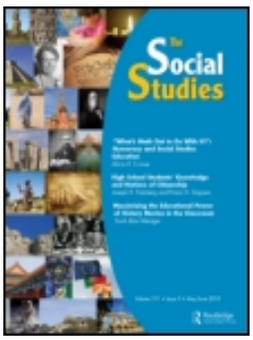

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Developing Visual Literacy: Historical and Manipulated Photography in the Social Studies Classroom

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The importance of visual literacy development is demonstrated using social studies examples from an innovative, collaborative arts program. Discussion of the Visual Thinking Strategies approach, connections to the Common Core State Standards, prompts for higher-order critical thinking, and the application of historical and social science ideas in the classroom are presented.

Keywords: visual literacy, photography, social studies, history

As the high school students eagerly engaged in a scavenger hunt activity searching through the art exhibition for images of a "spirit" photograph, a staged US Civil War battle scene, and a community populated solely by women, their questions to each other were overheard by their teacher, the exhibition's curator, and museum staff: *How could photographer William Mumler have been acquitted when he so clearly defrauded people? Did Alexander Gardner stage all the battle scenes he photographed, or just this one? What drove artist Debbie Grossman to reimagine Russell Lee's Great Depression photographs as a parallel world composed of only women?*

After completing the scavenger hunt, their teacher gathered the students to debrief on the activity and entertain the students' queries. Before the students' visit to the exhibition, their teacher participated in a museum-based workshop where he attended a customized lecture by the exhibition's curator, received a guided tour of the exhibition, obtained the accompanying curriculum, and had the opportunity to interact with one of the artists whose work was featured.

Evident throughout the visit, the high school students' questions clearly exhibited a *visual literacy* that enabled them to derive and make meaning from the works they viewed. By being prompted to critically analyze the photographic works, students were exercising their ability to be critical thinkers and consumers, skills that have been noted by many scholars and curriculum experts as crucial for citizenship in the twenty-first century (e.g., Beatty 2013; Jenkins 2009; Institute of Museum and Library Services 2015; Kellner and Share 2007; Lambert and Cuper 2008; Marshall and Donahue 2014). As Kellner and Share (2007) argue, an informed, critical literacy of the media "is crucial for participatory democracy in the twenty-first century, and the only progressive option that exists is how to teach it, not whether to teach it" (59). Furthermore, because visual literacy skills are underscored in the Common Core State Standards and woven throughout all the grade-level expectations, students will need to be able to effectively apply these skills in their schooling.

Visual Literacy

Our understanding of visual literacy includes people's abilities to see, interpret, and make meaning of images and other visual objects in the world around them (Association of College and Research Libraries 2011; International Visual Literacy Association 2012). As Yenawine (1997) points out, visual literacy involves several cognitive skills that range from simple identification to complex abilities that call upon interpretation, analysis, and personal meaning-making. Especially now in the age of digital communications and ubiquitous social media where people are bombarded on a daily basis with images such as pictures, photographs, graphics, videos, and icons, visual literacy skills are becoming increasingly important (Baker 2012; Lundin 2013). However, as Schoen (2015) points out, mere exposure and consumption of visuals does not automatically mean students are equipped with the skills necessary to effectively interpret and use them.

All too often, students accept what they see at face value, with little understanding of the intent or appreciation of the perspective used by the image's creator. Many students have not yet developed the ability to view visual text, as Duffelmeyer and Ellertson (2006) assert, "not as

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Color versions of one or more of the figures in this article can be found online at www.tandfonline.com/vtss.

a transparent window on reality, but as constructed from a viewpoint, with someone's communicative purpose and a calculated effect in mind" (section 2). As educators, it is our opportunity now to help students become discerning consumers of visuals and in so doing, facilitate the development of crucial thinking skills that will serve them well in both college and career. Furthermore, visual literacy must be integrated into the curriculum for all ages. We agree with Kellner and Share (2007), who argue that a Deweyan reconceptualization of literacy is needed and, in so doing, "we must reframe our understanding of literacy so that these ideas become integrated across the curriculum at all levels from pre-school to university" (59).

