Dismantling a Hero Trope:
The Role of the Portrayal of War in Media and the Rhetoric of The Red Badge of Courage

Photography has the potential to place spectators into specific snapshots in time, bringing characters to life while simultaneously removing traces of personality from its subjects. Stephen Crane’s seminal Civil War novel The Red Badge of Courage reflects a similar, hyper-realist narrative that echoes the burgeoning field of photography during his time. The Civil War was the first war to be extensively documented with photography; the media coverage that resulted from this new technological development forever changed the way war was portrayed in popular media. Similarly, television coverage of the Vietnam War brought images and—for the first time—video footage of the conflict into the homes of everyday Americans, influencing their perception of the war and its fighters. In this paper, I argue that media coverage shapes public opinion of war, moving from the ideas of glory and honor to the harsh reality of death and destruction as photographic and video coverage and rhetoric work together to dismantle the hero trope, capturing the realities of war rather than myth.

Twisted bodies, crumpled on grass fields. Corpses placed in a line for easy removal. Death, pain, and carnage at every turn. These images abound in Stephen Crane’s The Red Badge of Courage as it chronicles the war journey of “the youth” Henry Fleming, a private in the Civil War. They also describe the wartime photography of Mathew Brady and others. Looking at its etymology, “photography” quite literally means “writing with light” (Kroes 87), so photography and writing have, since the word was first introduced into popular consciousness, been intrinsically intertwined.

The Civil War was, for multiple reasons, a new kind of war for the United States. It was the first war to be extensively covered by photography and the first war to be brought into the public eye through battlefield imaging that created eyewitness accounts of conflicts firsthand (Kroes 83). Photographers, like those on Mathew Brady’s team, spent extensive hours at the front lines of battlefields and documented the preparation for bloody battles and their aftermath; given the limited scope and cumbersome process that went into creating a single photograph at this moment in history, artists were not able to capture the action-filled battles that characterize later war photography (83). The realism that was recorded in these photographs and images defined a new kind of immediacy in warfare coverage that would impact future wars fought across the world. This photographic reality also provided a sharp
contrast from coverage of previous wars, which were generally only later considered by the glorious victors. This immediacy was, for example, prominent in the television coverage of the Vietnam War—really the first war to be extensively covered on television, giving it the name of the “living room war” (Wade 313).

Years after the culmination of the Civil War, this realism was reflected in Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage*. This novel, often considered one of the most famous depictions of the Civil War, exposes the harsh, grim realities of everyday warfare of the time. The realist narrative style of *The Red Badge of Courage* reflects the burgeoning field of photography that documented the Civil War as no other war had been seen before. Crane’s story does the work that photography does but uses a pen and paper rather than a lens and shutter. By framing his scenes thusly, Crane develops a critical tendency to capture the realities of combat for an audience that was woefully naïve about the true carnage of war. Photography and rhetoric work together to dismantle the heroic trope, capturing the realities of war rather than myth and idealism.

The rhetoric Crane uses throughout *The Red Badge of Courage* paints a picture in readers’ minds of a war that is less a story of heroes and gallant men defending life and liberty against a clearly inferior opposing side; rather, it is the account of a bloody conflict with death, pain, loss, and suffering for both forces. In particular, throughout the novel Crane describes corpses in a way that creates a vivid image for readers: “The corpse was dressed in a uniform that once had been blue, but was now faded to a melancholy shade of green. The eyes, staring at the youth, had changed to the dull hue to be seen on the side of a dead fish. The mouth was open. Its red had changed to an appalling yellow. Over the gray skin of the face ran little ants. One was trundling some sort of bundle across the upper lip” (Crane 38). Readers can instantly picture the “melancholy” green and “appalling” yellow of the corpse, a stark contrast between the heroic manhood that was so common in earlier war epics (Kroes). Just a few short pages later, Crane describes yet another body Henry has stumbled upon: “Another had the gray seal of death already upon his face. His lips were curled in hard lines and his teeth were clinched. His hands were bloody from where he had pressed them upon his wound. He seemed to be awaiting the moment
when he should pitch headlong” (Crane 41). This man is not part of the invincible soldier trope but rather a hapless victim of circumstance, thrust headlong into a war not of his own design.

