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THE RHETORIC OF THE FRAME

Revisioning Archival Photographs in The Civil War

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Thanks to *The Civil War*, first broadcast on PBS September 23–27, 1990, audiences have become accustomed to seeing the camera rove over or delve into the flat surface of a photograph as if that photograph were a three dimensional entity. This technique did not originate with the 11 hour Florentine Films production. It is standard Hollywood practice, as filmmaker Ken Burns was the first to acknowledge (Milius 43), but it certainly was made familiar by the documentary. Some joked about the frequency of slow and deliberate movement "up the legs, past the belt, now the chest" (Adler 59). Others credited the film's use of 3,000 archival stills (Milius 43) with creating an "unremittingly authentic record in black and white" (Broder D7) that contributed to the film's historical authenticity. This essay will argue that the archival photographs are appropriated in ways that go beyond exposition to constitute visual rhetoric.

Mobile framing and reframing, the two techniques on which this essay focuses, involve alterations to the frame and composition of archival photographs. Mobile framing is Bordwell and Thompson's term for camera work (specifically the pan, the tilt or the tracking shot) that gives viewers the illusion of movement, regardless of what actually took place in the profilmic event. In mobile framing, the camera treats the archival still as if it were a three-dimensional entity, endowing it with depth and motion. Mobile framing, especially the slow pans and tilt shots used so frequently in *The Civil War,* problematizes viewing by prolonging, beyond normal expectations, the time it takes viewers to decipher exactly what they are seeing. As Carole Berger explains, delayed recognition "highlights the sense-making activity itself and obliges us to reflect on it" (150). Thus mobile framing encourages viewer awareness of the linkage between seeing and knowing and the epistemological assumptions involved in that linkage. Reframing accomplishes the same goal, though more subtly.

In reframing, an archival still is dissected into several different shots, one of which

shows the photograph in its original form and others which reframe portions of the original. Reframing is often used to provide close-ups of individuals barely noticeable in the original photograph, thus inviting viewers to question why this is so. Why does the original photograph relegate this particular person or detail to the background? Why does the film place them in the foreground? These questions highlight the rhetorical construction of the photographs, and, ultimately, of the film. That is, the photographs give witness to the past as viewed by a photographer influenced by the conventions and ideology (and of course the technology) of the nineteenth century. Reframing suggests other interpretations of the photographs and the past they represent, thereby providing the more complex analysis called for by visual historians like Robert Rosenstone, Joshua Brown, and Andrew Britton. Ultimately, reframing visually advances the argument that history is not a product, an absolute truth enshrined in libraries and archives, but rather an on-going critical encounter between the past and present. That encounter, moreover, is not passive or accidental; it is rhetorical.

This analysis of the rhetorical function of reframing and mobile framing in *The Civil War* begins with a brief review of the concept of visual rhetoric, establishes its relevance for documentary studies, then applies the concept to portions of the film series which best illustrate both the aesthetic operation of these techniques and their rhetorical implications. Special attention is paid to segments depicting the slave experience to demonstrate that reframing and mobile framing not only compensate for gaps in the visual record but also encourage viewers to question the reason for the gaps. Past and present ideologies are juxtaposed, inviting viewers to question the implications of their own ideological stance and to recognize that representation and ideology are inextricably linked (Minh-ha 97).

VISUAL RHETORIC

A wide range of visual forms have been the subject of rhetorical analysis, including the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (Foss), print advertisements (Scott), fiction films (Rushing and Frentz, Gronbeck), 1930s social documentary (Medhurst & Benson), newsreels and newscasts (Nichols), news documentary (Rosteck), and direct cinema (Benson; Nichols). Nevertheless, two similarities can be found amid this diversity: the concept of audience as actively engaged with the visual text and the linkage of aesthetic and rhetorical functions.

In "Respecting the Reader," Tom Benson points out that rhetorical analysis of visual texts must investigate "the ways the text positions the spectator as an active participant in the making of meaning" (197). Rhetorical critics, he argues in "The Rhetorical Structure of Frederick Wiseman's *Primate*," must go beyond "*what* meaning emerges from a text or artifact" to an explanation of "*how* it emerges" (204). Tackling the *how* means attending to the specific properties of visual images and their processing by viewers. The job of the rhetorical critic, Benson explains, is to locate those effects in the complicated interaction between text, context, and audience: "The text implies its audience and the interpretive actions of its audience" (204).

Sonja Foss agrees that meaning comes from interaction between the visual object and the viewer; indeed her definition of a rhetorical response is that a "viewer attributes meaning" (331) by engaging in "a critical, reflective analysis of the work or a cognitive apprehension of it" (329). The visual object invites certain responses and discourages others (Foss 329). This analysis, moreover, can lead viewers out of the self-contained, non-referential universe of the text, which Foss calls its aesthetic dimension, to the world beyond the text (329).