Visual literacy is one of several skills that can be found repeatedly in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Launched in 2009, the CCSS provide learning expectations for K–12 students that outline what students are expected to know and understand by the time they graduate from high school to get ready for college or a career (CCSS Initiative 2015). For example, students at the high school level are expected to be able to examine and compare multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats to evaluate the credibility and accuracy of each source (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9–10.2). Students at the middle school level are asked to analyze the purpose of information presented in diverse media and formats and evaluate the motives behind its presentation (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.8.2). Examining photographic works—either as objects of art or historical artifacts, and especially those that have been altered or manipulated—could support the development of both of these standards related to visual literacy. In the social studies in particular, photography can promote opportunities in the curriculum where students can use visual literacy skills to analyze content in a deep and meaningful way. Many museums of art have created guides to highlight the connections between visual literacy and the CCSS (e.g., see http://www.vislit.org/common-core-visual-literacy/).

Enhanced!: A Case Study in Visual Literacy

During the spring 2015 semester, the University of South Florida's Contemporary Art Museum presented *Enhanced!*, a selection of vintage and contemporary manipulated photographs that span the history of photography. Transformed both manually and digitally, the exhibition's images are meant to fool the eye of the viewer and to expand and shift the viewer's understanding of photography as a medium. Classic images dating from the 1850s to the 1960s include works by Anna Atkins, Harold Edgerton, Alexander Gardner, Gustave Le Gray, Man Ray, Eadweard Muybridge, Jerry Uelsmann, and Weegee. Contemporary selections include works by Yoan Capote, James Casebere, Jerome Favre, Adam Fuss, Debbie Grossman, Kalup Linzy, Christian Marclay, Vik Muniz, Yamini Nayar, Roman Signer, and Peter Tscherkassky.

The loose display structure of the historical and contemporary works inevitably spur comparison and contrast among both techniques and themes that appear in multiple points throughout the collection. On one level, the viewer can simply appreciate the photographs' subjects, technical skills, and creativity. On a deeper level, the viewer is invited to use a critical, analytical eye in considering the accuracy of a photographic image and in making meaning from it. As the museum's director notes:

> Today photography is inherently part of visual culture and the vehicle by which we have come to understand our place in contemporary society. The possibilities and reality of the digital manipulation of images have created a crisis of verisimilitude; we no longer trust the photographic image (Miller 2015, 1).

It is this very "crisis of verisimilitude" that we envisioned would help students reflect on what they were seeing and what meaning they made of it.

We have found that manipulated photographs can be especially useful in social studies classrooms. For example, history teachers can guide students in their consideration of "documentary" photographs. Teachers of government can help their students explore photography as a medium for propaganda. Sociology teachers could use any of a number of images to consider the constantly evolving nature of society and culture. Teachers of psychology can have students contemplate how the Self is presented in self-portraits, especially given the popular form of contemporary "selfies."

The *Enhanced!* exhibition, then, provides a timely opportunity to develop students' visual literacy. To support this educational aim, we developed a series of lessons for the *InsideArt* curriculum (see http://ira.usf.edu/InsideART/index.html) designed to help educators introduce students to manipulated art, expand and shift their understanding of photography as a medium, ultimately expanding their visual literacy skills and knowledge of historical content. The curriculum consists of seven lessons that introduce students to manipulated photography, explore how artists compose images, and have students consider the documentation of reality and history in photographs. The concluding lesson encourages students to create their own photographic works and share them with others.

The lessons make use of a variety of instructional strategies and pedagogical approaches that promote multiple skillsets, including the development of creativity, critical thinking, listening, speaking, writing, and visual literacy. In several of the lessons, we use what Long (2008) calls "full circling." This process entails students critically reading and interpreting visual media and using the arts as a call to ethical action. The four-part process begins with provoking interest in a visual piece, encouraging students to vocalize their understanding and awareness of what they view, engaging students

in a reflection and discussion of the ethical conflicts that may be present, and finally, implementing a plan of action around what was learned.

