

The Incredible Stillness of Being: Motionless Pictures in the Films of Ken Burns

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From the baffling silences and provocative ambiguities of still photographs emerge the stories and histories of Ken Burns. His chronicles of the varieties of American experience, *Brooklyn Bridge* (1982), *The Statue of Liberty* (1985), *The Shakers: Hands to Work, Hearts to God* (1985), *Huey Long* (1986), *Thomas Hart Benton* (1989), *The Congress* (1989), *The Civil War* (1990), *Empire of the Air* (1992), and now *Baseball*—praised and condemned, by turns, by scholars, media critics, and artists alike¹)—derive their eloquence not only from their collages of diary entries, newsreel footage, and popular songs of the past, but from the stopped time of their motionless pictures—with their crude gesticulations, awkwardly self-conscious poses, and blurred features. Exhumed, Frankenstein-like, from the basements and trunks of private collections and the morgues of public archives, the aggregate of photographs in itself constitutes a collective metaphor for the unity-out-of-diversity dynamic of America itself. At the same time, as in the tale of the Brothers Grimm about “The Juniper Tree,” where the scattered body parts yearn to conjoin again after being torn asunder, the individual photographs hint at a larger visual significance, like arrows pointing to the secret meaning of their collective identity.

Burns perceives no contradiction between his avowed dual agendas as storyteller and historian, purveyor of illusion and collector of fact. Indeed, as we shall see, he’s participating in the tension between imitation and authenticity that Miles Orvell in his valuable book, *The Real Thing*, identifies as the “primary category in American civilization”—a dialectic that has preoccupied artists,

designers, and engineers since the introduction of the photograph into public life more than 150 years ago.²

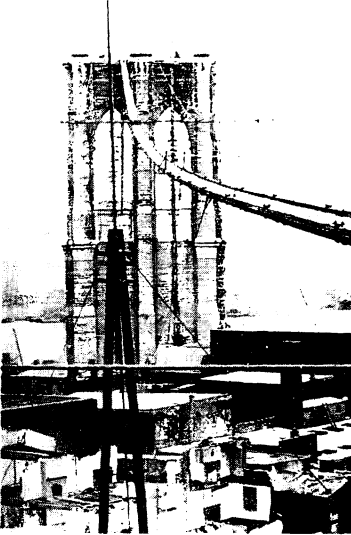
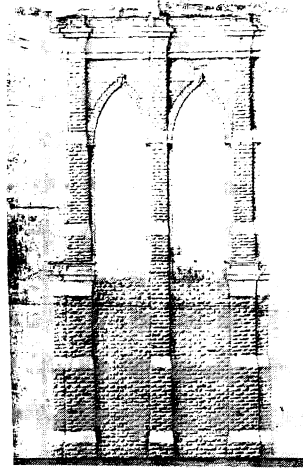
On the one hand Burns insists that history must be made accessible and dramatically stimulating to the general public. “I will be a translator for people of complex subjects,” he said in a 1989 interview; “be the baton in the relay race. I’m trying to take what I can from the scholars who ran the last lap and hand it on to the audience. . . .”³ This necessitates the sweeping aside of the cobwebs and moribund academic rhetoric that too often alienate the general public. “We have really murdered history in this country in the last hundred years,” he told this writer in a recent interview:

We allowed the Germanic academic model to overtake our academy and convince historians that they need only speak to one another. They only need to be of the most highly specialized communication—which is to say they no longer need to write well. History used to be the great pageant of everything that went before this moment, not some dry and stuffy subject in a curriculum. The word ‘history’ itself gives away its primary organization. It’s mostly made up of the word ‘story,’ and we’ve forgotten to tell stories.⁴

These “stories” necessarily are not just those of the major historical figures in history, but of forgotten, ordinary men and women going about their ordinary business and ordinary pleasures. Thus, Burns describes himself as “an emotional archaeologist,” excavating the debris and the discards of the past “to provoke a kind of emotion and a sympathy” with the general viewer.⁵

On the other hand, Burns feels the responsibility of the revisionist historian to get the record straight, i.e., to “correct” what he is convinced are factual errors and distorting biases in prior historical chronicles. Regarding *The Civil War*, for example, he declared he wanted to amend the “pernicious myths about the Civil War from *The Birth of a Nation* to *Gone with the Wind*,” especially racial stereotyping and other bigoted distortions in plot and imagery.⁶

Kenneth Lauren Burns was born on July 29, 1953, in Brooklyn, New York. His father was a graduate student in anthropology at Columbia University. His mother died when Ken was eleven. After graduating from high school in Ann Arbor, Michigan, Burns enrolled in Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts, where he studied photography with Jerome Liebling and Elaine Mayes. At this time he met Amy Stechler, his future wife and collaborator. They worked together on his senior-year directing project, a film about Old Sturbridge Village, Massachusetts. After graduating in 1975 with a B.A. degree in Film Studies and Design, he formed his own film company, Florentine Films.



***Brooklyn Bridge*, an Academy Award-nominated film, featured commentary by historian Lewis Mumford (pictured lower right). Courtesy of Direct Cinema Limited.**

His first film was a sixty-minute documentary about the Brooklyn Bridge, based on David McCullough's book, *The Great Bridge* (1982). McCullough narrated the film, as he would several subsequent Burns projects. *Brooklyn Bridge* took four years to make and, after being entered in several film festivals, was broadcast on PBS in 1982 and nominated for an Academy Award. His second film for PBS, *The Shakers: Hands to Work, Hearts to God*, was inspired by his discovery of Hancock Shaker Village during a trip through rural Massachusetts. Two more films followed in 1985. As quiet as the Shaker film had been, *Huey Long* was charged with the grasping ambition and energetic platform manner of the fiery Long. It was premiered in 1985 at the Louisiana State Capitol in Baton Rouge, where Long had been assassinated exactly fifty years before. *The Statue of Liberty* was released on the occasion of the centennial of its erection. Ironically, at the time, the Lady of Liberty was surrounded by the restoration

scaffolding. Her “confinement,” as it were, was seen by Burns as a metaphor for the threats currently being voiced in America to curb immigration.