In *The Civil War,* the impetus to make this journey from aesthetic experience to rhetorical analysis is provided by mobile framing and reframing. Together these two techniques focus attention on the archival photographs as constructions that embody past ideologies open to reinterpretation (Trachtenberg 70; Levine 26). In deconstructing these photographs, the film invites viewers to question their own formulation of abstractions like individuality, community, family, and freedom. This deconstruction is crucial to the depiction of the slave experience because it can stimulate audience awareness that these concepts are absent from archival photographs of African Americans. Visual images of slave families, for example, must be wrenched

from group photographs. Mobile framing and reframing demonstrate that the social relationships previously regarded as "real" and constant are, in fact, "rhetorically constituted" and susceptible to change (McKerrow 103).

Viewers' ability to analyze a visual text is grounded in their familiarity with generic conventions of production and reception (Gronbeck 140–41; Nichols 24). Ernst Gombrich, for example, has demonstrated that pictorial art forms are based on conventions common to artist and viewer. Alan Trachtenberg makes a similar argument with regard to documentary photographs. Likewise Scott argues that in decoding advertising images, "consumers draw on a learned vocabulary of pictorial symbols . . ." (264). Foss advances similar claims in her analysis of non-pictorial art forms (329–31). Rosteck, in his analysis of television news documentaries, and Benson, in his studies of Wiseman's films, discuss the generic conventions utilized by particular audiences. First among these is viewers' recognition of "conventional form," which Burke defines as "the appeal of form as *form*" (126), that is, the expectations and attitudes an audience brings to its initial encounter with a particular visual text.

DOCUMENTARY ASSUMPTIONS: SEEING IS BELIEVING

Most viewers of historical documentary expect to see a faithful representation of the past. They bring with them to the viewing experience an "assumption that sounds and images stand as evidence . . . rather than as elements of a plot" (Nichols 20). Instead of the suspension of disbelief characteristic of fiction, documentary film invokes in many viewers an "activation of belief" that they are seeing evidence of the real world (Nichols 28). Viewers assume that documentaries are "transmitting" historical events rather than fictionally creating them (Guynn 223). Documentary "produces the referential illusion and in fact derives its prestige from that production" (Guynn 223). Instead of the power of the imaginary, documentary invokes belief in the real—whether it be the reality of the present or of the past.

The Civil War inspires belief in its ability to capture a past reality primarily through lavish use of archival materials. Over 160 archives were visited in gathering material for the film; 16,000 archival photographs were shot, 3,000 of which ultimately were used (Milius 43). The filmmakers treated these photographs as "evidence of the past" ("Civil War" 58) and tried to let them "speak for themselves, to convey meanings and emotions and stories on their own" (Ken and Ric Burns qtd. in Ward xvii).

Nevertheless, to transform these archival photographs into a meaningful film experience for modern audiences demanded considerable creativity. Mobile framing was used to create the illusion of three dimensionality and movement, while reframing provided the close-ups or mid-range shots that were beyond the technology of nineteenth century photographers. As theorists like John Berger, Ernst Gombrich, and Nelson Goodman have demonstrated, seeing is conventional. The postmodern era has been conditioned by snapshot photography and its "nonselective accuracy of detail" (Kouwenhoven 187) to value minutia which mid-nineteenth century viewers, who prized panoramic views, would have regarded as trivial.[1] Thus, in the film, an archival photograph of slaves gathered in front of a cabin is reframed to focus attention on one detail of the photograph, a detail that is much less noticeable in the original: a girl holding a book. Through mobile framing, a shot which begins with a distant view of pickets around a campfire in a field ends with a zoom into a close-up of hands extended over the embers. In both these instances, a small detail from the original photograph is singled out for special attention.

The panoramic and group shots, crammed with information viewers might not master in full, present the past as past, as strange and different. The close-ups achieved through mobile framing and reframing enable viewers to experience the past on the intimate terms they have been conditioned to regard as "reality" (Kouwenhoven 187; Snyder 20). The archival photographs retain their historical authenticity and thus contribute to viewer expectations about documentary form. Nevertheless, their mode of presentation goes beyond historical exposition to critique. Both mobile and reframed shots have rhetorical implications because they invite viewers to recognize that the photographs are versions of the past that can be evaluated for the ideological implications of their composition.