Visual Literacy: Curricular Examples

The *Enhanced!* collection gives the viewer pause, casting into doubt what is (in)visible in the photographic image. Using these images as starting points or as central focal points, we used the *Enhanced!* collection to develop secondary social studies lessons that are thought-provoking and sharpen students' skill sets, most notably their visual literacy skills. Below we describe two examples that can serve as openings in the US history curriculum.

US Civil War

To date, the US Civil War has been the deadliest conflict in US history, with an estimated 750,000 people who died in the line of duty and hundreds of thousands more who died from disease (Hacker 2011). In this context, spirit photography emerged. This type of photography attempts to document spirits or ghosts in photographic imagery. Despite evidence that proved the medium a fraud (practitioners used double negatives), spirit photography enjoyed popularity into the beginning of the twentieth century.

One of the most famous examples of spirit photography is a portrait of Mary Todd Lincoln, taken around 1870, by American photographer William H. Mumler (1832–1884) (see figure 1). In the lesson entitled *Does Photography tell the Truth?* students are guided through their viewing of the image using the Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) approach (Yenawine 1999, 2013). Based on the theories of Piaget and Vygotsky, this structured group discussion approach generates "observations, insights, and exchanges that spur not only thorough, rigorous examinations of works of art but also significant skill development in individuals" (Yenawine 1999, 5). VTS discussions are facilitated by the teacher who asks open-ended questions that become more directed and probing as the process unfolds:

Fig. 1. Mary Todd Lincoln with Abraham Lincoln's "spirit," ca. 1872. Photographer: William Mumler. Printed with permission from Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection, Allen County Public Library, Indiana State Museum, http://contentdm.acpl.lib.in.us/cdm/singleitem/collection/p15155coll1/id/56.

- What is going on in this picture?
- What do you see that makes you say that?
- What more can you find?

As the questions imply, students are asked to carefully consider a work of art and share what they see, supported with visual evidence. With each student's response, the teacher-facilitator points at the feature being discussed and paraphrases the comment neutrally, without assessment or praise. As each student offers an insight or perception, the teacher-facilitator links the comments, weaving a larger, collective frame for viewing the work (Landorf 2006). In this manner, students contemplate the views of others and consider the possibility of multiple perspectives and interpretations (more information on the VTS method in both print and video form can be found at http://vtshome.org/what-is-vts).

After guiding students through the viewing of Mary Todd Lincoln's spirit photograph, the teacher can describe the image's background and provenance, explaining that the photograph was produced in 1872, after President Lincoln had been assassinated. Students then consider the medium more generally, with questions, such as:

- How might the context of the US Civil War have contributed to spirit photography's popularity?
- Why did it remain popular, despite being exposed as fraudulent?

Fig. 2A. Bronson Murray in Trance Spirit of Ella Bonner, 1872. Photographer: William Mumler Albumen *carte de visite*; 3.75×2.25″. Printed with permission from Drapkin Collection. **Fig. 2B**. Spirit Photograph, 1890. Photographer: H. E. Chase Albumen *carte de visite*; 2×3.5″. Reprinted with permission from Drapkin Collection.

The *Enhanced!* collection included several spirit photographs produced as a *carte de visite* (see figure 2). This popular format entailed photographs the size of a calling card, shared among friends and visitors. Albums for the collection and display of cards became a common fixture in Victorian parlors. The immense popularity of these card photographs led to the publication and collection of photographs of prominent persons. Again, students are asked to consider the context of Victorian society and deliberate on the popularity of the *carte de visite* format with questions, such as: Why might this format have been so popular during this era?