Crane also, to an extent, uses particular rhetoric to dehumanize his characters by describing them as grouped masses rather than as individuals: “The gaunt, careworn features and dusty figures were made plain by this quaint light at the dawning, but it dressed the skin of the men in corpse-like hues and made the tangled limbs appear pulseless and dead. The youth started up with a little cry when his eyes first swept over this motionless mass of men, thick-spread upon the ground, pallid, and in strange postures” (64). This image of a “motionless mass” is bold and strong; it allows readers to see what Henry sees, creating a photograph out of words. This rhetoric also vacates personality and dehumanizes characters—much as photography is able to do. While photographs can reveal intense amounts of small details, the humanizing characteristics like personality are often removed—especially in the case of Civil War photography—as viewers are only able to see the “motionless masses” forever frozen into one snapshot in time.

In the same way that Crane’s writing reflects the harsh reality of war, it also reflects the dispassionate nature of photography. This style is exemplified in the Civil War photographs of Mathew Brady and his team. Both the photographs and Crane presented their subjects as body-shaped inanimate objects rather than as human figures and thus changed the perception of participants in war. This theme is explored by Bill Brown in his book *The Material Unconscious: American Amusement, Stephen Crane, and the Economics of Play* as he argues that “[t]he very idea of a tableau consisting of twisted corpses, not figures in heaven, obviously works to deflate theatrical sentimentalization by supplying photographic detail. But it also inflates the photographic into the theatrical, disclosing carnage itself as an object of fascinated sight” (Brown 152). The minute, photographic detail that Crane includes in Henry’s perception of the war dramatically increases the realist nature of the text. Moreover, he does this not so much as a measure of brilliant genius but rather as part of a moment where war both has been redefined and is in the process of being redefined by photography.
Prior to the advent of photography that could in any practical sense capture real life, real-time images, many war narratives were stories that glorified the soldier in battle and created a hero complex (Kroes). Soldiers who went off to war were imagined as glorious heroes, fighting to right wrongs inflicted by the “savages” of the opposing side. War was gallant and heroic, an honorable task. Wartime photography changed that forever. Rob Kroes writes that “Mathew Brady and his team of war photographers for the first time in history confronted audiences with images of the war as a machine producing corpses, thus radically changing their views of battlefields as fields of glory and heroism” (83–84). In the way that Crane’s writing undoes the ideal of heroic manhood, Civil War photography elevated to popular consciousness the idea of brutality and destruction in war and represented a shift away from viewing war as an arena for the display of honor and glory. Kroes continues: “Not surprisingly, Brady’s photographs of the war, and more particularly of the aftermath of bloody carnage, showing dead men stiffening in the chill air of the morning, struck observers by their immediacy, their raw force that would forever alter the mode of visual representation of war” (86). The brutal realities of war were on stark display in a way that simply was not possible before photography, and specifically before the advent of the uniquely documentary style of photography that arguably surfaces because of and from the documentation of the Civil War by Mathew Brady and his team.

According to Kroes, the realist style of the photographs that emerged from the war creates a powerful resonance among viewers—particularly veterans—because “Brady’s focus on war as a machine producing dead bodies enhances the impact of his pictures as so many reminders of our own mortality, our human condition” (Kroes 91). Previous war narratives had glorified victory and those who come out of war the winners—the living ones. These pictures reminded the public that there are losers in war too, those who perish, “[a]nd when Brady shot soldiers who had already been shot, the only difference is that death stares us in the face. In war, a thin line divides the quick from the dead. Death rather than victory is the outcome of war” (89–90). Viewers, especially those who had fought in the Civil War (and more contemporary spectators as well), understood that often the only thing separating them from those dead corpses pictured in a line was sheer dumb luck—being in the right place at the right time, being “quick”
enough to evade death’s grip in that particular moment. The narratives—both the novel and the photographs—serve as a reminder of the impermanence of life as readers and viewers are confronted with images of corpses that don’t seem that dissimilar from themselves.

