Nicola Paladin[*]

IMMORTALIZING DEATH ON THE BATTLEFIELD: US ICONOGRAPHY OF WAR FROM THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION TO THE CIVIL WAR

In discussing the problematic issue of the representability of war in art and literature, Fredric Jameson classifies war as one among several "collective realities which exceed representation fully as much as they do conceptualization and yet which ceaselessly tempt and exasperate narrative ambitions, conventional and experimental alike" (2014, 104). In a sense, every form of representation of war consists of a mediation between the events' historicity and a certain amount of fiction, relevant and functional to the community exposed to it: "Group, nation, clan, class, general will, multitude — all these remain so many linguistic experiments for designating an unimaginable collective totality, a manifold of consciousness as unimaginable as it is real" (Jameson 2014, 103-104).

Within the field of US narratives of war, both in literature and in the visual arts, the inevitable and consequential clash between imagination and reality is particularly evident in the representation of death on the battlefield. Although its origin and artistic persistence permeate the Western artistic tradition, this trope has become an inescapable element of American war culture. Yet, throughout the history of the United States, its representation has been amplified and transformed by the impact of the visual arts, first in painting, then in photography. Visuality is crucial for its interconnection with literature, to the point of being influenced by and influencing literary descriptions of the same trope.

The fact that these representations have evolved according to the technological transformations of their epochs is out of question. On a general basis, the irruption of daguerreotypes and photography determined a dramatic change in the amount of available images of death in battle, and, consequently, in the popular perception of the issue. In particular, in chronological terms, paintings correspond to the American Revolution as daguerreotypes correspond to the Civil War. For different reasons, both wars can be considered as two founding moments of American culture. At the same time, they form a progression, for example, in their death toll: as Drew Gilpin Faust underlines, "The number of soldiers who died between 1861 and 1865, an estimated 620,000, is approximately equal to the total American fatalities in the Revolution, the War of 1812, the Mexican War, the Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, and the Korean War combined" (10). Considering the American War of Independence and the Civil War, this numerical gap is proportionally related to the number of soldiers deployed.[1]

The different amount of casualties in the two wars certainly produces a divergent popular perception of death on the battlefield through reports, testimonies, and visual representations.[2] During the American Civil War, death became a more significant aspect to the "home front" not only because of its rate, but also for its massive media representation.[3] Within this changing scenario, the advent of war photography dramatically

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[*] *Nicola Paladin insegna lingua angloamericana e traduzione all'università di Catania, presso la Struttura Didattica Speciale di Lingue e Letterature straniere di Ragusa. Ha conseguito un dottorato di ricerca in Scienze del testo presso la "Sapienza" Università di Roma con una tesi sul rapporto tra la letteratura della Rivoluzione Americana e la narrativa ottocentesca sulla Guerra di Indipendenza. Tra i suoi interessi di ricerca vi sono la letteratura americana dell'Ottocento, la letteratura di guerra e il fumetto americano e il fumetto di guerra.*

[1] Faust reports that "Approximately 2.1 million northerners and 880,000 southerners took up arms between 1861 and 1865. [...] During the American Revolution the army never numbered more than 30,000 men" (18-19).

[2] Death constitutes an articulated and multifaceted discourse in the United States of the 19th century and it implicates several aspects whose complexity cannot be entirely explored in the present essay. For a deeper examination of the trope of death in American culture I suggest: Russ Castronovo's *Necro Citizenship: Death, Eroticism, and the Public Sphere in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (2001), Gary Laderman's *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes toward Death, 1799-1883* (1996), and Dana Luciano's *Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth-Century America* (2007).

[3] War literature, for example, notably increased from the American Revolution to the Secession War for several reasons: the involvement of more people, corresponding to a larger amount of witnesses; a broader

transformed the visual perception of death in war, providing an effect that painting could not attain — universalization. The photographic representation of death on the battlefield exemplifies what Susan Sontag would later famously describe as the promise of industrialized photography: "to democratize all experiences by translating them into images" (8).

