Camera Obscura

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Camera Obscura

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of fine Arts in Film and Animation

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Approval Date: December 2017
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Abstract

*Camera Obscura* is a feature-length script about a 19th-century photographer who must document the unraveling Civil War while struggling to come to terms with deaths of his loved ones. It is a historical fiction film about memory, death, and human costs.

Rutherford Holding, an adept yet recluse photographer, stands between a mobilizing country bound for war and the trauma of losing his loved ones years ago. As those around him enlist and prepare in nationalistic fervor for what is to be the American Civil War, Holding desires to evade any chance to meet death face-to-face once again. However, he pigeonholes himself in a scathingly unpopular position of a coward, unable to provide for the Union. After a visit from his mentor who offers him a chance to capture photographs of the war, Holding begins a journey that would explore the notion of the ‘honorable’ death, how it rips people apart from those they love with disgrace and antipathy.

Photography was a budding medium, representing reality with unseen palpability for which citizens populating the homefront would feast their cautiously curious eyes. The image became a verge between the homefront and the battlefront. Palpability notwithstanding, the image had the ability to lie to its spectator through the means of its production. Where the camera is placed and what is in the frame are all deliberate choices of the photographer usually unknown to the recipients of these images.

Holding, seeing that in order to restore honorific attention towards the dead, must combine the authenticity of the image with its deceit it produces simultaneously. The art, and ultimate significance, of post-mortem photography allowed him to ease the pain of those who lost, thereby easing the pain of his loss.
Writing on writing is like looking at yourself in the mirror, taking a marker or some similar device, and tracing yourself as best you can. One superficial glance renders such a task as easy; your source is before you, only moving if you do. Yet, ease gradually makes way for a vulnerability in sketching yourself. Details are missed while the details sketched are imperfect. In other words, your sketch will share some resemblance of your original self but it will no doubt only be a vaguer representation, one that espouses you to almost obsessively consider the minute features of your body. Ultimately, and succinctly, it becomes awkward.

Indeed, writing on writing is awkward. It is not abhorrent in any way but it summons a sort of hesitation, wherein the thought, "Everything about my story and thesis is written in my thesis," from time to time enters the mind. No matter, the process must be done, and in doing so there will be, perhaps, a greater understanding of not just the words written as the thesis but also of who I am and why I write. Such a thorough reflection, literalized by the preceding analogy, allows me to look at myself, for all of its maladroit and malaise, from a more experienced vantage point.

Maybe this piece, though mandatory and essentially practical, is my version of Bradbury’s *Zen and the Art of Writing*. As my thesis was in screenwriting, whereupon I wrote over one hundred and twenty pages, my engagement into the art of writing has found me loving the craft even more while hating the content I produce doubly so. That is not to say I hate my ideas. As this piece will show, my feature script, *Camera Obscura*, was tediously thought out and the thematic underpinnings of why I chose to write this are there and secured with my own
individual confidence. Nevertheless, something deep in my soul, spurred on by the increase of love and joy I have for writing, gnaws at my confidence, only taking a break to tell me that there is something inherently wrong with my story and my approach.

So is that what I see in my reflection? Are my features but a product of a love-hate relationship with the medium that has capped my graduate studies? Possibly, though much of what I feel upon gazing at my reflection may not be confined to what is in the mirror. What lies beyond are the things that only manifest in some obscure notion of which I cannot organize. The scope of this piece is predicated upon not just how much I have learned in writing (particularly screenwriting) but of how much I know I don’t know. Consequently, this exploration into the process by which my thesis emerged from the psyche many years ago to end up as a stack of papers functions well beyond the scope of reflection and the mirror that beams back a duplicate.

Writing on writing is many things, an awkward, joyous, fruitful, humbling venture. But it is most assuredly complicated. That reflection beyond the mirror is so simplistic in its accuracy that I forget that it resembles someone who is always changing. Am I able to finally reach out, through the transparent partition, and make a connection? The passing of time poses an obstacle; my reflection in the mirror is one from the past, slowly becoming the reflection of my present. Allow me to make the attempt anyway. At the very least, it will be quite intriguing to write about.

**Act One: On the Origins of Camera Obscura (Review of Research)**
Mrs. Siberling taught Arts in American Culture on the third floor of Morey Hall at the University of Rochester. My sophomore year, in the fall of 2010, had me as one of her students, sitting at one of the cold and awkward desks where the desk proper was connected to the chair; a most efficient and irritating design. I always sat against the window, which was both a source of solace and distraction whereupon my wandering eyes gravitated with fleeting curiosity towards the outside world before the rest of my mental capacity reminded me that I was in class and a teacher, Siberling, was vocalizing a lesson that I probably should have my focus reclaim.