The next five years were devoted to Burns’s most ambitious undertaking yet, *The Civil War*. Working 15-hour days, he shot 150 hours of film and took pictures of 16,000 still photographs acquired from dozens of archives and private collections. The project was smelted down to five parts, eleven hours of film, and 3,000 photos. When it was broadcast on PBS in September 1990, it became the most-watched public-television documentary in history. Quickly, it became something of a cottage industry, spawning a book, *The Civil War: An Illustrated History*, by Geoffrey C. Ward and a musical documentary, which was broadcast on PBS in August 1991, called *The Songs of the Civil War*. Among the many awards garnered by *The Civil War* were an Emmy, a CINE Golden Eagle, the National Educational Film Festival’s Golden Apple, a Lincoln Prize, a People’s Choice Award, and a Peabody.

Amazingly, during this five years’ intense activity, Burns somehow found the time to work on two other documentaries in 1988-89, *Thomas Hart Benton*, occasioned by a centennial exhibit of Benton’s work in Kansas City, and *The Congress*, a photographic tour of the Capitol Building.

Empire of the Air was released in 1992. The two-hour history of radio broadcasting—concentrating on three American electronics pioneers, Lee De Forest, E.H. Armstrong, and David Sarnoff—was, with *Huey Long*, Burns’s darkest work. More than a mere chronicle of fifty years of technological history, it was an indictment of corrupt American ideals, of the takeover of individual ambition and enterprise by ruthless corporate machinations.

Baseball, which premiered on PBS during the month of September 1994, clocks in at more than eighteen hours, divided into nine episodes, or “innings,” of approximately two hours each. Unlike *The Civil War*, which had a definite beginning and end—a period of just over four years—*Baseball*’s chronicle begins in the confusion and myth of the game’s origins and concludes with a gaze into its open-ended future. Burns regards it as a sequel to *The Civil War*.

Strangely enough, among the recent plethora of articles about Burns, few commentators have noted the crucial implications of his preoccupation with still photographs.⁷ Burns studied still photography at Hampshire College with Jerome Liebling, a social documentarian of renown. “Jerry. . . taught us to respect the power of the single image to communicate,” Burns said in a 1990 tribute to his former mentor.⁸ Repeatedly, Burns has expressed his preference to tell his stories, whenever possible, with still photographs rather than motion picture footage.⁹ His films are compendiums of the photographic technologies and effects—of daguerreotypes, calotypes, cartes-de-visites, and high-speed images. Their authentic testimony, or “certificate of presence,” as Barthes has put it,¹⁰ is self-evident, their messages thrown into especially high relief when juxtaposed to the imagery of paintings and drawings. (Nowhere is this more clearly demonstrated than in the battle scenes of Shiloh and Gettysburg in *The Civil War*, when the intrusion of paintings—purportedly, no photographs exist of the actual

combat—to illustrate spoken narratives about battle scenes seems artificial, false, and jarring.)

Indeed, Burns is today's master of motionless photography. It is at once his theme, his method, and his meaning. His subjects themselves embody the stasis and immobility of a still photograph—the Brooklyn Bridge suspended between two grounded towers; the Statue of Liberty confined within the scaffolding of its 1985-86 restoration; the Shakers' devotion to their changeless traditions and beliefs; E.H. Armstrong caught in the grip of his monomaniacally obsessive (and doomed) battle against the crushing forces of David Sarnoff; Thomas Hart Benton's Missouri Statehouse murals frozen in their collages of images; and the Gettysburg battlefield littered with the crumpled corpses of slain soldiers.

Significantly, it is not the moving arc of the ball players and the horsehide that preoccupies Burns in *Baseball*; rather it is the essential *stillness* of their being. At the beginning of the "Second Inning," poet Donald Hall, one of Burns's omnipresent commentators, states the case:

There's a lot of wonderful *stillness* in baseball that I love. Mini-seconds of stillness, when the pitcher has gotten the sign, when the batter is crouched, the players all lean forward with their hands on their knees. And then very shortly the ball is delivered. But in that tiny period when that pitch and fever in the crowd is tangible, there's a moment of absolute stillness that I treasure.

Baseball is not, in the final analysis, a celebration of the dynamism of an American game, but a meditation on its changeless traditions, an essentially nostalgic tribute to an idealized American past. "It may be the most American thing about baseball—as we fans take it," continues Hall, "that it's a refuge from America. I think when we go to baseball, we go away from the America of our daily lives." Static, beautifully composed images of clean, varnished (and empty) bleachers accompany the words—images reminiscent of the severely pristine lines of the Shaker house interiors. In his description of an empty baseball diamond late in the "9th Inning," Hall concludes: "This is a place where memory gathers, a place that we can return to, a place that we can even imagine existing in the future."

He's describing a photograph as well as a ballpark.

Thus, while all Burns's films contain moving picture footage, to be sure, their most affecting moments occur when a particular instant is plucked from the flux of time and implacably fixed onto the picture surface. We recall the images of Emily Roebling crossing the just-completed Brooklyn Bridge, the suddenly-stilled dead body of Huey Long stuffed into a coffin, the sequence of images of a Shaker woman's dance, E.H. Armstrong dangling from high radio towers, lilliputian workers clambering over the gigantic body parts of Lady Liberty, and the flat,



Baseball fans at New York's Polo Grounds in 1911. Photo copyright by the Library of Congress.

white forehead of Abraham Lincoln rising above the blur of the crowd come to hear his Gettysburg Address.