Starting from this inevitable structural transformation, as well as from the generally recognized status of the American Revolution and the Civil War as two "great iconogenerative events in American history" (Chambers 1985, 72), the purpose of this essay is to observe American Civil War photography against the grain of Early Republic history paintings of the American Revolution representing death on the battlefield, and to analyze the cultural reshaping of paradigm provoked by the advent of photography on the US consciousness of war, in contrast with the pictorial tradition. What I investigate is whether new forms of visuality implied a conceptual transformation in the meaning of death, and my objective is to demonstrate the strict interconnection that exists between the techniques of representation of the trope of death in war and its evolving significance for the audience. I will compare one of the most famous paintings of the American Revolution, *The Death of General Warren at the Battle of Bunker's Hill, June 17, 1775*, realized by John Trumbull in a series between 1815 to 1831, and a selection of Civil War daguerreotypes by Timothy H. O'Sullivan, Alexander Gardner, and James F. Gibson. Considering the chronological distance and the technical aspects that distinguish these works, I will prioritize their visual rhetoric of death and the narratives inherent to the composition of each of these images.

One pole of this artistic frame unquestionably coincides with the work of John Trumbull (1756-1843), known as "the painter of the American Revolution," and the first all-American internationally renowned painter. In 1817, he was commissioned by the Congress to paint four scenes of the American Revolution on the United States Capitol Rotunda: *Declaration of Independence*, *Surrender of General Burgoyne*, *Surrender of Lord Cornwallis*, and *General George Washington Resigning His Commission*. Trumbull's Rotunda paintings became icons of the young republic, and so did Trumbull's celebratory cycle of paintings dedicated to the Battle of Bunker Hill and to the death of General Joseph Warren, which can be considered as one of the most canonical and symbolic visual depictions of the American struggle for independence.[4] Despite its temporal distance from the events it represents, the series was inspired by a much closer literary source: Hugh Henry Brackenridge's five-act tragedy, *The Battle of Bunker Hill*. The text narrates the eponymous battle from the point of view of the officers in charge by alternating the American perspective and the British one, represented in turn by Warren, Putnam, and Gardiner, and by Gage, Howe, Burgoyne, Clinton, and Lord Pigot.

Although the Continental army lost ground, the Battle of Bunker Hill was presented and later memorialized as a sort of "American Battle of Thermopylae," in which the rebels fought bravely – outnumbered and outgunned – and inflicted serious casualties to the enemy. In his tragedy, Brackenridge refers three times to Leonidas' three hundred Spartans and celebrates the American struggle by praising the collective effort of the soldiers, and by elevating Joseph Warren to the status of martyr.[5] Inevitably, the celebratory cypher of the text is reinforced by the intrusion of a fictional element which makes the narrative historically less accurate, but ideologically more functional to the purpose to which the tragedy was devoted.

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literary culture, particularly in the Northern states; a larger availability of editorial "materiel" (paper, ink, printers, etc.). This aspect was problematic during the American Revolution, under strict British control, when printers would change the spelling of words and printing style due to the shortage of types in wartime.

[4] Most famous pictorial representations of the American Independence War do not date back to the revolutionary period but were instead produced in the 19th century. That is the case of Trumbull's production, including *Declaration of Independence* (1818 ca.), or Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1859). Undoubtedly, Trumbull's works show a fascination for famous deaths on the American Revolution battlefields: he also depicted *The Death of General Montgomery in the Attack on Quebec*, and *The Death of General Mercer at the Battle of Princeton, January 3, 1777*.

[5] Joseph Warren was an appreciated physician in Boston, a well-known and admired leader of the rebels, and a brave soldier. He deliberately asked general Israel Putnam to be deployed at Bunker Hill as a private soldier rather than as an officer, a choice which led him to fight on the front line, possibly causing his death.

This fictional insertion is evident in the description of Warren's death. In 2011, Samuel A. Forman demonstrated through forensic tests how Warren had been shot at his cheekbone, dying instantaneously.[6] Yet Brackenridge – and Trumbull one generation later – depicted Warren's death as a painful, decent, heroic agony, which is described at the beginning of the fourth scene of the fifth act: Warren enters "mortally wounded, falling on his right knee, covering his breast with his right hand, and supporting himself with his firelock in his left" (1776, 28), saying, "A deadly ball hath limited my life, and now to God, I offer up my soul. But O my countrymen, let not the cause, the sacred cause of liberty, with me faint or expire." As Sarah Purcell elegantly puts it, Brackenridge

> affords Warren the rare privilege of dying on stage. He is the only major character to do so in the canon of Revolutionary propaganda plays, although in reality Warren died instantly from a gunshot to the face; [...] in its physical reality, Warren's death was not unlike thousands of others that followed over the next eight years of war with Great Britain, but on a symbolic level his demise soon came to mean something much greater. The actual grim violence of Warren's death was transformed and sentimentalized into a tool for mobilizing public support for the war. (Purcell 2002, 11)