In general, I was a good student, but I do have a tendency to daydream. Most of my life has been passed or organized through some variation of a daydream; stories were no different. So it is no surprise that some of the material I was taught in this class, or in many other non-film classes, was subject to a vague process of thinking by which some story may or may not come to fruition. In fact, in regards to Arts in American Culture, I think each and every topic taught went through my mental machinations of narrative discovery. From early American portraiture to daguerreotypes to Albert Bierstadt paintings, each topic and idea met the arresting force of my addicted mind craving a way to make what I learned into a movie. When those moments where my wandering eyes took over, my mind could see very specific and deliberate shots: Louis Daguerre developing the first daguerreotype, that blip of a moment ignited an unreproducible feeling of ecstasy and triumph.

I thought these cinematic moments were perfect, a guaranteed Oscar winner in my subjectively skewed mindscape. I would smirk and anyone who happened to glance in my direction would render themselves confused as to why I would be smiling in the middle of a lecture (this is not a backhanded remark towards the instructor). Nevertheless, I knew, in my own head, what I concocted was what would romantically be called movie magic. Yet, I knew when
some romantic ideas would not hold up to the scrutiny of pragmatic thought and any possibility of a story is constructed on flimsy ground. Tossing them aside, I wait for the next epiphany. I did not have to wait long. American culture, for better and for worse, is inexorably tied to the social and historical ramifications of the Civil War. In addition, the development of the new artistic medium of photography coincided with the expansion of chaos the war brought.

Gently leaning on the window, my eyes wandered in sync with my mind; how profound it is to be on the brink of a visual breakthrough during one of the most pivotal and violent moments in a nation’s history. I smirked. With that I asked an important question that would draw me so far away from the lecture space and into the idealized vision of a possible future of a filmic reimagining of these issues: what must have it been like to be a photographer straddling that brink, forging new ground in how humans would look at their own world and humanity?

The seed had been planted, it was not a matter of if this idea will grow but a matter of when it will grow. A seed is small but it is what it will become that makes its miniscule characteristic meaningless. When an idea sticks, rooted in the wrinkles of my brain, it begins to behave as the tides do on any beach, mimicking the ebb and flow rhythm. Planted in the fall of 2010, the idea of Civil War photography ebbed and flowed in my mind, sometimes triggered by an external force and sometimes managing to catch my attention with its own vigor. Each ebb and flow brought with it a new trait; the idea never returned in the same state it left. Most of the times these are caused by conscious interactions with my environment but there are those rare moments of revelation that seem to happen in the recesses of my mind, unmoved by what I encounter in the outside world.

One permutation created a photographer who, on the eve of the war in 1861, was stationed with a survey team out West, taking pictures of the serene and harmonious wilderness
that, largely, was still untapped by Western civilization. The intriguing narrative hook was that this photographer would be transported from natural serenity to the fire and brimstone of human conflict; the images he captures are the punctuations of such a drastic dichotomy. This is the permutation that stuck with me by the end of the Art History course and will remain with me, with numerous variations, for the next six years. Once again, those ‘perfect’ shots flooded my mind occasionally, intoxicating me with the idea that, yes, this story has unquantifiable potential. Of course, this intoxication brought with it self-flattery devolving into obnoxiousness. But I didn’t care, the notion that I have never seen a Civil War film, from Gone With the Wind to Cold Mountain, focusing on the individuals who made the visual transports to guide us back to a time so long ago and whose images are ingrained in a national memory, was enough to keep me attracted.

Like a latent virus ready to strike, infecting one cell after another, this story was lying in anticipation for when I allowed it to explode within my mind. It only needed a trigger.

Thesis Preparation and The Wild Change in Personal Narrative

It is no surprise that, six years later, this latent idea has lost at least some of its potency. Six years later sees me entering the Thesis Prep class at the tail end of my second year in the Rochester Institute of Technology's School of Film and Animation graduate program. Much of my distance from this supposed Civil War epic is due to the fact that coming into the program I implicitly thought I would make a film as my thesis. A film was the most conspicuous product one can create in film school to, crudely put, sell yourself to the industry. Moreover, if it is flashy enough, whether it be a flash of that indie spirit or of Hollywood flare, it attracts the gazes of
many people in many festivals. Essentially, it is the easiest measurable unit of talent. So, of course, a film will do!