Trachtenberg, for example, points out that photographers of the Civil War era adopted many of the props and conventions of portrait painters. Social class, he argues, could be inferred from the pose the photographer employed for the subject and from the amount of retouching expended on the final product (21–28). Photographs of soldiers and camp life also were composed according to pictorial conventions (Trachtenberg 73–75). For example, seen in the film is a photograph of Custer sitting with a captured Confederate (actually his cousin), a young body-servant at their feet. This is a conventional pose (Trachtenberg 84). Nevertheless, this photograph, like the others used in the film, comes with no annotations regarding its embodiment of nineteenth century attitudes about class. Instead, camera work is used to lure viewers beyond consideration of the informational content of the photographs to the attitudes and values implied by the arrangement and selection of subjects. The photographs are authentic. The people and places they depict did in fact exist. But the film's manner of presentation calls attention to itself, encouraging viewers to pay attention to the construction of the photographs and to the ways construction and reconstruction affect meaning.

Even when the archival materials seem simply to serve the narrative, the way they are presented helps establish a viewing pattern which, in other segments, leads to critique. For example, to illustrate narrator David McCullough's account of preparations for the siege of Yorktown (II: 16),[2] viewers are shown a series of shots taken from portions of an archival photograph. The photograph itself is not remarkable. It shows fortifications, including a cannon with soldiers behind it and piles of cannon balls to the left front. But, as is typical in this film, segments of the photograph are shown separately before the camera pulls back to reveal the whole photograph. In this instance, the first shot shows soldiers grouped around the cannon. Then the camera moves up to reveal the earthworks with a line of soldiers atop it. Next comes a far shot in which viewers see the photograph in its entirety.

There is no ostensible reason to first present portions of the photograph as single shots, except that this manner of presentation conditions viewers to question the relationship between the parts of the photograph and the whole. The camera work encourages viewers to "join in the mental exercise of sifting historical evidence" and thus establishes a pattern in which viewing becomes an act of purposeful discovery (Hulser 23). As Hulser points out, when "the historical mode of representation itself attracts . . . critical attention," viewers will begin to question "how what they see is supposed to prove a point" (23).

For example, in the second episode, as viewers hear Lincoln's words urging McClellan to act, they see first a far shot of a clearing among trees where the General camped out, then a cut to a head shot of Lincoln. Next viewers hear McClellan's haughty rejoinder to the President. Simultaneously they see a photograph of McClellan and three staff members; the shot is framed so that McClellan is center screen. In the next shot, the photograph is reframed to provide a close-up of McClellan, similar to the previous head-shot of Lincoln. The combination of head shots (first Lincoln, then McClellan), invites viewers to compare these two men, to match up their characters much as the film has matched their close-ups. At this point in a traditional documentary, an omniscient narrator, "the textual dominant," would speak with unchallenged authority to draw conclusions for the audience and thus advance the film's argument (Nichols 35). McCullough, however, voices no overt judgment about McClellan's shortcomings. Instead archival materials are selected and edited to provide evidence and imply a judgment, while camera work encourages viewers to move from implication to conclusion.

That McClellan should be judged the loser in the visual match up with Lincoln is cued by pairing a quotation from an unidentified private with two shots of an archival photograph in which a lone figure sits in a chair atop a huge earth mound. To the left, below the mound, is a cannon. In the background is a harbor with boats barely visible. In the left foreground of the photograph is a man on a horse; three men occupy the right foreground. These are a part of the York River defenses abandoned by the Confederates (Ward 132), but the film provides no identification or explanation. Instead it cuts to a closer view of the seated figure perched incongruously and inexplicably atop the earth mound.

This close-up must activate, at least in some viewers, a common assumption: the soldier at the front knows more than the general back at camp because workers always know more than their bosses. That assumption gains further support from the quotation: "I don't see the sense of piling up earth to keep us apart. If we don't get at each other some time, when will the war end? My plan would be to quit ditching and go to fighting" (II: 16). If an audience, based on its "stock of opinion and knowledge," makes the assumption and draws the conclusion which follows from that assumption it, in essence, persuades itself (Bitzer 407). Examining the ways in which this film appropriates archival photographs can provide an explanation of how such self-persuasion is elicited and how it supports larger claims about the nature of history.

AUDIENCE COLLABORATION WITH DOCUMENTARY FORM

Audiences collaborate in assigning particular meanings to a visual text (Foss 330). In that collaboration they draw on their own life experiences as well as on prior aesthetic and rhetorical experiences (Thompson 10; Foss 330). However, viewer collaboration is circumscribed by the text, which "renders one rhetorical interpretation more likely than another" (Foss 330). Through their content selection, shot composition, camera work, and editing, filmmakers guide what is seen, for how long, and in what order (C. Berger 149). Viewers construct meaning from shot content and context, from the relationship of shot to shot, and from the "rhythm of the cutting," all of which contribute to a film's "visual rhythms" and constitute an important aspect of its rhetoric (Medhurst & Benson 58). The visual rhythms of *The City,* for example, reinforce the claim that suburban life is an attractive compromise midway between the hectic rush of city life and the soporific pace of the country (Medhurst & Benson 59).