The description of Warren's death is strongly subjected to the necessities of its contingency. The text was written at the very heart of the American Revolution, when the emotional contribution of Warren's death could have meant a lot to the American rebels in terms of inspiration. Jason Shaffer adds that due to his "sense of history, along with his power as a speaker and his large family, [Warren is] the ideal vehicle for Brackenridge's propagandist treatment of death and mourning" (15-16). The same reasons explain the fictionalization of Warren's death, a process of *postmortem* mythologization that continued after the end of the war and throughout the Early Republic era through the work of John Trumbull. The pictorial version of Warren's death he proposed adjusts itself more to Brackenridge's narration than to what historical accounts had given tangible evidence of.

The structure of Trumbull's series of paintings is analogous: the vanishing point is represented by Warren's lifeless body, lying on his back, sustained by another American soldier who also tries to protect it by parrying a bayonet lunge fencing. A group of continental troops stands above this *Pietà*, trying to repel the assault of the redcoats while firmly holding their flags in the face of the enemy. Two British soldiers aim at Warren, and behind them, the rest of their regiment charges at the American standard bearers.[7] The main group of figures constitutes a uniform cluster of characters and composes a triangular shape; figuratively lying on Warren, the American side is developed vertically and opposed to the English side that is deployed along a diagonal and dynamic line that may be read as a metaphorical wave that crashes against the 'American wall.'

From a visual and narrative standpoint, Warren constitutes the cornerstone of the painting. He symbolically represents the American ideal to protect, and embodies the inspiration for his soldiers not to retreat from the field but rather to pursue the fight. In this way, Trumbull visually reactivates Brackenridge's textual imagination, and configures death as "a sacrifice that inspires others to go forth and do likewise" (Shaffer 2006, 4). In his celebration of the revolutionary years, Trumbull evokes the exemplary value of Warren's martyrdom as a model to consolidate and export to the following generations of American culture as a constant reminder of the meaning of virtue both in victory and defeat: Shaffer suggests that "What the figure of the patriot martyr cannot always achieve on the page or the stage, however, he may achieve by luring new volunteers from the reading [and possibly viewing] audience of Brackenridge and his fellow pamphleteers" (2006, 19). In transferring this dynamic to the Early Republic, Trumbull transposes the same drive into visual art, forever canonizing the myth of Warren's death in the American public memory, both in terms of significance and of visual representation. In this way, the depiction of the American Revolution

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[6] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DdggCICMnkU. In addition, according to following accounts, after being shot, Warren's body was repeatedly bayoneted until it became unrecognizable, or even beheaded. In any case, Warren's body was exhumed ten months after the battle and recognized by Paul Revere.

[7] For the identification of the other characters, I suggest "Key to the Battle of Bunker's Hill," http://www.americanrevolution.org/bunkey.php.

"created a new kind of national martyr, one who sacrificed himself purely for the cause of liberty and sanctified the American nation with his death" (Purcell 2002, 21).

Trumbull's fortune and fame granted his paintings on the American Revolution the status of iconic images, a fate which the iconography of the American Civil War does not share: as Steven Conn justly remarks, "While American critics and others at the outbreak of the war still revered history painting, and while the nation's own Revolution had been wonderfully productive of iconic historical scenes, in fact the entire genre was already on the wane" (2002, 21). Several reasons underlay this weakening, and one in particular: plot. Due to its source and its celebratory intention, *The Death of General Warren* should obviously not be looked at as a faithful historical reproduction, but rather as what Hayden White would define as an "emplotted" version: Roland Barthes would say that "Painting can feign reality without having seen it" (1980, 76).

Within this logic, several elements that are generally attributed to photography re-appear (or rather pre-appear) in the structure of paintings. Kiku Adatto claims that, in photography, "Images are bearers of meanings, enduring carriers of ideals and myths" (2008, 243), they record reality and document facts, but they unveil deeper truths beyond the surface. Despite its different form, *The Death of General Warren* seems to share this same prerogative, or rather, it seems to suggest an authorial intention and a broader picture behind the picture: the painting can be considered as the epitome of the early republican optimistic ideology, thus justifying Purcell's position on the fact that

> By commemorating the Revolutionary War, Americans created a national mythology for themselves. They transformed the bloodshed, division, and violence of war into beautiful symbols of unity and national cohesion. Because the war had been such a cataclysmic event, military memories tended to highlight in the strongest possible terms the necessity of Americans' bonding together. (2002, 3)

