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Capturing the Moment: A Rhetorical Analysis of World War II Celebration

Kylie Wagar
Western Washington University

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CAPTURING THE MOMENT: A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF WORLD WAR II CELEBRATION

To what extent are images from the 1940s romanticized, celebrated and replicated in reflection of remembrance of the World War II era?

By: Kylie Wagar, Communication Studies

The iconic image V-J Day in Times Square is nationally remembered for the celebration of the end of World War II. Focusing on the archival collection Victory and Peace from the National Archives, this research demonstrates a disconnect in American perceptions and the reality of culture through iconic images. Specifically I investigate the extent to which images from the 1940s romanticized, celebrated and replicated in reflection of remembrance of the World War II era. These replications do not properly reflect the true events in 1945, but rather the idea that many would like to take away from this era. The images I refer to throughout this research regarding a sudden kiss contributes to this generation's nostalgia that comes from World War II phenomena. The relevance that this paper has to this contemporary moment contributes to the ideas of sexism, dominant American culture and the freedom of expression.



Figure 1, Victor Jorgensen, National Archives "Victory and Peace." World War II Records. (n.d.) National Archives. Retrieved from <https://www.archives.gov/research/military/ww2/photos>.

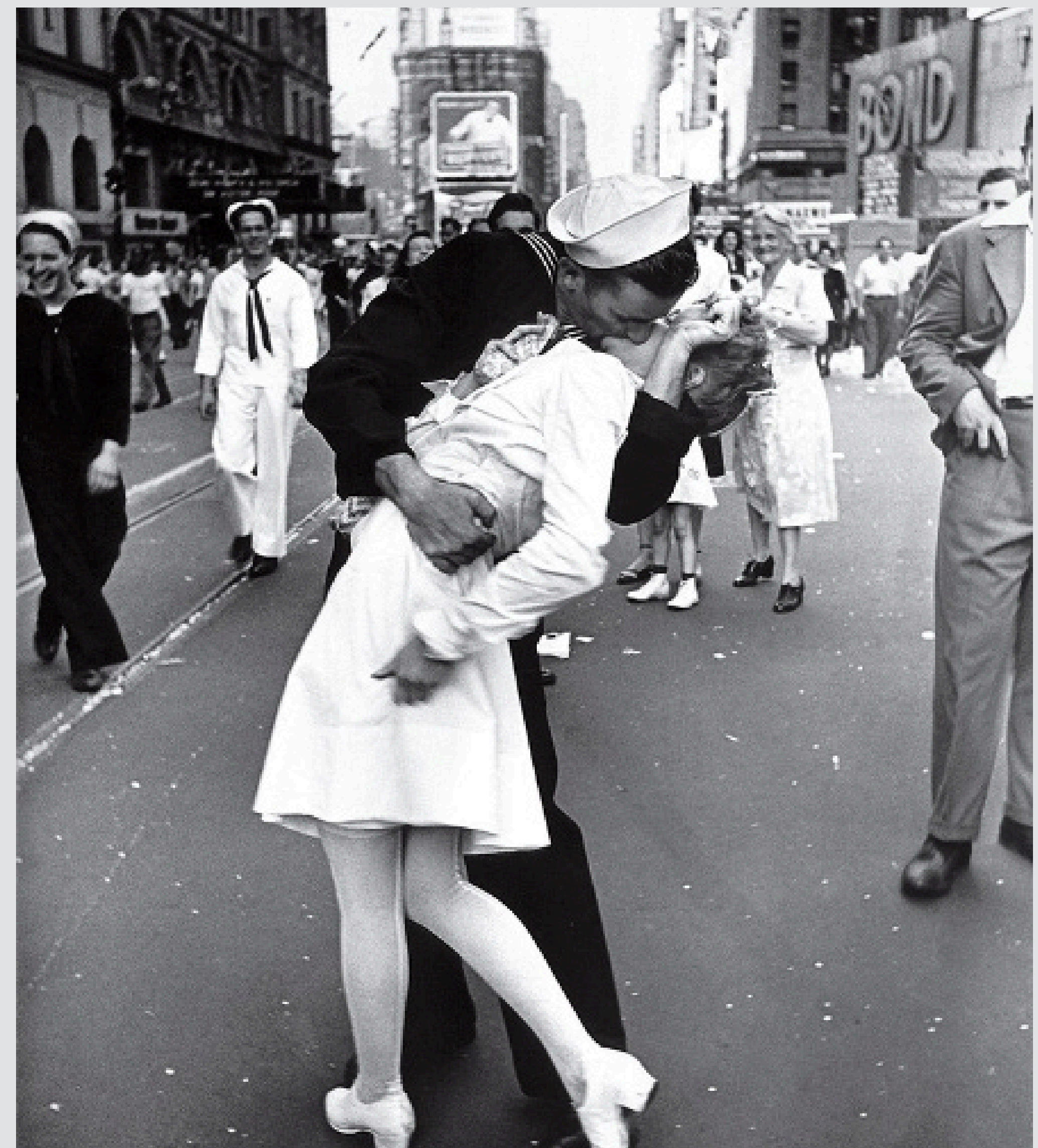


Figure 2, Alfred Eisenstaedt, Time Magazine. Retrieved January 22, 2017, from <http://100photos.time.com/photos/kiss-v-j-day-times-square-alfred-eisenstaedt> World War II.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