Baseball is no less crowded with these moments—the solemn frontality of a daguerreotype portrait of the original New York Knickerbocker Baseball Club in 1845; the surprising revelation of a group of Union soldiers posing before a pile of baseball bats; the surreal poetry of Spalding's White Stockings players clambering over the Sphinx in 1889; the oddly contorted body of pitcher Sandy Koufax in mid-motion; the poignant, protracted shot of a saddened newsboy carrying the newspaper that proclaims the Black Sox scandal; the fierce scowl of pitcher Bob Gibson bearing down on the batter; and the prescient image of a crowded grandstand in Boston in 1894, just minutes before a fire would burn it to the ground.

If his subject and materials seem to be static, Burns's technique is not. In his celebrated camera movements across the surfaces of photographs, Burns is a kind of latter-day Robert Flaherty. Burns's explorations of these motionless regions transpire with the same relentless probity that fueled Flaherty's explorations of the topography of the Louisiana bayous and the Aran seacoast.¹¹ Like photographer Andre Kertesz, who says, "I never calculate or consider; I see a situation and I know that it's right",¹² Burns declares, "I just shoot everything I can. I isolate each photograph and energetically explore its surface with my lens and later make

decisions purely on the quality of the image and how I respond to what I find there. You could say I don't choose which ones to use, they usually choose me."

In this age of A&E documentaries and television news programs, it is astonishing to remember that, as Christian Metz has pointed out, such an extensive use of archival photographs in motion pictures has had few precedents before 1960.¹³ This should be distinguished from works from the late 1920s by Russian filmmakers Dziga Vertov and Alexander Dovzhenko—especially *Man with a Movie Camera*, *Arsenal* and *Earth*--in which freeze frames were interpolated into a narrative of moving images; and from later films like Cartier Bresson's *Quebec As Seen by Cartier Bresson* and Harold Becker's *Eugene Atget* (1964), wherein still photographs were conceived and later examined by the motion picture camera as art objects. Burns, by contrast, treats "artistic" images and snapshots alike as raw, plastic materials that are subject to constant manipulation.

The real precedent for his method, as he has acknowledged, was the classic Canadian Film Board documentary, *City of Gold* (1957). "When I first went to college in 1971, I saw *City of Gold*, and it used the technique of first-person storyteller and music in a counterpoint to dozens and dozens of frozen images. The camera prowled over the surfaces, moving in and out, so that those dead photos came alive, in a way. I was impressed by that."

Indeed, as Richard Dyer MacCann has attested in *The People's Films*, *City of Gold* was "the prototype for all films based on still photographs."¹⁴ Drawing upon a collection of hundreds of glass plate negatives that had been found in a sod roof house, *City of Gold* chronicled life in Dawson City in 1898 at the height of the Klondike gold rush, recording the rapid transformation of Dawson from a tiny mining village to a tough but sophisticated frontier settlement.¹⁵

"*City of Gold* seems to have been one of the first important examples of using photographs this way," acknowledged Colin Low, a co-director of the film, in a recent interview with the author from his home in Quebec, where he still works for the NFB. "Wolf Koenig, a co-director with me on the film, had proposed that we do a film full of stills. Of course, people at the Film Board objected at first, asking us why we wanted to use old, dead photographs. We had to prove ourselves. We enlarged the transparencies to 11x14 for 35mm film in order to capture the full gray range, like a fine-grain positive. Using techniques we had already worked out with Roman Kroiter for animating the camera, we shot a number of tests. The more tests we shot, the more things in the pictures we saw."¹⁶

Cutting from detail to detail, tracking the image surface with the camera, utilizing an evocative music track by Eldon Rathburn and poignant narrative by Pierre Berton and Stanley Jackson, *City of Gold* had all the dynamic and poetic qualities of a live-action film. Subsequently, the "stills in motion" technique was quickly absorbed into a series of American television documentaries produced for NBC's ongoing *Project XX* series. Coming out of the popular *Victory at Sea* series, *Project XX* had already achieved signal recognition with theme documen-

taries using moving-picture footage like “Nightmare in Red” and “The Twisted Cross.”¹⁷ In 1957 producer Donald B. Hyatt, who succeeded his boss, the late Henry Salomon, saw *City of Gold* and immediately contacted Colin Low as a consultant on a new series of Project XX programs. “[He] meant to broaden the purposes of *Project XX* by creating documentary treatments of the past,” wrote William A. Bluem, “where the religious, cultural, social, and political ideas of the 20th century were first formulated.”¹⁸ This necessitated the use of still photographs, and in his first program, “Meet Mr. Lincoln” (1959), he examined over 25,000 daguerreotypes and photos. Similarly, “Mark Twain’s America” and “The Real West” utilized thousands more photos and engravings. Hyatt noted at the time that photographs afforded a dimension to which the motion picture could not reach—i.e., their ability to capture the momentary, evanescent gesture that otherwise is gone in an instant. “When all these authentic flashes of history are treated with respect something uncanny happens—the dead come alive,” he said. First, however, the filmmaker had be patient with the still images, “climb inside” them, and “meet the people and live with them.” However, like Low, Hyatt had come to realize that the temptation to continually move the camera “in and out and all around Robin’s barn” must be resisted: “I move the camera only when there is a reason it—to motivate action, not to cover up inaction.”¹⁹

Burns’ selection, analysis, photographing, and editing of photographs from among the many thousands available in archives and private collections is, according to his production coordinator on *The Civil War* and *Baseball*, Mike Hill (who has accompanied Burns on many expeditions to photographic collections), a time-consuming process of trial and error. “We do the actual shooting of many of the photos right on the spot,” says Hill. “After setting up lights in a small room or corner of the archive, we affix the desired image to a gray, magnetic board with strip magnets, light it from the side, and shoot it in a variety of ways. It might be a static wide shot of fifteen seconds or so; or he may go in and do a pan; or he’ll move in and isolate details. I’d say the majority of stills you see in *The Civil War* were done like that.”²⁰

The use of the animation stand is reserved for images that require a more complex camera choreography. “If Ken decides a particular photograph needs a particularly complex kind of move—something really precise—he’ll contact the archive and either borrow the original print or get a duplicate made and send it to the Frame Shop with instructions,” says Hill.