Documentary photography also emerged during this era. Early inventors and first practitioners of photography advanced the belief that the photographic image offers an "unimpeachable reflection of reality" (Smith 2015). Nineteenth-century photographers, such as Nicépore Niépce, Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, and William Henry Fox Talbot, argued that because images were produced by mechanical and chemical means, they were faithful accounts of truth and authenticity. Since then, photographic images have been used as evidence in courts of law, to identify persons and property, as genuine representations of other peoples and places, and as factual depictions of historical events (Smith 2015, 2). However, the framing of images, scene staging, and outright fraud have also cast doubt on the medium's realism.

The "truth" of documentary photography can be explored in images by John Reekie and Alexander Gardner produced during the US Civil War. Reekie was an American photographer, active from 1861 to 1865. Reekie's *A Burial Party* (see figure 3) was taken in Cold Harbor, Virginia, nearly a year after the battles of Gaines' Mill and Cold Harbor. In it, decomposed bodies are being interred by a work crew of African American men. It is a grisly scene, with soldiers' bodies reduced to bones and

Fig. 3. "A burial party on the battle-field of Cold Harbor," 1865. Negative by John Reekie. Positive by Alexander Gardner. Printed with permission from Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC 20540 USA. http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.print.

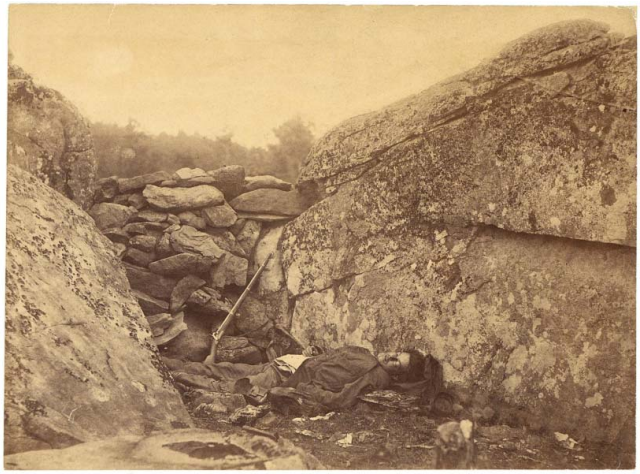

Fig. 4. "Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter, Gettysburg," 1863. Photographer Alexander Gardner. Printed with permission from National Archives and Records Administration (111-SC-202199).

Fig. 5. *Abandoned Farm in Cimarron County, Oklahoma*, 1936. Photographer Arthur Rothstein. Printed with permission from Drapkin Collection.

clothing rags, "a macabre and chilling portrait—literally a study of black and white—that is memorable as any made during the war" (Rosenheim 2013, 98). The authenticity of the scene has been called into question because of, among other things, the way the skulls are lined up, with a worker's head visually completing the line created in the center of the image (Johnson 2013).

After viewing and considering Reekie's photograph, students are asked:

- When and where do you think this is taking place?
- What are the men doing?
- Is there anything about the image that suggests it was intentionally composed?
- If the workers had been asked to assume digging postures and the skulls had been gathered and lined up, would that change the veracity of the image?
- Is this photograph more about death or survival?

The negative of *A Burial Party* was taken by John Reekie, but the positive was created by Alexander Gardner. Gardner was a well-known Civil War photographer who published in 1866 the first collection of photographs documenting the conflict. Gardner's famous *Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter, Gettysburg* (see figure 4), has been proven to be staged. Taken on the Gettysburg field in the aftermath of the battle, a dead soldier's face is turned toward the camera, his rifle nearby. In truth, the body was probably dragged about forty yards and was that of an infantryman, rather than a sharpshooter (Library of Congress 2010; Seels 1997). The gun belonged to Gardner. As Sontag (2004) observed, "To photograph was to compose (with living subjects, to pose), and the desire to arrange elements in the picture did not vanish because the subject was immobilized, or immobile" (53).

