

Shades of Gray: Vicarious experience and the power of things in American Civil War re-enactment”

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Abstract

Among historical reenactors, costumed hobbyists staging elaborate battles and episodes from the American Civil War, ‘experience’ is king. This paper deals with the relentless quest among reenactors for the ultimate vicarious experience – that is, the coming as close as possible to ‘what it must have been like’ for real flesh-and-blood Civil War soldiers – and with the ways in which this striving is connected to and dependent upon material objects or ensembles of objects.

The presentation, based on ethnographic fieldwork in and around the iconic field of Gettysburg, in Pennsylvania, in 2010 and 2013, explores reenactors’ social and material aspirations as part of what historiographer Ewa Domanska has called a ‘material hermeneutics’. Their privileging of experience and embodiment is discussed in relation to another, different modality of accessing the past in Gettysburg, epitomised by the federal US National Park Service and its so-called ‘battlefield rehabilitation’ program revolving around a visual ‘cleansing’ of the landscape.

In the last part of the paper, I discuss the complex political and ethical aspects inherent in the restaging of specific historical perspectives and narratives, and the claims to authenticity and authority inherent in them. The ‘power of things’ is also a power connected to the material manifestation of certain claims and thus potentially barring what Ulrich Beck has called ‘the truth of others’. What emerges, then, is a cautious call for a reflexive and explorative engagement with reenactment and related performative practices, which acknowledges their considerable power but also insists on the possibilities of alternative perspectives and pasts.