Most of the portraits he selects—daguerreotypes, cartes-de-visites, and snapshots—engage our attention in a special way. Unlike the commercial cinema, where performers are seldom allowed to gaze directly into the camera, the faces gaze at *us*. These are family portraits, frankly proclaiming themselves to children, siblings, parents, and posterity. Indeed, they reinforce one of Burns’s main themes, that of *family* as a metaphor for the “unum-out-of-pluribus” of American life—the close bonds of Shaker communities, the war-torn Civil War families, the baseball teams, etc.



A young “powder monkey” in the Civil War, employed to carry power to the guns. Photcopy by the Library of Congress.

The daguerreotypes and cartes-de-visites, particularly, of the mid-nineteenth century were executed under controlled conditions and with a minimum of artistic pretension. “The poses were the simplest imaginable, generally full-face views, as if they were looking at themselves in a mirror,” wrote critic Sadakichi Hartmann. “There were no arrangements, no creeds of tone or pictorialism. They were too busy with the mechanical side of the sitting to delineate people at their best or what they, or their patrons, thought best. . . . The result was a simplicity mingled with a certain primitive awkwardness.”²¹

Less formalized, but just as direct in their address are the faces in the snapshots. With the development in the latter third of the nineteenth century of faster shutters and more portable equipment, a more instantaneous, informal kind of image was achieved. Again, the “snapshooter” and subject are not interested in artistic issues and effects, but in mere presence and recognizability; and, again

the priorities of the “artistic” image—composition, control of focus throughout the picture plane, disposition of the subjects or characters, the subtle gradation of tones—no longer apply.²²

We can’t look away from these images. The eyes of the people fix us and hold us in an unwavering stare. At first intimidated, then entranced, we fall into a kind of spell. “They’re looking at you, to see what you’re like,” says Tom Daly, editor of *City of Gold*. “And of course you’re looking at them too, to see what *they’re* like.”²³ We look on, as if expecting to learn more about them, as if, like Barthes in his famous meditation on his mother’s photograph, we “want to outline the loved face by thought, to make it into the unique field of an intense observation”; and “to enlarge this face in order to see it better, to understand it better. . . .”²⁴

Paradoxically, Burns treats these and other photographic images with an almost ruthless disregard for their original state. As long as they retain their original borders and/or frames, they are intractable. But by venturing inside the edges, abolishing the sense of a surrounding “frame,” and by selecting details for our attention—recompositing them, as it were—Burns appropriates them for his own purposes. Thus violated, they become something new, raw materials that can be shaped to a variety of purposes. They now suggest a sense of what Kracauer calls “endlessness,” i.e., the sense of a world going on in all directions beyond the edges.²⁵ A glance at Burns’s books, which print the photographs in their original, uncropped states, points up the differences.

Thus, either by re-framing a photograph, or examining the mise-en-scene of a given image, or breaking it up into details, or juxtaposing it with other images, or by providing aural cues, Burns compels us to perceive the picture field as an arena of narrative activity, as a constellation of nexes of attention. A given photograph in *Baseball*—say, one of those incredible panoramas of Ebbets Field that encompasses the crowded grandstands and the playing field in between—is subjected, variously, to slow, vertical and horizontal pans, dolly movements in and out, and a succession of five or six separate shots. The famous photograph of Babe Ruth’s legendary “called shot,” October 1, 1932, is flashed on the screen three times, providing a closer view of the controversial gesture. A portrait of ballplayer Addie Joss is accompanied by the narrator’s comment that soon he will die of meningitis. During a prolonged, static shot of the face of Shoeless Joe Jackson in the aftermath of the Black Sox scandal, we hear an account of the last, sad years of his life. In each instance, we are bidding the images to yield up additional information. In *The Civil War*, after picking out the recumbent form of a wounded soldier in a hospital tent, the camera directs its gaze slowly downward to reveal the grisly detail of a barrel which (so the caption tells us) contains amputated body parts. “What essentially you are doing is forcing yourself to examine and contemplate an isolated moment in time, over a period of time,” says NFB filmmaker Don Winkler. “It’s the motion picture probing this frozen moment as though trying to get some kind of secret out of it.”²⁶ Again, the words of Barthes come to mind: “I decompose, I enlarge, and, so to speak, I retard, in order to have time to know at last. . . .”²⁷



Mid-nineteenth-century photography: “Executed under controlled conditions and with a minimum of artistic pretension.” Photo copyright by the Library of Congress.

But what do we know, exactly? Earlier in this paper, I noted that Burns does not only want to document history, he wants to tell stories. Thus, although, as we have seen, he uses archival photographs as testaments to facts, he also exploits them as provocations of illusions.