After giving students a few minutes to study Gardner's image, they can be asked to consider if there is anything in the composition of the photograph that suggests it was staged:

- In what ways does the staging impact the viewer's interpretation of the image?
- Why might the photographer have arranged certain features deliberately?
- Consider the photograph's title: what feelings or emotions might the photographer have been trying to evoke? In what ways does the title influence the impact of the image on the viewer?

The Great Depression

Arthur Rothstein, too, staged scenes to produce photographic images that have become iconic. A photographer with the Farm Security Administration during the Great Depression, Rothstein admitted to staging some of the photographs he took, saying he had done so to show urban America the desperation and suffering in the Dust Bowl (Hirsch and Erf 2002). At the time, those opposed to the Roosevelt administration seized upon this to call into question photography's role in propaganda (National Public Radio 2011). In Rothstein's haunting image of an abandoned farm in Cimarron County, Oklahoma, taken in 1936 (see figure 5), "the objects were positioned for maximum emotional effect" (Drapkin n.d.). After students are informed that the scene was staged, they consider how the composition of the photo adds to the drama and tragedy

Fig. 6. "Tying a ribbon on a calf's tail was one of the feature attractions at the Pie Town, New Mexico Fair rodeo" (1940). Photographer Russell Lee. Printed with permission from: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC 20540 USA. http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.print

of the Dust Bowl and if they agree with critics who charged that this manipulation amounted to propaganda.

Russell Lee was another American photographer who was most active during the Great Depression and World War II, though he did not manipulate his images. However, years later, his work served as a central focus in the work of American artist Debbie Grossman, who pushes viewers to consider alternative perspectives.

Lee chronicled the lives of ordinary Americans through his photography. His best-known work was created under the auspices of the Farm Security Administration during the Great Depression. His work differed from that of other FSA photographers in that Lee used flash to take photographs inside buildings, carefully recording the life of his subjects and the environments in which they lived (Appel 2003). He also created series of photographs, painting a more complete and robust picture of his subjects. One of Lee's most famous series was *Pie Town*, taken in New Mexico in 1940. At the time, Pie Town, New Mexico, was a community settled by about 200 migrant Texas and Oklahoma farmers who filed homestead claims. Lee believed that the series not only showed the difficult conditions in which many Americans were living during the Great Depression, but also depicted Americans' resilience and sense of community (see figure 6).

Artist Debbie Grossman is an American photographer who likes to re-imagine history (Grossman 2011). Her series, *My Pie Town* (2010), imagines a community comprised entirely of women. Using Photoshop, Grossman modified Lee's images and created a parallel Pie Town either by exchanging male figures with women or erasing men altogether (see figure 7). To sharpen visual acuity, students can view the Lee/Grossman companion images one after the other or side by side, noting what differences can be discerned. Students are also encouraged to imagine the dialogue between and among the characters; or, if an image is of just one person, to envision that person's thoughts. As an extension, students can write out their dialogue/monologue and even perform it for their peers. In this fashion, teachers can introduce class discussions on gender, women's roles, and the changing nature of the family unit.

Fig. 7. *Ruth Leonard secures a calf in her pasture*, 2010. Series: *My Pie Town*, 2010. Photographer Debbie Grossman. Original images by Russell Lee, Photoshopped; digital print; 10 $^{1}/_{2}$ × 14", edition of 15. Printed with permission from Debbie Grossman.

Conclusion

The *Enhanced!* exhibition and curriculum is a prime example of the integration of social studies and art aimed at developing students' visual literacy skills. Visual literacy is paramount in today's society where individuals are required to interpret, analyze, and make personal meaning of images they encounter on a daily basis. The combined efforts of the local school system, the university's College of the Arts, the College of Education, and the university's Institute for Research in Art, make this exhibition and curriculum series truly an interdisciplinary, community-based project. All those invested in this endeavor aspired to support secondary teachers as they strive to create and deliver lessons that enhance students' historical content knowledge and promote the skill sets necessary to be innovative thinkers and critical consumers in today's visual world.

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