The emergence of photography as a dominant media form during this time undoubtedly shaped public opinion of the war. Gone were the days of hand-spun tales of epic adventures and quests to find glory and validation on the battlefield. Instead, photography captured the raw, real, everyday effects of wartime and the death and destruction, the carnage and the blood, that went along with it. According to Brown, *The Red Badge of Courage* echoed this realism:

> While the novel tells the story of a youth’s initiation into battle, the text begins to tell an altogether different story about the visualization of war and of sport, striving, by my account, to make the photographic corpse freshly visible—not, I want to emphasize here, in any effort to affirm a realist imperative, but rather in the effort to demonstrate how photography’s own realist imperative incites a sense of exciting captivation. War appears less as an arena for heroism and patriotism and more as an instantiation of the logic by which a new sensorium compensates for modernization. (Brown 25)

The heroism is gone, replaced with an understanding of the effects of modernization both on warfare and on its portrayal. For those not on the battlefield, first photography, then *The Red Badge of Courage* and the narrative it presented, offered a glimpse into the less-than-glamorous realities of war. Using this lens, Crane argues that war isn’t so much about the brash heroism of yesteryear—more of a myth than a truth—but rather an acceptance of the realities it presents. Photography and rhetoric ultimately together dismantle the myth of the heroic trope in war—even if it took photographs of dead soldiers, the light forever extinguished from their eyes as they lay abandoned in a field, to do so.

The media has, therefore, a great impact on the way war plays out in the hearts and minds of everyday citizens. As technology developed through time, the still photographs of the Civil War were transformed into video footage shown on television of the Vietnam War. The Civil War was the first war to be documented with photography; the Vietnam War was the first war to be shown through the new medium of television. In his book *Paper Soldier: The American Press and the Vietnam War*, Clarence Wyatt explores the idea that like in the Civil War, photographic and video coverage of the Vietnam War escalating gave the general public a view of events happening in a place they would probably never see
firsthand; thus, the portrayal of the battles and their participants directly influenced public perception (Wyatt 7). He writes about the roles that media played during the conflict in Vietnam, ultimately theorizing that “the press was a significant, even decisive, influence on the war’s outcome” (Wyatt 7). The press and media did not only present the war. Media coverage and television footage—along with the continued and increased use of photography—also reflected and created both the general public’s reaction to, as well as the government’s portrayal of, the war.

Just as Mathew Brady’s Civil War images have continued to maintain a status in the public consciousness until the present day, scholar W. Patrick Wade discusses how certain photos taken during the Vietnam War made their way back to America and left an indelible mark:

Malcolm Browne’s photograph of a Buddhist monk’s self-immolation in 1963; Eddie Adams’s photo of a summary execution during the Tet Offensive in 1968; John Filo’s picture of a college student’s fatal shooting at Kent State in 1970; and Nick Ut’s searing image of a naked young Vietnamese girl crying out in pain from napalm burns in 1972. Such images, through their supposed capacity to shock, touch, or outrage the public, are thought to have raised critical questions about US tactics, increased public support for the anti-war movement, and hastened the US military withdrawal. (Wade 313)

These pictures burned themselves into the public consciousness of American citizens and had a profound impact on their view of the war and the actors in it. It is hard to see a picture that captures the very moment between life and death for a man executed in the street and not feel sorrow for the victims of a war not of their own design. It is hard to see a picture of a slain college student and the anguish of his friend and not question the necessity of military intervention. It is hard to see a picture of a nude young girl, screaming in pain and horror as she runs away from a napalm attack, and not question the effectiveness and legacy of American intervention. But it was these very photos that monopolized newspaper reports and nightly news broadcasts on television. Their increased prominence meant that the dominant public was bombarded with images of hurt, pain, and death in a way that reflected Mathew Brady’s Civil War images of dehumanized corpses sprawled motionless on a battlefield. As with the photographs that emerged from the Civil War, these photographs of brutality helped to dismantle the hero trope of soldiers, showing them as both the victims and victimizers—neither choice made willingly.
More than anything, coverage of the Vietnam War on the television screens of the public were incessant. In the Civil War, photographs were generally published after an extensive development and processing time due to the technological limitations of the era (Kroes 83). Journalist Don Murray explains that film video cameras were used to document the Vietnam War, and the footage could generally be developed within 24 hours of taping (Murray 90). Because of these technological advances, television reports could use footage that was, in the grand scheme of things, incredibly recent. These film reels, straight from the battlefields of Vietnam—a place incredibly foreign to most American viewers—was broadcast into the living rooms of everyday Americans, changing their perceptions of the war and those fighting in it. Neil Hickey explores the idea that nightly news broadcast after nightly news broadcast, the Vietnam War was broadcast into the living rooms of the American public:

