“Shoddy” is the afterlife of rags. This talk is about why that afterlife matters.

Starting in the early 1800s, shoddy was the name given to a new material made from reclaimed wool, and marked one of the earliest forms of industrial recycling. Old rags and leftover fabric clippings were ground to bits by a machine known as “the devil” and then re-used. Usually undisclosed, shoddy became suit jackets, army blankets, mattress stuffing, and much more.

This talk will examine visual and material cultures of textile recycling and their contributions to histories of science, technology, and medicine. Shell argues second-hand clothing is a vital medium—simultaneously visual and material, embodied and inanimate. Sources include literary and historical publications from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Most vital, however, are the visual and material sources: from military uniforms to mattress labels, from medical illustrations to political cartoons, to some of the best-known photographic documents in American history, here interpreted anew.


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