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A Snapshot in Time: Deconstruction of a Historical Alaskan Photograph

The beauty of photography is that you capture a moment in time that will never happen again, exactly the way you saw it. Or can you? As a critic of photography, you are constantly analyzing what is happening within a photo and why that photograph exists. But as a critic, do you ever consider what the photo does not reveal? Do you consider what secrets the photo holds and that lies deep within the photograph or what the photo is trying to hide? By deconstructing the attached photograph, the reader begins to see that, despite their perceived interpretation, there is no meaning behind the photograph. The reader is unable to decipher the true intent behind the

photograph. Did the photographer intend to have these people as his subject? Was this the intended landscape? Or is this photograph just a snapshot that will forever be lost to time?

The photograph appears to be a generic black and white picture of three men dressed in military uniforms, enjoying some alcohol, fishing, and food on a warm and sunny Alaska summer day in 1943. The three men seem to be well acquainted friends in a small wooden canoe with fishing poles on Fort Richardson, Alaska's Otter Lake with a vast forest in the background and beautiful mountains peering through the clouds (University of Alaska Anchorage, Consortium Library). This beautiful photograph captures normal soldiers doing normal activities on a summer day during one of the most turbulent times in human history. But as the reader begins to deconstruct the photograph, each aspect begins to lose meaning when the reader asks the question "why?" Why did the photographer decide to capture this specific moment, with these people, in this setting?

At first glance, the most prominent aspect of the photograph, and the intended subject, is the three soldiers centered in the photograph. The first impression given by the picture is that these three men are seemingly just trying to enjoy so recreation during an Alaska summer day. But as you look closer, you begin to question why exactly the photographer would decide to take this photograph. What brought these men to this lake to begin with? Was it lunch and a drink? Is it possible these men were relaxing after a long stint overseas, or were they tasked with protecting Alaska from the fear of attack from the Axis powers during WWII? It is also possible that these men were simply lucky where they were stationed in Alaska and avoided the explosive war that had engulfed the world. Once you begin to deconstruct this photo, you begin to realize that as a read you cannot deconstruct it to a point that makes sense. There are so many factors

that contribute to how we want to deconstruct the photo, that it begins to lose all meaning. One reader of the photograph may have a different interpretation than anyone else that deciphers it. Therefore, as each individual reader begins to decode the photograph, it loses all meaning. If there is no meaning within the objects and people in the picture, could the reader discover possible meaning within the setting and landscape of the photograph?

All works in the humanities use setting as a major element to develop the work itself, and photography is no different in that aspect. This photograph has a quite plain yet beautiful setting. The vast water and dense forest leaves much of the actual setting of the photo to the imagination. This forces the photograph's reader to use imagination to decipher the author's intent behind this background. The setting is so special that in its simplicity, it makes the photograph more complex. Did the men just depart on their journey around the lake? Are they simply posing for a photograph in a boat to post to their social media page later? What is the true destination for these men? The average reader would guess that they just decided to take a lap around the lake and enjoy all the beauty that nature has to offer. Is it possible these men had just completed a devious act and were all smiles because they had returned without being caught and the boat was just for deception? The setting of this photo is so striking because of what little it tells the reader and therefore forces the reader to make assumptions that hold no meaning because the reader does not understand the author's intent.

When we read photography, much of the information of the photograph is inferred conclusions that the reader makes based on their own past experiences. What the reader often misses is the information hidden within the picture or perhaps not hidden. When a reader takes a deconstructive approach to breakdown a photograph, they begin to realize that the author had no

meaning or intent behind the picture. Is it possible that despite all the information contained within the photo, it has no meaning? Is it possible that that this picture will forever be lost to time with the true meaning lost forever with no explanation? Is it possible that this is even a photo at all?

Work Cited

"Otter Lake, Anchorage, Alaska, June 1943." *Alaska's Digital Archives*, University of Alaska Anchorage, Anchorage, Alaska, June 1943, <https://vilda.alaska.edu/digital/collection/cdmg13/id/15395/rec/8> Accessed 12 Nov. 2022.