The concept of visual rhythm is useful in explaining the ways in which *The Civil War* establishes patterns that guide viewer collaboration in the meaning-making process. The visual rhythms of *The Civil War* tend to be slow. Frequently the film uses a slow tilt shot that

ends with either a long take or a cut to a close-up. For example, a shot in which the viewer's line of vision, controlled by the camera, travels very slowly up the photographic subject's torso will end with a long take of the subject's face or else cut to a close-up of the subject's face or eyes. Long takes, slow pans, and tight close-ups invite viewers to explore images, reflect on their possible meaning (C. Berger 150), and wonder how that meaning is arrived at (Hulser 23).

In *The Civil War,* the visual rhythms are often so slow as to unnaturally delay recognition of what the image is. For example, in the sequence of shots that follows the opening credits, the camera moves very slowly up a black surface adorned with white spheres. The image is unidentifiable until the camera reaches the face of a Union soldier. It then becomes clear that the camera has been panning up the soldier's uniform, but at such close range as to disorient and confuse the viewer. The next shot also begins with a mystifying image which, as the camera pans slowly screen left, reveals itself to be a rifle butt lying near what turns out to be the corpse of another soldier. Again recognition of the total image has been delayed. Another segment begins with a slow tilt shot down a black surface, which eventually resolves itself into a tree trunk. But recognition of the tree is not complete until the camera zooms back to reveal women standing beside the huge tree trunk. The slow camera movement in these shots focuses attention on the act of cognition, alerting viewers to their own participation in the meaning-making process.

Slow panning and tilt shots frequently are used to build suspense, but filmmakers can also use them to create a pattern of audience expectation that differentiates itself from conventional viewing patterns (C. Berger 150). Viewing patterns contribute to the form of a text, which Burke defines as "the creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite" (31). Form is "a way of experiencing" (Burke 143). A text which satisfies pre-existing audience expectations is conventional in form (Burke 127); its emphasis is on the information conveyed (Burke 39). The conventional form of a historical documentary would be the delivery of authentic information in a straightforward manner, since this would

fulfill audiences' prior expectations that such films "do not actively represent reality . . . but [instead] are identifiable with it" (Britton 27).

The Civil War, in part because it plays against these expectations, achieves what Burke calls "formal elegance or eloquence" (37). The eloquent text focuses audience attention on the presentation of information rather than on the information itself (Burke 37–39). This emphasis on presentation is also characteristic of parametric form in film; that is, form in which "artistic patterns compete for our attention with the narrative functions of devices" (Thompson 19). For example, the pattern of "seeing" by beginning at the bottom of a human form and moving very slowly up to the face, pausing there, at rest, is not necessary to visually identify who is being referenced; in fact, it delays recognition. In parametric form, "colors, camera movements, sonic motifs, will be repeated and varied across the entire work's form" in such a way as to call attention to themselves; means of presentation supersedes expository function (Thompson 20). Mobile framing and reframing are primary contributors to the eloquent, or parametric, form of this documentary.

The Moving Frame

Besides the obvious function of animating still photographs, camera movement in *The Civil War* can expand the frame of the original photograph, thus giving it symbolic importance far beyond the specific scene photographed. Slowly panning the photograph of a line of corpses along a fence conveys the sense that the fence and the remnants of slaughter go on and on; the particular scene of slaughter becomes emblematic of all similar scenes. Slowly panning the photograph of slaves at work in the cotton fields creates the illusion that the line of slaves stretches on eternally; these slaves symbolize legions of slaves toiling endlessly in countless fields. When the camera pans a line of soldiers photographed at march through a street, viewers not only get a sense of movement, but also, because the camera defies the limits of the photographic frame, the impression that the line is endless.[3]

The slow camera movement also gives viewers time to contemplate the image and to question its significance. The more time viewers spend moving through the illusionary depths of the image,[4] the more significance that image takes on. Slow panning prolongs the point at which viewers can process what they see because as long as the camera keeps moving (within the shot), it is still providing information necessary to the assessment of the shot's total meaning. As Tom Daly, editor for *City of Gold*,[5] explains, "It's the mind that moves . . . your understanding takes a little journey through the movement inside the shot" (qtd. in "Still Photo" 1). In other words, prolonged pans and tilts encourage viewers to engage with visual images on both a cognitive and an emotional level.[6]

The rhetorical implications of this engagement are exemplified by a sequence of shots utilizing daguerreotypes of African-born slaves, stripped to the waist. The film provides no information about the origins of the daguerreotypes. Instead they are paired with McCullough's reading of historical quotations about the degradation of slave life.