The Secession War posits a radical set of changes in the American cultural paradigms, reshaping the popular perception of Americanness, nation, politics, and ethnicity, and as Henry James famously affirmed, "The Civil War marks an era in the history of the American Mind" (1879, 144). In addition, the conflict represents a profound process of transformation in the military field, bound to influence all future wars: it is generally recognized as the first industrial war, and it revolutionized the numbers of conflicts, both in terms of soldiers and victims. Particularly, the last element attests a fundamental change in contrast to the American Independence War and to the other wars of the late modern age, as it exposed the American people – in the North and in the South – to such a massive yet ordinary iconography of death on a daily basis as it had never been experienced before.[8] Faust observes how, both for soldiers and civilians, "Loss became commonplace; death was no longer encountered individually; death's threat, its proximity, and its actuality became the most widely shared of the war's experiences" (2008, 12).

The sight of dead bodies was thus one of the most fundamental carriers of this national trauma, an experience which, for the first time in history, was not limited to veterans, but largely accessed by the civilians. "Bodies," Faust continues, "were in important ways the measure of the war — of its achievements and its impact; and indeed, bodies became highly visible in Civil War America" (2008, 15). The development of daguerreotypes and their use on the battlefield allowed newspapers to ordinarily expose the people of the United States to the images of the Civil War casualties, imposing a reconsideration of the very notion of death in the light of the overabundant visibility of corpses and the loss of a functional superstructure of positive ideals to convey through those images: to put it bluntly, those photographs were simply too many for a coherent intentional narrative of any sort, be it patriotism, heroism, or sacrifice. Not by chance, Susan Sontag argues that

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[8] According to Steven Conn, "The Civil War occurred at a revolutionary moment in American visual culture. Photography and mass-produced graphic illustrations in newspapers and magazines created thousands of images of the war. The speed with which these images could be created, and the possibility of their reproduction ad infinitum, proved tough competition for artists who still worked with paint on canvas" (2002, 21).

> The more general [photographs] are, the less likely they are to be effective. A photograph that brings news of some unsuspected zone of misery cannot make a dent in public opinion unless there is an appropriate context of feeling and attitude. The photographs Matthew Brady and his colleagues took of the horrors of the battlefields did not make people any less keen to go on with the Civil War. (2001,14)

According to Conn, who elaborates on the consolidated opposition between the fictionality of paintings and photography's pretension to objectivity, one of the most significant elements of divergence between photographs and paintings consists in the fact that "Rather than attempt to make narrative and moral sense of the war, photographs served as part of the apparatus of documentation" (2002, 35); however, he recognizes, many Civil War photos "were staged, the bodies manipulated, and that constitutes a kind of interpretation," although they "presented themselves as capturing unadulterated reality. They replaced timelessness with immediacy and moral teaching with cold fact. Photographs powerfully redefined how the 'real' could be visually reproduced, but not necessarily what was 'true'."[9]

Civil War photographs of dead bodies represent the intention to depict reality as it is. But, despite their apparent transparency, they are not totally free from a narrative, an act of emplotment – intentionally or unintentionally – constructed by the photographer; despite their presumption of hyper-realism, they naturally produce a strong emotional response in the viewers. Undoubtedly though, massive circulation of dead bodies photographs and engravings, during and immediately after the war, produced a social shock and a national trauma. For the Civil War era public, images of corpses lying on the battlefield, gathered before being buried, or moved and posed by photographers, determined a traumatizing experience because of their immediacy. In Barthesian terms, the most evident prerogative in all these 'types' of photographs is the *presence* of death in its most realistic and less heroic shape. Quite comprehensibly, the most famous Civil War images by well-known photographers such as Matthew B. Brady, Alexander Gardner, or James F. Gibson represent death on the battlefield.

If we consider three iconic photographs, such as Gardner's *Dead Confederate Soldiers Left on the Field after the Battle of Antietam* (1862), Gibson's *Body of a Confederate in Slaughter Pen* (1862), and O'Sullivan's *The Aftermath of the Battle of Gettysburg* (1863), one element dominates the others: the absolute lack of composure in death. The three images immortalize death in its very immediacy, as they were taken right after the conclusion of the battle, before any transfer of the casualties, and they represent the soldiers in the exact position that each body assumed when collapsing, lifeless, after being killed. This condition characterizes the composition of each picture: *Dead Confederate Soldiers Left on the Field* shows five dead bodies in the foreground, scattered belly up, and a line of other casualties in the background which follow the line of a trench they had been defending. *Body of a Confederate Soldier Killed in the Slaughter Pen* shows the body of a man who fell backwards after being shot among some rocks, and it seems as if he had been sitting down. *The Aftermath of the Battle of Gettysburg* shows four bodies lying on their backs in the foreground and several dead soldiers scattered in the background while a horseman and an infantryman check for survivors.