In the aforementioned photographic examples, specific meanings have actually been *obscured* rather than clarified. Again, we think of Barthes, who said, “Such is the Photograph: it cannot say what it lets us see. . . . I must therefore submit to this law: I cannot penetrate, cannot reach into the Photograph. I can only sweep it with my glance, like a smooth surface.”²⁸ Susan Sontag has asserted that “one never understands anything from a photograph” because it “hides more than it discloses. Comprehension comes from the function of the subject and that takes place in time and must be explained in time.”²⁹

In *Baseball* the isolation of the gesture of Babe’s “called shot” reveals only an indistinct—and baffling—blur. We examine Addie Joss’s features in vain for any outward sign of his fatal illness. Shoeless Joe Jackson’s face has all the expressivity of a Rorschach blot, suggesting, by turns, the player’s anger, frustration, or regret, depending upon the psychological disposition of the viewer.

And we don't know if that particular camera movement cited in *The Civil War*—wherein our gaze is directed from the wounded soldier to the barrel—indicates an amputation that *has* happened or *will soon* happen (or has *ever* happened).

Other examples from *The Civil War* and *Baseball* come to mind. We hear the crack of a bat at the same time we see a photograph of Ruth's swing. But the implication that he has hit the ball is actually only an aural cue—the ball is not visible. Has the bat's contact with the ball occurred just before, or seconds after, the shutter exposure (or did it happen at all)? Elsewhere, a montage of still photos of black ballplayers like Frank Robinson and Curt Flood are displayed against a voice-over recounting the violent racial unrest of the 1960s. Are these images expressive of the respective players' anger, defiance, or triumph? In *The Civil War* a photograph of the "air ward in the Armory Square Hospital" is accompanied by a voice stating that it appears to be decorated "either for the Fourth of July or perhaps for the end of the war." We will never know (nor does it matter much). A particularly provocative example in the same film is the celebrated "Sullivan Ballou" episode. As the words of Ballou's last letter to his wife, July 14, 1861, are heard, we see five photos of different married couples, any of which (or none) could depict Mr. and Mrs. Ballou. In all these instances, the truth of the matter necessarily confounds us. To paraphrase Shelby Foote's comment on the soundtrack regarding the elusive character of Robert E. Lee, "the heart is a secret kept to the end from all the picklocks of biographers."

Ironically, Burns's aforementioned choreography of the camera, which relentlessly explores every detail of the picture surfaces, further contributes to this ambiguity. In Part One of *The Civil War*, the camera lingers on the face of a young white girl while the words of diarist Mary Chesnut are heard, wondering why the slaves did not rise up in fury at the outbreak of war: "Are they stupid? Or wiser than we are?" The camera zooms slowly back from the girl's face, revealing that she is holding the hand of an elderly black woman while sitting in her lap. Has the subtle camera movement revealed the answer to the question, or merely articulated another inquiry? A wealth of information may be retrieved in the process, yet, as Brian Henderson has noted, "*The Civil War* limits the readable potential of the photos it displays, if only by cutting down the time of reading and, sometimes, by offering only a detail of the photo for viewing."³⁰

The juxtaposition through editing of these photographs plays its own part in confusing matters. "A photograph is only a fragment," Susan Sontag has written, "and with the passage of time its moorings come unstuck. It drifts away into a soft abstract pastness, open to any kind of reading (or matching to other photographs)."³¹ The endless possibilities of these juxtapositions confront Burns with the same dilemma of choice that confounds anyone attempting what William Bluem has called "the creation of dramatic structures out of life's raw material."³² At first, every possible combination of images is considered, a process that Burns likens to horsetrading.³³ It's no wonder that one of Burns's favorite quotes from baseball legend Casey Stengel is the maxim, "When you reach a fork in the road,

take it." This ambivalence constitutes the very essence of Burns's method at this stage. *He goes for the fork in the road every time. . . .*

In this way a given photograph absorbs "coloration" from those preceding it and, in turn, imparts its own implications to those that follow. In *The Civil War* several photographs of Lincoln and Grant recur in differing contexts throughout the entire series. Because they have lost their specificity, they function now as general referents, reflecting the changing circumstances surrounding them. Similarly, in *Baseball*, several tight closeups of Babe Ruth's face constantly reappear during, variously, his triumphs as a hitter, his tantrums as a celebrity, and his fatal illness with cancer. Each time, his features seem to alter in accordance with the prevailing situation. Elsewhere, still images are plucked from different contexts and are reassembled to "tell" a story, like the scene purporting to depict a confrontation between Ty Cobb and Walter Johnson and another scene wherein Grover Cleveland Alexander finds his "last hurrah" in a duel with Tony Lazzeri in the 1926 World Series.

Burns promotes a kind of perceptual confusion, too, when he interpolates still photographs into a sequence of moving picture footage—a technique doubtlessly derived from the opening and closing moments of *City of Gold*. We blink, momentarily confused by the contradictions of moving pictures that are static and still photos that are dynamic.³⁴ Live-action footage of Ty Cobb and Jackie Robinson running the bases is punctuated by frozen images of their outflung bodies spread out against the sky or obscured in clouds of dust. The slow-motion bat swing of Ted Williams is interrupted by no less than three freeze-frames. And the live-action pitching motion of Bob Gibson is periodically interrupted with a pan of a still photo of his face, from right to left, moving from surrounding darkness to the blazing energy of his contorted features.

