CHAPTER 9

LIFE AND DEATH IN PEEP BOXES: BRINGING THE CIVIL WAR TO THE AMERICAN HOME

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It is a leaf torn from the book of God’s recording angel.
—Oliver Wendell Holmes, Atlantic Monthly, July 8, 1861: 18

1. OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES’S DISCOURSES ON STEREOSCOPY

An archaeology of our—often violent—visual experience and the forms of reality constitution related to it begins in the nineteenth century amid what Jean-Louis Comolli has memorably described as the “frenzy of the visible.” My contribution deals with the experience of participation, immersion, and availability of visual realities through a new medium. In the course of the nineteenth century one specific apparatus extended the field of the visible and transformed the visual experience of mass audiences in particular: the stereoscope. Using the example of Oliver Wendell Holmes’s pioneering and little examined discourses on the new medium and the use of the stereoscope during the Civil War, I examine to which extent this medium contributes to perceptual mastery of the visibility of violence. In fact this approach contributes to an overlooked dimension of violence in the American Civil War. As I argue, the American Civil War founded the paradigm of modern

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wars that the imminent reality of war remains ambivalent, a distant yet close enough prospect for observers, a visual “set-piece” that Americans want to preserve and hold on in front of their eyes, straddling the divide between the private and the political, the collective and the individual. Violence, while acknowledged, remains at arm’s length, close and removed at the same time through new technologies of observation, especially the stereoscope, displaying imagery of situational violence, characteristic of modern civil wars: snipers, guerrillas, wounded veterans, men and armory, and last but not least commanders in pose trying to symbolically incorporate a decisive engagement routing the enemy through massive violence. In other words, the stereoscopic images of the American Civil War allow for a certain level of control, sovereignty, and identification in a postconflict situation in visual scenarios, because they made possible an intimate illusion of visual participation in segmented and fragmented representations of violent events, which involve the observer asymmetrically, mostly in a (more or less voyeuristic) position of a “bystanding” noncombatant. This asymmetry of invisible indiscriminate and massive violence versus intimately visible and commensurable dimensions of violence is characteristic of the display of war images until our digital age. The medium of the stereoscope and its specific display of images in the nineteenth century are paradigmatically relevant for the experiences of sovereignty and control of millions of citizens over a national catastrophe.

Thus the significance of the stereoscope for cultural history stems on the one hand from its importance in the fundamental changes of perception practices of the nineteenth century in general, and on the other from its widespread use in conjunction with millions of photographs produced during the period. A form of optical illusion, originally introduced in 1838 by Charles Wheatstone, the stereograph derives from the fact that human beings see the world through two eyes, each of which sees a slightly different view. When the brain receives and combines these two images, the result yields a perception of the world in three dimensions. In the late 1850s, photographers created special cameras with two lenses that reproduced the vision of two separate eyes. These cameras produced two negatives, side by side, on a single piece of glass. After the negatives were printed, and the resulting photographs mounted on special cards, these cards could be placed in a viewer, where they reproduced a startlingly lifelike image in three dimensions.