The apparent lack of a premeditated staging of these pictures, as well as the absence of an underlying plot, shed in fact light on an actual narrative which inevitably emerges and that is conveyed to the viewers. The banality, the fortuity, and the horror of these scenes charges the dead bodies that are represented with a sense of pathetic, of pity, but completely devoid of any symbols of heroism or nobility. In other words, the only meaning these Civil War casualties assume is their being dead, whereas in a rhetoric death such as Warren's, it is through the act of dying that the protagonist's inspirational role and myth emerge. The death's mode of representation is what confers a narrative role to dead men; as a consequence, if, on the one hand, in Trumbull's painting, Warren shows a certain plasticity, almost sculptural, conveyed by his physical composure and a noble calmness in his complexion, on the other hand, the dead Confederates photographed by Gardner, Gibson, and O'Sullivan show a flat anonymity, coarseness, an overall lack of heroic (and fictional) dignity.

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[9] Roland Barthes somehow agrees with Sontag, as he argues that the one possible way to tame photography is "to generalize, to gregarize, banalize it until it is no longer confronted by any image in relation to which it can mark itself, assert its special character, its scandals, its madness" (118).

Alexander Gardner's *Dead Soldiers in a Ditch after the Battle of Antietam* (1862), *Bodies of Confederate Dead Gathered for the Burial* (1862), and Timothy O'Sullivan's *Six Dead Union Soldiers Killed During the First Say's Fighting at Gettysburg* (1863) display a slightly different timing in the caption: they do not immortalize death on the battlefield immediately after it has occurred, but rather a while after the battle, when the bodies are gathered before being buried. The most evident element of divergence in comparison with the previous pictures is that, in these cases, the bodies are 'in pose'. The original position that each of them had assumed when falling is altered, as the position of the limbs in O'Sullivan's photograph suggests (for example, a soldier in the background has his right arm placed upon his face). Even after being relocated, the corpses share the same banality — and, possibly, the absence of heroic and noble traits is even more accentuated by their quantity. Their being aligned in the same position before the burial annihilates every possible specificity that characterizes each man: in this way, as Russ Castronovo claims, "Equalization takes the place of equality" (2001, 12); the corpses resemble each other and share the same future, the same tomb, and – oftentimes – the same anonymity. This very aspect is part of the most significant narrative of the Civil War, "Suffering" (Faust 2008); at the beginning of the era of dead bodies' "mechanical reproduction" (Walter Benjamin will excuse me), photography achieves the standardization of the peculiar traits of death: singular symbolic death ceases to exist, and with it, martyrdom. The subtext that Civil War visuality advances is that no Union dead, nor any Confederate one, shows any elements of heroism, inspiration, or symbolic action; their meaning resides in their being lifeless, without political (or racial), or personal distinction. On this aspect, Faust claims that "At war's end this shared suffering would override persisting differences about the meanings of race, citizenship, and nationhood to establish sacrifice and its memorialization as the ground on which North and South would ultimately reunite" (2008, 12).[10]

Even in single-subject dead soldiers photographs, individual characteristics are blurred in the process of democratization of death. For example, Gibson's above-described *Body of a Confederate Soldier Killed in the Slaughter Pen*, but also Timothy O'Sullivan's controversial *A Sharpshooter's Last Sleep* (1863),[11] although depicting individuals – and thus discernible – subjects, provide images that do not convey any substantial difference from any other dead soldier in Antietam or Gettysburg: Gibson's *Dead Confederate*'s face is not even visible, and no peculiar element stands out from the sharpshooter to the point of rendering the photograph iconic. Quite the contrary: the familiar element is constituted by the location rather than the body, whose complexion reminds instead of other anonymous dead soldiers, such as the man in the foreground in Gardner's *The Aftermath of the Battle of Gettysburg*.