By decade’s end, Americans had grown weary of ‘the living room war’ that came into their homes daily on the evening news programs, sometimes with vivid film of bloody casualties that eventually mounted to more than 58,000 American dead, most of them eighteen to twenty years old. For the first time, viewers were seeing war footage—in color—of body bags and burning villages, of napalmed Vietnamese and endless jungle firefights. Each Thursday on the evening news, TV anchormen delivered the week’s tally of dead and wounded. Moral exhaustion was setting in on the homefront. (Hickey 68)

Seeing footage of brutality and pain inflicted by war and the result—death—first shook and then exhausted the American public. As compared to the Civil War, public consciousness of the Vietnam War was greater than ever before, given the relative integration of television into society by this point. The incessant nature of the television coverage streaming from television sets in living rooms across the country made this war seem like a never-ending, corpse-producing machine. Civil War images of dead bodies on battlefields were reflected and magnified in the television reports from Vietnam with their “body bags”, “burning villages”, “napalmed Vietnamese and endless jungle firefights” (Hickey 68). The tally of dead and wounded wore on, week after week, creating a sense of “moral exhaustion” that reminded everyday Americans of the true cost of the war (Hickey 69). Rather than being heroes sent to Vietnam to save a naïve citizenry from the cruel fate of communism, American soldiers in Vietnam were simply victims of a government’s decision to send them to a place they didn’t ask to be—and a place from where not all of them would return.
Together, the photographs and video footage that emerged from Vietnam painted a picture of war in which no side emerged victorious. There were no heroes, there were only chemical weapons and hidden explosives, there was only brutality and death at every turn. The question, then, must be considered: how are present day conflicts portrayed in the media today? Unlike the Civil and Vietnam Wars of the past that were covered wholly by journalists and professionals, the most recent wars and crises have seen a diffusion of responsibility, seen in real-time by citizens who can now create the news, rather than just consuming it. Murray notes that “[w]ar in the modern age had become a global contest watched by the world in real time” (Murray 89). Civil War photographs had to wait to be developed, Vietnam War television shots had to be processed (albeit with a shorter lag time than in the Civil War), but social media and other even more recent technological innovations have allowed war to truly be experienced by the public in real time.

Presenting a conflict and its participants to a naïve public is not easy. It requires consistency of coverage, a resolute commitment to the truth, and the courage to present an inconvenient and often violent truth. It requires the ability—both physical and mental—to capture and publish photos and videos of the death and destruction that rears its ugly head all too often in war. Photography, first in the Civil War and then in the Vietnam War, especially when combined with the advent of video footage, destroys the myth and idealism that can so easily pervade war coverage. Heroism is gone. Reality—death, brutality, and pain included—is the only thing that remains.
Works Cited


The war literature of the Civil War era glorified heroism and the courage of soldiers on both sides of the war. The numerous memoirs of war veterans influenced Crane, who had a lifelong obsession with war. He drew upon the common pattern of these chronicles for the major plot elements in The Red Badge of Courage: the sentimental expectation of the young recruit moved to enlist by patriotic rhetoric and heroic fantasies of war; the resistance of his parents to his enlistment; his anxiety over the apparent confusion and purposelessness of troop movements; his doubts about his personal courage; the dissipation of his heroic illusions in the first battle; his grumbling about the incompetency of generals; and other such motifs, incidents, and situations. 

The Red Badge of Courage is a war novel by American author Stephen Crane (1871–1900). Taking place during the American Civil War, the story is about a young private of the Union Army, Henry Fleming, who flees from the field of battle. Overcome with shame, he longs for a wound, a “red badge of courage,” to counteract his cowardice. When his regiment once again faces the enemy, Henry acts as standard-bearer, who carries a flag. Quotation: The captain of the youth’s company had been killed in an early part of the action. His body lay stretched out in the position of a tired man resting, but upon his face there was an astonished and sorrowful look, as if he thought some friend had done him an ill turn. Analysis: Crane’s realistic portrayal of war stands out in comparison to Henry’s unrealistic notions of battle. It’s similar to when you were in Junior High School and expected all the guys and girls to look like the characters in High School Musical and then you realized after about 5 minutes that your schoolmates were the same old dorks you went to Junior High with. References. Crane, Stephen. The Red Badge of Courage and Other Writings. Boston: The Riverside Press. 1960, 115-231.