Mike Hill reveals that Burns frequently orders his photographers to shoot live-action scenes in the manner of taking still photographs: "He wants rock-steady images, minimal camera movement, and carefully-composed frames. Sometimes it's difficult to distinguish these shots from still photographs." (This also holds true for the filmed interviews, which fix the subjects in tight, static, frontally composed closeups, rather in the manner of pre-Civil War daguerreotypes.) Thus, in the "Honorable manhood" sequence in *The Civil War*, the still photographs of camp life are almost indistinguishable from the statically-framed, modern moving picture footage of grasses waving ever so slightly in a breeze. This technique is everywhere apparent in *The Shakers*, in which live-action film of Shaker furniture, house interiors, barns, and cemeteries, shot in monochrome with a static camera, is intercut with—yet virtually identical with—still photographs. Everything is seen in terms of its *potential*—stasis as potential movement, movement as potential stasis. We gaze on, astonished and confused. Like the Watchman at Birnam Wood, we wonder: What is it, that moved, exactly . . . ?

There is an old story about two Buddhist monks who argue about the paradox of motion. After regarding tree branches tossing in the wind, one monk insists that it is the branch that moves. The other says it is the wind that moves. Unable to agree, they consulted an older, wiser monk. With a laugh, he told them, “It is neither! It is the *mind* that moves!”

Ultimately, Ken Burns’s motionless pictures are full of surface tensions that promote both the authenticity of fact and the ambiguity of illusion.³⁵ He belongs to a tradition in documentary picture making that is outlined by Miles Orvell in *The Real Thing*, and which includes Civil War photographer Alexander Gardner and Native American documentarist Edward Curtis—i.e., the contention that the most important consideration of a photograph is not that it be truthful, but that it be *convincing*. In words that apply equally well to Burns, Orvell notes that Gardner’s rather cavalier treatment of Civil War subjects—deliberately staging scenes and attaching misleading captions to certain images—“[played] upon his audience’s beliefs in the veracity of the medium while taking for himself a much more flexible view of photographic practice, whereby the manipulations of the photographer were permissible in the interest of achieving a rhetorically convincing effect.”³⁶

Consequentially, Burns’s films provoke and intrigue us because they satisfy our thirst for the *actual* at the same time that they arouse our wonder in the *potential*. A particularly striking consequence of this is that we seem to “see” things that never actually appear. I noticed this phenomenon after viewing his first film, *Brooklyn Bridge*, when I was convinced in retrospect that I had seen the shadowy figure of Washington Roebling supervising the finish of the bridge through his open apartment window. Reexamination of the film revealed, however, only shots of Roebling’s *closed* window. Similarly, I came away from *The Shakers* with a clear image in my mind’s eye of the sect’s founder, Mother Ann Lee—despite the fact that her face is never seen! Mike Hill says that after *The Civil War* was broadcast on PBS, Civil War buffs who had seen every photo taken during the conflict confronted him and Burns, demanding to know: “Where did you find *that* image? I’ve never seen it before!” Hill adds wryly: “They were convinced they were seeing images that weren’t there at all!”

“My profound wish is that you can make the past come alive for a moment,” Burns says, “that I’m a good enough storyteller to make history suspenseful and vital again, not freeze it in its tracks. All good history makes you wait on the edge of your seat, makes you watch from behind the trees, wondering if Pickett’s Charge might not really succeed this time; or if the Babe will strike out instead of hitting the 60th home run. I’ve noticed that when people see our episode on the Black Sox Scandal, they begin to wonder if the players might not win the Series after all!

“That’s the greatest moment—that I can make people think *something else* might happen, rather than just the history they already know.”

It's a delightfully unsettling notion. Burns implies that history's imprint is full of "trace images" that are pregnant with might-have-beens and could-yet-be's—a consideration more often linked with Hollywood than with the serious historian. History, like the photograph, is full of possibilities. Burns can enlist our belief in both.

Notes

1. A sampling of commentary will suffice. On the positive side, referring to *The Civil War*, George Will wrote: "Our *Iliad* has found its Homer. . . . If better use has ever been made of television, I have not seen it." See George Will, "A Masterpiece on the Civil War," *The Washington Post*, September 20, 1990, A23. Citing Burns's *Huey Long*, *The Shakers*, and *The Civil War*, Pamela M. Henson and Terri A. Schorzman write: "Historians have long envied the impact of documentary films but often criticized their oversimplification and partisan interpretation of historical issues. Several recent documentary films have overcome some of those problems and can serve as models for those who wish to use the video medium to disseminate history." See Pamela M. Henson and Terri A. Schorzman, "Videohistory: Focusing on the American Past," *The Journal of American History* 78:2 (September, 1991), 624. Before Burns, by contrast, the prevailing view about attempts to fuse factual and narrative history on film was typified by historian Donald Matheissen's accusation that "in practice, each side of this collaboration tends to resist the other. There seems to be a fundamental incompatibility" (627). See Donald Matheissen, "Filming U.S. History during the 1920s: The Chronicles of America Photoplays," *The Historian* 54 (Summer 1992), 627-40.

Negative views of, for example, *The Civil War*, focus on errors in detail and Burns's tendency to simplify political issues and historical processes concerning the origins of the war and the subsequent years of reconstruction. See especially David Marc and Robert J. Thompson, *Prime Time, Prime Movers* (Boston, 1992), 307; Jane Turner, Censer, "Videobites: Ken Burns's 'The Civil War' in the Classroom," *American Quarterly* 44 (June, 1992), 244-54; Ellen Carol DuBois, "The Civil War," *American Historical Review* 96 (October, 1991), 1140-1142; and A. Cash Koening, "Ken Burns's 'The Civil War': Triumph or Travesty?" *The Journal of Military History* 55 (April, 1991), 225-233.

Meanwhile, the popularity of the broadcasts on Public Television is incontestable. According to James S. Turner, *The Civil War* "broke an all-time viewership record" with an estimated 39 million viewers, averaging 16 million per episode. See James S. Turner, "The 1991 Frankel Awards," *Humanities* 12:6 (Nov.-Dec., 1991), 17. Hugh Purcell states: "The PBS had known anything like it. The major networks were dented. The sponsors were thrilled. . . . Ken Burns is a national figure." See Hugh Purcell, "America's 'Civil' Wars," *History Today* 41 (May, 1991), 7.

