

## Modes of Seeing: Case Studies on the Use of Digitized Photographic Archives

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Digital humanities scholarship has expanded beyond its deep foundations in text analysis to find new meaning and knowledge through the creative reuse of historical photographs and other visual resources. Visual studies scholars in the humanities who wish to work primarily in the digital domain face a fundamental dilemma in the choice either to create “purpose-built” thematic collections tailored to specific studies (Palmer, 2008) or to make use of collections digitized for general purposes by an archives, a library, or other cultural heritage organization. “General-purpose” digital library collections are simultaneously mechanisms for delivering digital surrogates of archival holdings and new archival collections in their own right that reflect the decisions that digital curators make throughout the digitization process (Ross, 2007; Conway, 2008). The research issues associated with the actual use in humanities contexts of these large-scale general-purpose collections of digital images are profound and as yet largely unexplored (Saracevic, 2004). Concluding an important study establishing a typology of use in image retrieval, Graham (2004, p. 324) observes that “these *uses* do not tell us what was actually done with the images once they had been found.”

This paper reports on a multi-case study of the use of general purpose digitized photographic archives. The paper’s title is a play on John Berger’s somewhat forgotten pre-digital argument in *Ways of Seeing* that reproductions transform art (including of photographs and other graphical materials) into information, and in doing so expose original material objects to new uses not imagined by either the artist or, especially, the museums and archives that collect these artifacts. “It is not a question of reproduction failing to reproduce certain aspects of an image faithfully; it is a

question of reproduction making it possible, even inevitable, that an image will be used for many different purposes and that the reproduced image, unlike the original work, can lend itself to them all” (Berger, 1972, p. 24). In suggesting that the post-modern critique has outlived its usefulness in the arena of visual studies, Mitchell calls for moving beyond Walter Benjamin’s skepticism of the reproduction by embracing digital image surrogacy as superior. “In a world where the very idea of the unique original seems a merely nominal or legal fiction, the copy has every chance of being an improvement or enhancement of whatever counts as the original” (Mitchell, 2003, p. 487).

Efforts to extract evidence and meaning from the digitized photographic image extend well beyond the disciplines of art and art history to encompass history, a range of other social sciences, and increasingly the humanities. Humanists with a propensity toward visual studies run the gamut from skepticism to enthusiasm about the processes that digitally transform the material properties of original photographs and camera negatives. Koltun (1999, p. 124) claims that a digitized photograph “leaves behind another originating document whose disposal or retention can inspire other archival debates focused around original attributes and meanings not ‘translated’ into, even distorted by, the new medium.” Sassoon (2004, p. 199) largely sees diminished meaning (“an ephemeral ghost”) through digitization, whereas Cameron (2007, p. 67) projects archival properties onto the “historical digital object” that are distinctive and original. Skeptics and enthusiasts on both sides of this argument stake their claims with little regard for the actual uses of digitized historical photographs.

This paper exposes varying perspectives on “modes of seeing” by synthesizing case studies of seven deeply experienced researchers both within and outside the academy, ranging from scholars to serious avocational users to people whose livelihood depends on finding and using high quality representations of historical photographs. The group of study participants is broadly (but not statistically) representative of the variety of sophisticated humanities-oriented uses to which general purpose collections are put. The participants in the seven case studies vary widely in terms of demographic

characteristics. Three are female; four are male. Their ages range from 30 to 67. The participants work and live east of the Mississippi River in five separate communities. Each case study revolves around a specific tangible product that was in some stage of completeness at the time of the interviews. The form of the products ranged from books and a dissertation, a complex and dynamic website, to a database for a membership organization. For their projects, participants made use of digitized photographs delivered from either the Library of Congress's American Memory collection or the online catalog of the Prints and Photographs Division. Each of the five collections consulted is discrete within its particular delivery system. The Civil War Photographs collection is available through interfaces to both the American Memory and the PPD databases. A 1872 Turkestan photographic album and photographs from the National Child Labor Committee are available in digital form only through the online catalog. Portions of the extensive Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information collection are distributed through the American Memory interface, but the entire digitized collection is fully available only through the online catalog. Finally, the Bain photograph collection, including a sizable sub-collection on American baseball, is fully available digitally through the online catalog and selectively through the American Memory interface.

The paper frames the findings on the use of digitized photographs in digital humanities scholarship within new theoretical perspectives on visual literacy (Elkins, 2008) and remediation (Bolter and Grusin, 1996), and the practical aspects of imaging for humanities scholarship (Deegan and Tanner, 2002). The case studies are constructed using an innovative multi-method qualitative approach that encompasses archival research in photo archives combined with a two-stage qualitative investigation. Stage one gathers background information and an assessment of expertise from interview subjects. Stage two consists of in-depth, semi-structured, in-situ interviews and observations. A three-part "thinking out loud" protocol extracts extensive commentary on the nature of individual and community expertise, on macro decision making strategies for creating the research product, and the character of micro-decisions on the choice and

use of individual photographs. The descriptive evidence of "modes of seeing" is derived from a "grounded theory" analysis of interview transcripts.

Using extracted quotations and extensive visual examples, the paper presents an original typological model on the ways that perspectives of users on visual content, archival properties, and technical characteristics of digitized photographic archives combine to produce distinctive, but often intersecting "modes of seeing." One mode, "Discovering," takes maximum advantage of the visual detail discernable in high-resolution digital copies of camera negatives to find and contextualize new knowledge. A second mode, "Storytelling," has a point of departure in the emotion evoked by wholly composed photographic images, seeking hidden narratives surrounding the subjects of the images, much in the way that textual archives yield their stories through the power of provenance. A third mode, "Landscaping," finds meaning through the geospatial and temporal contexts of the images and the circumstances of their existence, sometimes providing a portal on technologically mediated power relations. All three modes carry either a "materialist" or "anti-materialist" stance that circumscribes the intimacy of original source and digital surrogate. The two stances have much to say about trust, integrity, and the archival nature of digital collections for humanities scholarship.

The findings have at least three important implications for the use of general purpose collections of digitized photographs in a digital humanities context. First, the study demonstrates the relationship between the technical characteristics of digitally transformed photographs and the construction of visual narrative. Second, the study exposes how hidden archival properties embedded in the transformed archival photographic record create the context of use for scholars who privilege digital surrogacy over the material nature of original sources. Third, the study's model of "modes of seeing" diversifies our understanding of how humanists interpret the visual order on, beneath, and beyond the visual plane of the photographic object.

### **Funding**

This work was supported by the U. S. National Science Foundation [IIS-0733279].

Ricardo Punzalan provided valuable assistance in conducting the phase-one interviews.

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