> "No day ever dawns for the slave," a freed black man wrote, "nor is it looked for. For the slave it is all night—all night forever." One White Mississippian was more blunt: "I'd rather be dead," he said, "than be a nigger on one of these big plantations." (I:6a)

The words suggest the degradation. The images show it. The camera work intensifies it, making explicit the "aggression" Sontag suggests is "implicit in every use of the camera" and supporting her claim that photographs "turn people into objects that can be symbolically possessed" (14). Moreover, the camera, as it moves slowly upward, exploring every nuance of muscle and bone, intensifies that violation by prolonging it. The longer the camera explores the images, the longer viewers have to consider, not just the informational value of the photographs, but their manner of presentation. The camera is viewers' only means of sight; it controls what and how they see. Thus as viewers' eyes move slowly over the images, they symbolically participate in the violation.[7]

Most viewers will not know that J. T. Zealy photographed the slaves at the request of Harvard professor Louis Agassiz. They will not know that Agassiz used the daguerreotypes to identify African traits he then tried to trace in American-born slaves (Trachtenberg 53). But all viewers know that to be stripped naked and publicly perused is a gross violation of human dignity. This is the common knowledge, the *doxa,* that viewers can be counted on to bring to their interpretation of the photographic sequence.[8]

To link slavery, which some might regard as a dead issue, a historical abstraction, to such an elemental human experience can revitalize the issue for contemporary audiences. But the rhetorical effect is more subtle than that. The same camera work that discourages passive spectatorship encourages viewers to engage in the kind of self-confrontation that will enable them to experience "alternative subject positions" (Shohat and Stam 358). They are both the victims and the perpetrators of the cruel depersonalization represented by the photographs.

Mobile framing makes viewers symbolic enactors of the very act they would condemn as inhuman. Thus slavery becomes a personal issue as well as a contemporary one. To regard this inhumane act as both personal and present (i.e., viewers engage in it as they watch) is crucial to the film's overarching claim that history is about the confrontation of the present with the past. This short sequence in Episode I reverberates throughout the film (and in fact the daguerreotypes do appear more than once). Ultimately the mobile framing of the Zealy daguerreotypes in this sequence leads inexorably to Barbara Fields's statement in the final episode: "The Civil War is not over until we today have done our part in fighting it . . . " (IX: 30).

REFRAMING

Reframing, too, supports the film's claim that history is about the confrontation of the present with the past. It also enables filmmakers to raise issues for which there are no archival images, encouraging viewers to question why such gaps in the visual record exist (Hulser 20). Thus reframing is especially significant in the representation

of African Americans. As Shohat and Stam explain, "The tension between presence and absence points to a possible reconceptualization" of texts that ignore anything that challenges the dominant ideology (220). Through reframing, subjects who are marginalized in the archival photographs can be made the center of the film frame, creating "a contrastive diaphony or counterpoint" (Shohat and Stam 239) which combats assumptions that archival photographs reveal the whole truth about the past.

In reframing, filmmakers show viewers part of a photograph and then the whole of it—or the whole and then particular parts. Creating several separate frames from a single photograph calls attention to a part of the whole photograph that might otherwise be missed ("Still Photo" 5). The filmmaker working with stills can choose to frame individually any segment of the original photograph. Each reframing produces a different emphasis; consequently, "images from the same photograph would have a different meaning" (Daly qtd. in "Still" 4).

For example, in "Gun Men" (I:9a), a segment about camp life, viewers see in succession three different shots of a single photograph. The original shows five men, three seated and two standing behind them. One of the men holds a pistol to the head of the man seated in front of him. One reframe focuses on the gun. Another focuses exclusively on two of the men, one of whom has his hand on the other's shoulder. These reframed shots call attention to the ambiguities of this photograph—the hand on the shoulder, the gun to the head—made during a bloody war in which guns brought death, not laughter. The multiple reframings of the archival photograph also imply that there are non-lethal aspects of gun play and of war. The hand on the shoulder might connote the camaraderie that developed on the battlefield, the gun to the head, a mock recklessness, perhaps. The war created "gun men" but did not obliterate their need for fun and friendship.

The reframing of this particular photograph of "Gun Men" at play is in itself playful. But that playfulness serves a purpose. As Trinh T. Minh-ha points out, "playing upon the illusion" that the camera can totally capture reality produces "one irreality on the other and the play of nonsense . . . upon meaning . . ." (107). The

purpose, then, is to fracture meaning, total and indisputable, into meanings, relative and debatable. Just as the composition of the archival photograph plays with the meaning of war, the film, by reframing the photograph to foreground its playfulness, calls attention to its polysemy and relativizes the photograph's value as evidence. Reframing demonstrates that the same photograph can have several different meanings, depending on which aspects of it are foregrounded. This polysemy challenges the photograph's documentary purity, its factuality and total objectivity. Reframing encourages viewers to regard the photograph as one way of representing what was there, one interpretation of actuality. To reframe is to suggest alternative interpretations.