Grounded in the misery and the dreariness conveyed by the casualties on both sides of the American Civil War, the implicit anti-martial narrative that underlies the visual representation of dead bodies in photography contradicts the widespread rhetoric of the "Good Death" that early republican patriotic discourse had fostered for decades in antebellum America. Paraphrasing Faust, the cultural trope of the Good Death can be summarized as a dignified act of passing, through a sort of consciousness of the fact, and a certain readiness to the event. Dignity and sobriety while dying at war are two fundamental traits of the Good Death, because they mirror an equally dignified conduct in life. Yet, the circulation of an extensive amount of pictures of dead men, totally lacking those features, discredited any positive rhetoric of war, to the point that a new 'realistic imagination' of death on the battlefield took roots in popular culture and in the Civil War narratives of the Reconstruction Era.

The most famous example of the strengthening of this anti-heroic perception of dying at war is Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895). By alluding to the narrative trajectory of the protagonist, Henry Fleming, Giorgio Mariani argues that Crane "launches his parodic attack on popular fiction; by showing what war was like, Crane undercut the myth of the beautiful, valiant hero that had characterized especially Southern versions of the Civil War novel" (1992, 140). However, in several sections of the text, that same parodic attack can be recognized as it refers to descriptions of dead bodies. Chapter VII presents one of Crane's most quoted passages, Henry's encounter with a dead Union soldier:

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[10] See also David Blight's *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (2011)*.
[11] William Frassanito demonstrates that the young soldier's body had been relocated, carried on a white blanket for forty yards and staged into a sharpshooter's vantage point in order to dramatize the caption (1975, 187).

> He was being looked at by a dead man who was seated with his back against a column-like tree. 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 to the side of a dead fish. The mouth was open. Its red had changed to an appalling yellow. Over the grey skin of the face ran little ants. He remained staring into the liquid-looking eyes. (2005, 77)

Except for the detail of the ants, Crane's description provides no peculiarity of this corpse, nor does it suggest honorable or dignified aspects; even the political characterization of the soldier literally fades out as the color of his uniform does, suggesting a coincidence in the trauma between Northerners and Southerners, and claiming the democratic nature of death, which annihilates any visible distinction between enemies, and literally equalizes all men, as Gardner and O'Sullivan's photographs visually show.

Death on the battlefield can reasonably be considered as one of the most iconic tropes in two prototypical iconogenerative moments of American culture, the American Revolution and the Civil War. In both cases, Faust is right when she maintains that "Death's significance arose from its absolute and unique permanence" (2008, 23). The trope certainly presents clear elements of divergence due to the nature of the conflicts, their outcome, their backlash, and the mode through which they are represented. However, beyond the ideological pride of Trumbull's celebratory history paintings as opposed to Civil War photographers' realism, one of the most influential features that concurred to transform the significance of death lies in the different media that visually narrated the trope.

On the one hand, Trumbull's retrospective viewpoint, applied to a fictional medium, allowed him to construct an ideal *Death of General Warren*, charged with heroism, dignity, and nobility, thus depicting a martyr of the American struggle for freedom. On the other hand, Civil War photographs structured an anti-heroic rhetoric based on the visual, a reading that emerges because of the prerogatives of photography: immediacy, quantity, and reproducibility. However, the inevitable differences that exist between the two forms contribute to define two distinct cultural paradigms of death at war; dying in the American Revolution is configured as a sacrifice for a higher cause, as an *exemplum*, as the utmost stage of patriotic virtue. Dying in the Civil War posits the inevitability of death as the only reunifying threshold that characterizes American society, without design nor honor, and beyond any form of rhetoric of sacrifice.

As they derive from different contexts and media, these two representations of the same trope seem antithetical. Nonetheless, if read side by side, the American Revolution and the Civil War prove to be two equally iconogenerative events, not only because both engendered a particular paradigm of death, but because their cultural synthesis is the ultimate byproduct of their *iconogenesis*. In terms of narrative, certainly the mode of representation of death related to the American Revolution seems to prevail over the other: patriotism, virtue, and duty have provided US war propaganda with continuous self-fostered exceptionalism, notwithstanding the increasing number of military personnel deployed and the casualties suffered. The force of this paradigm is such that is has submerged and transformed the Civil War mode of representation of death at war; miserable, banal, unheroic, and even non-military deaths have become manifestations of American martyrdom, thus laying the foundations of a new and resultant narrative of death in American culture — one following a logic that acknowledges meaning to the life of people only through their death, and which would eventually find its best mode of visual representation in patriotic war movies.

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