At this writing, according to the Public Broadcasting Service, all or part of *Baseball* was viewed by 28 million people, enough to fill all 28 Major League ballparks nineteen times over. In 32 of the nation's largest cities the series averaged a 5.1 rating (more than twice the average prime-time rating for PBS) and a 7 share—the highest-rated "Inning" was the "4th Inning," about Babe Ruth, a 5.6 rating and a 9 share. The final "Inning" was the second most watched in the series.

For additional contemporary reviews of Burns's documentaries, see, in order of films produced, the following selection:

Brooklyn Bridge—Ken Nash, "Brooklyn Bridge," *Film Library Quarterly* 16 (1983), 33-34; *The Statue of Liberty*—"The Statue of Liberty Mixes Old with New," *New York Times*, October 28, 1985, 135: C17;

Huey Long—"Huey Long," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television* 6:1 (1986), 102-03;

The Shakers—Diane Welebit, "The Simple Life," *Americana* 15 (Sept.-Oct., 1987), 37-39;

The Congress—Ballard C. Campbell, "The Congress," *The Journal of American History* 76 (December, 1989), 1005-06;

Thomas Hart Benton—Valerie Lester, "Happy Birthday, Tom Benton," *Humanities* 10 (Nov.-Dec., 1989), 32-33;

The Civil War—Mark Wahlgren Summers, "The Civil War," *The Journal of American History* 77 (December, 1990), 1106-07;

The Empire of the Air—Kenneth Korman, "Empire of the Air: The Men Who Made Radio," *Video Magazine* 16 (June, 1992), 63;

Baseball—David Thomson, "The Best Interests of the Game," *Film Comment* 30 (Sept.-Oct., 1994), 20-26.

2. Orwell's thesis argues "that the tension between imitation and authenticity is a primary category in American civilization, pervading layers of our culture that are usually thought to be

separate, from commercial design and advertising to literature" (xv). The popular dissemination of daguerreotypes and photographs, particularly, in the middle of the nineteenth century complicated the dialectic since the photo image could be regarded as both fact and as illusion. Walt Whitman, who was fascinated by daguerreotypes, understood the paradox: "Clearly what added to Whitman's pleasure was the dialectical fancy that the daguerreotype, inviting the romance of speculation, was at the same time a 'fact.'" (17) See Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill and London, 1989).

3. "A Conversation with NEH Chairman Lynn V. Cheney and Filmmaker Ken Burns," *Humanities* 10 (July-Aug., 1989), 7.

4. Unless otherwise indicated, all subsequent quotations in this paper from Ken Burns are taken from his interview with John C. Tibbetts in Kansas City, Missouri, August 3-4, 1994.

Burns's cavils echo those of a few professional historians. Thomas Bender has voiced concerns about the fragmentation of historical scholarship and the failure of historians to reach beyond their professional peers. See Roy Rosenzweig, "What Is the Matter with History?" *Journal of American History* 74 (June, 1987), 119. Roy Rosenzweig quotes Allen Nevins and Thomas Bender concerning historical writing over the last half century, i.e., that the "emergence of overly specialized academic historical literature," fails to reach beyond the academic community. See Roy Rosenzweig, "What Is the Matter with History?" 117-18.

5. Quoted in John Milius, "Reliving the War Between Brothers," *The New York Times*, September 16, 1990, 2:1, 43.

6. Gary Edgerton, "Ken Burns's America: Style, Authorship, and Cultural Memory," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 21 (Summer 1993), 54. This reflects the agendas of historians identified by John Higham as "conservative evolutionists" whose eclectic gaze sees American history as "the forging of national unity and power in a crucible of sectional diversities." See John Higham, *History: Professional Scholarship in America* (1990, rpt. Baltimore, 1965), 151. Part of the method of this approach to history has been described by Alice Kessler-Harris as "pots and pans" research. In words that could be applied to Burns' work, she cites Arthur M. Schlesinger and Dixon Ryan Fox's thirteen-volume *History of American Life* as an example: "It described household living practices and material processes, the daily lives of women and children, the restrictions on colonial dames, and rudimentary work practices." See Alice Kessler-Harris, "Social History," in Eric Foner, ed., *The New American History* (Philadelphia, 1990), 164.

Siegfried Kracauer calls this method a "bottom to top" process and applies the concept to the film medium: "If [filmmakers] are true to the medium, they will certainly not move from a preconceived idea down to the material world in order to implement that idea; conversely, they set out to explore physical data and, taking their cue from them, work their way up to some problem or belief. The cinema is materialistically minded; it proceeds from 'below' to 'above.'" See Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film* (New York, 1960), 309. Burns himself uses the phrase "bottom to top" in Jerry Reynolds, "A TPQ Interview: Jerry Reynolds Talks with Ken Burns," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 12 (1992), 80.

7. To date, I have found only three studies that deal (albeit briefly) with these issues. Gary Edgerton has contributed two of them, "Ken Burns's America" and "Ken Burns's [sic] American Dream: Histories-for-TV from Walpole, New Hampshire," *Television Quarterly* 27 (1994), 56-66. The third is Brian Henderson, "The Civil War: 'Did It Not Seem Real?'" *Film Quarterly* 44 (Spring 1991), 10-13.

8. Edgerton, "Ken Burns's America," 53.

9. Interview on National Public Radio, September 15, 1994.

10. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York, 1981), 87.