The effect of reframing is analogous to the operation of a very elemental perceptual gestalt, namely the figure/ground relationship. Figure and ground are relative, but exclusive, terms; in other words, what is conceived as background cannot be reconstituted as figure without a certain amount of conscious adjustment. When viewers see in close-up (i.e., as figure) an individual whom they have just seen as part of a group shot (i.e., as background), they must make perceptual readjustments that may make them more conscious of the epistemology of seeing. Those readjustments may lead viewers to question why some individuals (especially slaves) were backgrounded in archival photographs and why, through reframing, they are foregrounded in the film.

In the opening episodes, photographs of individual slaves are rare. In addition to the Zealy daguerreotypes, the film includes a photograph of an elderly slave with a white child on his lap (his formal dress suggests that he is a house servant) and a photograph of another older man, also formally dressed.[9] There are also several photographs of recaptured escapees whose punishment included having their heads encased in metal contraptions resembling dog collars. Following the Emancipation Proclamation, however, viewers are shown photographs of African American soldiers, many of whom had their portraits made, just as white soldiers did. Thus the film reflects the changing status of African Americans by its selection and arrangement of the archival photographs available.

Before Emancipation, viewers see the individual slave primarily through reframing of group photographs. For example, a group shot of slaves working with livestock in a field is reframed as a close-up of one male slave's head and upper torso. Through reframing, the individual slave is singled out from the group; his facial features are now clear. Without reframing he would have remained a featureless member of the group. The archival photograph shows one version of the slave experience; the reframe shows another. Both versions exist within the same photograph, just as both realities existed in the past. Slaves were individuals with dreams and desires, even though the dominant culture (instantiated in the photograph) tried to obliterate that individuality.

Singling out an individual by reframing a group shot as a close-up invites viewers to speculate on the diverse ways of seeing and thinking about the subjects of these photographs—as a mass of laborers almost indistinguishable from the fields they worked, or up close, as individuals important in themselves, apart from their labor. Consequently, when viewers realize that the primary way they see individual slaves is through reframing of group shots, they may come to question the ideology of the photographs.

That ideology not only denied the individuality of slaves, it also denied their right to live as a family. Rather than reframe photographs to create family groupings, however, the film reframes to foreground the tentative and temporary nature of slave families. Viewers see African American women and children together, but whether they comprise a family is left unclear. For example, as McCullough begins to describe slave life (I:6a), viewers see a group photograph of African American men and women, some holding babies, seated on the ground in front of a wooden structure. While McCullough reports that children were sent into the fields at the age of twelve, this group photograph is reframed as a close-up of a woman and three children. Singling out these four figures from the group suggests that they might have some special relationship, but the suggestion is never clarified; viewers are left wondering.

Soon afterwards, the camera focuses attention on three African American children seated with an African American woman in a field. She holds the head of the youngest. Once again, the

composition of the shot suggests that this woman and children are related in some way. Then the film seems to contradict this suggestion by cutting to a wide range shot of the entire photograph, so that viewers see the woman and children as part of a larger group engaged in field work. In both these examples, the camera work contrasts close-ups suggesting a family relationship with far shots in which the women and children at first singled out recede into a larger group. Thus reframing calls attention to the ambiguity of family relationships in the archival photographs of African Americans.

A possible explanation for this ambiguity is provided by McCullough: "A slave could expect to be sold at least once in his lifetime, maybe two times, maybe more" (I:6a). Accompanying these words is a shot of an African American woman holding a child's hand, but the connection between the words and the visual image remains unexplained. Viewers may be tempted to see the two as mother and child, but their relationship is not clarified. As McCullough speaks of slaves struggling to maintain some semblance of family life, viewers see, excerpted from a larger photograph of field workers, a group of children seated in a circle in a field. Combining the words with the reframed image implies these children are related, but also can, on reflection, make viewers aware that family relationships are almost impossible to determine in these archival photographs, which depict slaves solely in amorphous groups.

The next shot further explores the nature of slaves' family life. While McCullough explains that "slave marriages had no legal status" (I:6a), viewers see a group of African American men and women, two of whom are dressed in white; one wears a white head-covering like a veil. The film cuts to another view of the same photograph, focusing on the group of onlookers seated in front of the women in white. The combination of words and visual images (especially the women in white) implies a wedding is taking place. But again that implication is left ambiguous.

In this sequence on slave life, the audience is made to work actively to construct notions of marriage, family, individuality. That is, viewers see through the eye of the camera and try to assign meaning to what they see based on "patterns of perception and valuation rooted in

the . . . American consciousness" (Gronbeck 143). But reframing thwarts this effort, implying one meaning in the reframes and yet suggesting another contradictory meaning in the composition of the archival photographs. While groping to fathom the relationships implied in various reframings of these group photographs, viewers experience slavery as the disruption or denial of those modes of being (marriage, family, individuality) that most would regard as natural and undeniable. The archival photographs record that denial and the ideology that sanctioned it. Reframing calls attention to that denial by challenging it with revisions of the visual record.