World War II was one of the deadliest wars that our nation has been involved in (History). At this time, the U.S. economy was failing, unemployment was at an all-time high, and countries all over the world were in the midst of war ("National WWII Museum"). World War II took the lives of over 35 million people altogether with some deaths not recorded, making it one of the largest conflicts across seas ever ("World War II"). World War II created a divide in nations with Germany and Japan representing the Axis powers and America and Britain comprising the Allied powers ("National WWII Museum"). One of the most popular images to come from the 1940s was the image of the sailor and the nurse embraced in a passionate kiss. Alfred Eisenstaedt was a German-American photojournalist. His work granted him a staff position for Life Magazine and is praised for his skill of "candid" photography. "Then suddenly, in a flash, I saw something white being grabbed," Eisenstaedt recounted. "I turned around and clicked the moment the sailor kissed the nurse" (Nemerov, 5).

CLOSE READ

At the first glance of the un-archival image, V-J Day in Times Square, from here on referred to as Figure 2, viewers can feel a sense of romanticism and joy produced by the two people in the photo. At second glance, the lines of the nurse's body give an artistic feel to the image, dragging the eyes up to the passionate kiss between two people. Figure 1, on the other hand, is at an awkward angle. Eisenstaedt's image is copyrighted and Jorgensen's was taken while he was on the job, contributing to the greater success of Eisenstaedt's image. The perfect "pop" of the leg in Figure 2 might lead one to believe that the woman is enjoying the kiss. In Figure 1, the woman's face is hidden by the sailor's hand, hiding her facial expression from the camera. The images are framed as if these two people are the only two people in the whole city. No one around them is focusing on the kiss, making it appear as normalized.

LITERATURE REVIEW

"At a simple denotational level, however, there are questions about Franklin's Ground Zero Spirit that cannot be answered without association to Rosenthal's photograph from Iwo Jima. For example, abstracting ourselves from immediate history, how do we know, on the basis of the photograph alone, that the three firefighters are raising the flag?" (Helmers and Hill, 9). This passage from Hills and Helmer references the fact that one image cannot exist without the other, therefore giving it the iconic and memorable quality. Edwards also indulges in the way that these images contribute to the overall national memory of patriotism. "The resonance of a news photo showing firefighters raising a flag over the ruins of the World Trade Center in 2002 is due, at least in part, to a thematic resemblance to the image of a flag being raised over the scene of a protracted and difficult battle in the war with Japan. Both photographs evoke values of collective effort and victory over threat, with the 2002 photo obviously building on the established rhetorical framework of its 1945 predecessor" (Edwards, 179).

UNCONDITIONAL SURRENDER

The familiarity of the image can be related to today's relevant popular culture. Most people have seen this photo, whether it be in poster form or online. The replication of this image is strong not only in modern media outlets, but also through the statue that stands in San Diego, California. Titled Unconditional Surrender, the statue is a replication of Eisenstaedt's iconic image. Seward Johnson sculpted this statue in 2005, but it isn't certain whether or not it is based off Eisenstaedt's or Jorgensen's image. Depending on the angle one is standing, both replications of images are present. For many families, mine included, family photos are taken next to this iconic duo. Without knowledge of the actual time period or the fact that these two people didn't know each other, the romantic qualities of the image-turned-statue leave viewers in awe.

METHODS

The analysis for the images of Victory and Peace will derive from the comparison of 1940s images with replications produced in the 21st century. I am choosing to compare V-J Day in Times Square with the images from the National Archives and the replication through statues, internet findings and poster sales and production of the image V-J Day in Times Square in popular culture, and how those contribute to the overall nostalgia of the World War II era. I conduct a close read of both V-J Day in Times Square and New York City Celebrating the Surrender of Japan. The close read of each photo will involve taking what is seen within the image and translate that into a visual rhetoric perspective rather than using these photos in history, but *as* history (Finnegan, 199).

DISCUSSION

The identification of gender identity and the continuous circulation of the analyzed images reminds viewers that there are still ways to improve thoughts on representing those of color and other gender preferences, while addressing ideas of sexual assault. "If the relationship between a signifier and its signified is the result of a system of social conventions specific to each society and to specific historical moments, then all meanings are produced within history and culture. They can never be finally fixed but are always subject to change, both from one cultural context and from one period to another. There is thus no single, unchanging, universal 'true meaning'" (Hall, 17). This century's ideology of rape culture is significantly different than those of the twentieth century. The progression of feminine and masculine ideals and the rise of LGBTQ+ cultures have un-silenced this "sudden kiss" that is referred to in this context.