11. John Grierson describes Flaherty's method as "a process of discovery and freedom in discovery to live with the people long enough to know them. . . to take the story from out the location, finding it essentially there. . . His idea of production is to reconnoiter for months without turning a foot, and then, in months more perhaps, slowly to shape the film on the screen: using his camera first to sketch his material and find his people, then using his screen. . . to tell him at every turn where the path of drama lies." See John Grierson, *Grierson on Documentary* (New York, 1947).

Flaherty's editor on *Man of Aran*, John Goldman, confirms this. "All the time I was on Aran I never saw Flaherty deliberately pose his camera. The camera was set up and he peered through it. Either what he saw through it was right, or absolutely wrong." Upon viewing the films in the screening room, Flaherty again tossed away preconceptions: "Here he would sit running through reel after reel over and over again, panning for the gold nugget, and the only criterion for the recognition of this nugget was his own bare awareness." Quoted in Arthur Calder-Marshall, *The Innocent Eye: The Life of Robert J. Flaherty* (London, 1963), 159.

12. "Interview with Andre Kertesz," in Paul Hill and Thomas Cooper, *Dialogue with Photography* (London, 1979), 48.

13. Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1977), 220.

Writing in 1931, Rudolf Arnheim had acknowledged that "the interpolation of still photographs" had a place in his blueprint of cinema's formative means. See Rudolf Arnheim, *Film As Art* (Berkeley, California, 1971), 117-18.

14. Richard Dyer MacCann, *The People's Films* (New York, 1973), 37.
15. Surprisingly little has been written about this classic documentary. The most complete account can be found in my forthcoming article, "All That Glitters: City of Gold Revisited," in *Film Comment* 31 (March-April, 1995). See also an interview with Tom Daly in *Pot Pourri: The Newsletter of the National Film Board* (Summer 1977), 2-7. There are also brief references in Richard Dyer MacCann, *The People's Films*, 37-38; Eric Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* (New York, 1993), 200-01; Jack C. Ellis, *The Documentary Idea* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1989), 273-83; and a photographic essay in "Fine Old Shots of High Old Time," *Life* 44 (May 19, 1958), 94-99.
16. Interview with the author, August 27, 1994.
17. For a brief history of *Project XX*, see Peter C. Rollins, "Nightmare in Red," in John O'Connor, ed., *American Television: Interpreting the Video Past* (New York, 1983), 134-58.
18. A. William Bluem, *Documentary in American Television* (New York, 1965), 157.
19. Quoted in Bluem, *Documentary in American Television*, 159.
20. Interview with the author, September 9, 1994. All quotations hereinafter from Mr. Hill are from this interview.
21. Hartmann's essay, "The Daguerreotype," can be found in Harry W. Lawton and George Knox, eds., *The Valiant Knights of Daguerre* (Berkeley, California, 1978), 147.
22. Two fascinating investigations of snapshot practice and aesthetics appear in David L. Jacobs, "Domestic Snapshots: Toward a Grammar of Motives," *The Journal of American Culture* 4:2 (Spring 1981), 93-105; and Richard Chalfen, "Redundant Imagery: Some Observations on the Use of Snapshots in American Culture," *The Journal of American Culture* 4 (Spring 1981), 106-13.
23. "Interview with Tom Daly," *Pot Pourri*, 4.
24. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 99.
25. Kracauer's discussion of this "inherent affinity" of the photograph is in *Theory of Film*, 63-68. Burns's concentration upon a single detail of a photograph, enlarging it and dwelling on its particularities, has its precedents in the work of Paul Strand in the mid-teens. "By moving close to the object, he could obtain an image that decontextualized it, fragmenting the whole form so as to obscure its identity." See Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing*, 215.
26. "Interview with Don Winkler," *Pot Pourri* (Summer 1977), 6.
27. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 99.
28. *Ibid.*, 199-06.
29. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York, 1978), 23.
30. Henderson, "The Civil War," 10.
31. Sontag, *On Photography*, 71.
32. Bluem, *Documentary in American Television*, 70.
33. Henderson, "The Civil War," 13. Henderson objects to Burns's analogy to horsetrading: "Horsetrading in American terminology and legend is also par excellence a situation of dishonesty."
34. In *Theory of Film* Kracauer writes: "Even though the moving images on the screen come to a standstill, the thrust of their movement is too powerful to be discontinued simultaneously. . . . [T]he suspended movement nevertheless perpetuates itself by changing from outer motion into inner motion" (44).
- In *Film As Art* Rudolf Arnheim notes, "A still photograph inserted in the middle of a moving film gives a very curious sensation; chiefly because the time character of the moving shots is carried over to the still picture, which therefore looks uncannily petrified. An ordinary photograph hardly ever gives an impression of rigid standstill because the dimension of motion is not applied to it, and the time spent looking at it is not considered as being the time that passes while the event shown in the picture takes place" (118).
35. There's another kind of "story" here. Ironically, the substances of glass, silver salts, and paper that bear these images like shields are themselves highly perishable. As photography pioneer Fox Talbot suggested, they not only record the flux of life, but bear the marks of "the injuries of time" (quoted in Sontag, *On Photography*, 70). In the case of old photographs, like Alexander Gardner's last photograph of Lincoln, we have to look past, or through, the ravages of surface cracks, pockmarks, and smudges in our quest for the subject. It is but a fugitive testimony, after all, a chronicle of the duration of time to which the image has been subjected, and which ultimately subsumes its power of representation. Unfortunately, many more photographic images never have survived at all. For example, after the Civil War, many glass-plate negatives were sold to gardeners who used them as panes in their greenhouses. Subjected to the burning sunlight, the images gradually vanished over the years.
36. Orvell, *The Real Thing*, 96.