But this revision has other implications as well. First, reframing, by focusing on groups that might be families, implies that slave families did exist, despite the difficulties. Second, the fact that the slave families constituted through reframing do not resemble the nuclear family unit may lead some viewers to question their own ideological constructs of what constitutes a family or a marriage. Finally, reframing group photographs visually supports, in a way that simply displaying photographs of African American leaders would not, historian Barbara Fields' assertion that slaves took action on their own behalf (III:8). Reframing enables viewers to experience visually the slaves' struggle for freedom, even though almost no photographic record of that resistance exists.

For example, a photograph of African American men, women and children gathered in front of a cabin is reframed to show a girl seated with three children. Her head rests on her clasped hands, in what might be a gesture of defeat or futility. This interpretation is supported by the narrator's comments about the disease and early death of most slave children. However, the visual which accompanies McCullough's commentary challenges the hopelessness of his comments. Another portion of the same archival photograph (slaves in front of a cabin) is reframed as a close-up of a woman with her hand on her hip, her elbow jutting out. She looks proudly into the camera; her pose seems to signify defiance, not the degradation and early death McCullough speaks of. But when the camera zooms back to reveal the whole photograph, the woman fades away into the group, and so does the defiance. Should viewers, listening

to McCullough's account of slaves' short life span, see this woman as one of a group of victims destined for an early death? Are they meant to respond to the defiance signified by the woman's posture, a defiance visually created by reframing? Both interpretations are possible because both are based on the same historically authentic photograph.

Reframing creates visual support for the claim that the spirit of rebellion lived, even amid the degradation of slavery. Helpless victimization and defiance existed as twin realities of slave life, and both are held in tension by the film text. The photograph, in fact, shows slaves who had fled their masters (Ward 13), but the film holds back this factual information; instead it creates visual images of two aspects of slavery within the same photograph. This is a complex, rather than a simplistic and patronizing account of slavery, one that makes the visual record itself the "site of interaction and struggle" (Shohat and Stam 347).

Thus through reframing, *The Civil War* avoids the "victimization model" which Lawrence Levine (16) denounces in documentary photography and which Brian Winston charges has existed in documentary film since its inception. Both critics assert that through selection and composition, photographers and documentarists bent on dramatizing one particular aspect of life may ignore contradictory aspects. Poverty, for example, is often pictured as unalloyed misery, thus denying the poor the power to rise, even momentarily, above their circumstances. But, as Levine points out, "Neither in photographs nor in life is reality composed of a series of either/or images" (21). Portraying the life of the poor or the life of the slave as unremitting misery and helpless victimization oversimplifies by ignoring the capacity of individuals to rise above their circumstances. It denies human complexity and therefore subverts historical understanding (Levine 22–23).

The Civil War avoids oversimplification by using reframing to make viewers aware that alternatives existed, even amid slavery. For example, as McCullough explains that the South could conceive of no alternative to slavery (I:8a), the film cuts to a group photograph of African American women and children standing in front of a log cabin. The next shot reframes an easily missed detail of the photograph: a girl holding an open book. In most areas of the South, it was illegal to teach slaves to read and write. Yet the film offers no explanation, providing instead McCullough's explanation of the impact of the cotton gin on the South's economic development and on the institution of slavery. The audience is left to ponder the significance of the girl with the book, which reframing has singled out as important but has left unexplained. Precisely because it remains unexplained, the reframe can be interpreted as an alternative to total subjugation. To reframe is to reveal the cultural hegemony that surrounds and informs the photograph, creating for the viewer a "clash of perspectives" in which that hegemony is made to confront marginalization (Shohat and Stam 357).

CONCLUSION

In "Knowledge and Time," Tom Farrell lists, as one of the requirements of rhetorical argument, that "the given be placed against a horizon of unrealized, unchosen alternatives" (128). Those who study historical documentary make a similar demand, complaining that filmmakers oversimplify and consequently distort history because they ignore the ideology and conventions embedded in visual artifacts (Walkowitz 57). Instead these critics call for films that construct a complex relationship of images, words, sounds, and music that encourages viewers to fill in gaps, confront discrepancies, and draw their own conclusions (Brown 122).

It is precisely this open acknowledgment of contradiction and inconclusiveness that viewers confront throughout *The Civil War.* Through mobile framing and reframing, this film series crafts a polysemic critique that discloses the alternative (and sometimes contradictory) meanings latent in the visual artifacts it explores. By playing the moving film frame against the still frame of the photograph, the documentary series creates a visual argument about the nature of history and its role in people's lives.

By accepting the photographs as polysemous, viewers enlarge their meaning (as mobile framing enlarges their visual content) and acknowledge (through reframing) that the historical

meaning instantiated in the photographs is contingent. In so doing, viewers come to realize that meaning depends on their interaction with the text. The text provides the parameters of interpretation (Foss 329). The viewers provide the common knowledge needed to activate that potential (Farrell 128). Of course, ethnic, class, gender, and racial differences make it impossible to assume that all viewers interpret a text in exactly the same way. However, the open structure of the text not only tolerates diversity, it encourages it. Reframing, after all, foregrounds the disparity between past and present attitudes about race and human rights. By problematizing cognition, mobile framing and reframing elevate viewers' awareness of their role. This is especially evident in the segment on slavery, in which viewers are urged to contest that cooperation. Viewers are invited to become makers, rather than spectators, of history.

Ultimately the film confirms Farrell's statement that "history, whatever else it is, is an invention and revision of argument" (123). Invention, in the rhetorical sense, involves the filmmakers' selection of archival photographs and their pinpointing of those issues (embedded in those photographs) that have salience for modern audiences: the dignity of individuals, especially those whom the dominant culture marginalizes, and the contingent meaning of taken-for-granted concepts like freedom and family. Revision comes about through camera work that calls attention to itself by playing against viewers' conventional expectations about historical photographs and films. That camera work (the aesthetic dimension) invokes those salient issues and calls upon audiences to analyze and critique their preconceptions about the past and its relationship to the present (the rhetorical dimension). Thus in implementing Benson's dictum that critics of visual rhetoric must attend to *how* meaning emerges and is processed by viewers, this analysis of *The Civil War* also confirms Foss's contention that in visual argument, the aesthetic and the rhetorical are inseparably intertwined to create a text that can be acted upon as well as experienced.

History is thus presented as an on-going and ever changing process in which the present revisits the archives to question, reinterpret, rediscover. *The Civil War,* through mobile framing

and reframing of archival photographs, enables viewers to symbolically enact this vision of history, to examine "the past in order to make the present and the future richer" (Burns qtd. in Milius 1). Thus camera work visually advances the film's overall argument, voiced by Barbara Fields, that "the Civil War is still going on. It's still to be fought and regrettably it can still be lost" (IX:31). Mobile framing and reframing invite viewers to join the battle.

NOTES

1. While Kouwenhoven argues that the development of dry plate technology and smaller, more mobile cameras is responsible for this change, Snyder insists that nineteenth century audiences prized panoramic shots because they thought the photograph should provide as much objective information as possible.

2. Quotations and paraphrases from the film were taken from a transcript obtained from Florentine Films. Since each of the nine episodes was separately paginated, roman numerals have been used to indicate episodes. Arabic numerals indicate page numbers within episodes. Letters *a* and *b* are used to distinguish between the two halves of episode one, which were also separately paginated. I:6a means page six of the first section of the first episode.

3. Recalling his work on *City of Gold,* Tom Daly suggests that avoiding the edges of photographs created "the illusion that the world went on in all directions beyond the camera frame. . . ." ("Still Photo" 3). In a personal interview (May 1995), as well as in several published interviews, Ken Burns identified this film as influential in his own work.

4. Hugo Munsterberg, in *The Photoplay* (NY: Appleton, 1916), was among the first to speculate on the viewer activity involved in completing and giving meaning to the incomplete perceptions supplied by a film, especially the mechanism by which viewers attribute depth to what they know to be a flat screen.

5. National Film Board of Canada, 1957. Directed by Colin Low and Wolf Koenig. Erik Barnouw, in *Documentary, A History of Non-Fiction Film* (rev. ed. Oxford UP, 1983: 200), credits the film with creating a new genre. See also John Tibbetts, "All That Glitters," (*Film Comment* March/April 1995: 52–55) on the film's use of archival stills.

6. Jim Wilson, a former chief of the National Film Board of Canada's Animation, Optical and Title

Photography Division, provides brief but interesting comments on the relationship between the pace of perceived camera movement and the mood of the film. See "Graphics" sidebar in "Still Photo" 6.

7. Similar camera work is used in the direct cinema film *No Lies* (Producer/Director Mitchell Block; distributor Phoenix Films, 1973). Vivian Sobchack, in "No Lies: Direct Cinema as Rape," *New Challenges for Documentary,* ed. Alan Rosenthal (University of California Press, 1988: 332–341), argues that this film uses camera movement as an instrument of symbolic enactment.

8. Farrell, in "Knowledge, Consensus, and Rhetorical Theory" (*Quarterly Journal of Speech* 62, 1976), explains that common, or social, knowledge "is a kind of general and symbolic relationship which acquires its rhetorical function when it is assumed to be shared by *knowers* in their unique capacity as audience" (4).

9. Beaumont Newhall (*The Daguerreotype in America,* New York: Graphic Society, 1961, plate #75) identifies the man as Caesar, the last slave owned in New York state.

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