And, walking into the Thesis Prep class, I had no wavering position for this plan. In fact, one of my self-titled epiphanies brewed one of my most ferocious ideas yet, one that would be made into an idea reigning in the nightmarish approach of David Lynch and the toxic misogyny in video game culture. It was going to be my most ambitious film yet…maybe ever. An irrepressible feeling of excitement reverberated throughout my body, motivated by a strong sense of social consciousness that I needed to express possibly as an attempt to err the choices I made in my past. Either way, it was a utopic position to be in, flailing in a creative revelry.

Yet, something happened.

What transpired, pulling me down from some confident realm was, like everything else among these pages, complicated. As a matter of transparency and, perhaps, politeness, the territory we will be forging may involve some critique of the program. It is important to include this episode because regarding the mode of production, or the context of which art, like scripts and films, are produced is of great importance. Especially for my case, where the context of which my thesis, a film about video games, was being developed was thrown into some grinder, or rather, a blender, in which what was made became a script of some entirely different idea.

We must begin with the structural description of the graduate program. There are few of us, four were in my year of live-action students (which then turned out to be six in the end). Filmmaking is inherently a collaborative process. Yes, it can be done individually and has been done but to be able to get a job, start a career, and find some sort of accomplishment requires interaction with others or, at the very least, their support. No matter, making films in this program certainly requires collaboration and the small numbers that inhabit the graduate space
places us at the mercy of the undergraduate filmmakers. What this promotes is initiative. As budding filmmakers, taking the initiative is a skill to be learned and honed, a strategy by which allows you to get what you want to create what you want.

The converse of such an observation is that when the graduates enter the program, a three-year affair, they first intersect with the undergraduates in their second year or later. By this time, a lot of them have already made plans with friends and fellow colleagues about helping each other out on projects. Graduates are on the outside looking in on day one, and any chance for availability from these undergraduates lies in between the projects and work they have already established.

With the thesis being my fourth project at RIT, I have relied on either graduate students and a trickle of undergraduates on my set or people outside of the department. As an unintended consequence, the two documentaries I made never forced me to recruit many people so, at most, I had two or three students helping me. Most were naturally graduates. When I finally began setting in motion my thesis, initiating the nervous recruiting process, I found out how far out of the loop I was orbiting. Visually, my original thesis idea was to be very specific, requiring an ample amount of time for preparation and tests. I needed an experienced cinematographer to helm the camera. As it turned out, literally no one was available. That, or no one responded to my inquiries. I ask you to remember the revelry I so unnecessarily described, that point in which I reached some sort of creative zenith combining real-world issues and many of my passions. I ask you to recall that moment because now, the zenith has disappeared. Under the oppressiveness of anxiety and uncertainty, any ambition I had for this project disintegrated.

It did not mean I abandoned the thesis film. I was not sure of an alternative plan until the week where I was to propose my idea. In fact, I proposed my video game idea to the committee.
Even with the heavy-handed surrealism and cynical premise, it was passed by the five committee members. As soon as I left the room, I turned to my thesis chair, Jack Beck, with a snide smile and fidgeting shoulders.

“Well, congrats,” said Prof. Beck.

“I need to talk to you about this whole thing,” I said, maintaining that illusory smile.

“About what?”

At this point, I come in close and lower my voice. Some of the committee members were filing out of the review room.

“I don’t think I want to direct a film anymore.”

Luckily, Professor Beck is the sort of chair that would not react rambunctiously without first hearing the testimony I was about to drop. Given the chance, I laid out my list of protestations to him with great care. Apart from the graduate and undergraduate void mentioned earlier, a convincing monetary argument followed. Without an acceptable crew, I felt uneasy spending, raising, or using upwards of four thousand dollars for a potential product I will not be satisfied with. So I reflected upon my time at RIT, plotting the trajectory of my growth as a storyteller. I came upon the revelation that my thesis would exhibit what I have improved upon the most, the one aspect of filmmaking that I know has grown and blossomed into something more mature and confident. Unfortunately, it wasn’t directing, or at least directing fiction films. Writing, on the other hand, was something I had always wanted to do, even as a small child. Writing was the element that brought me into that comforting zone of solitude free from any sort of harassment from cast or crew. Indeed, writing was the avenue of which my talents as a storyteller would (should) shine. And so it is writing that my thesis will be built on and delivered.
For most of the first two years of my graduate tenure, I was a live-action student creeping closer and closer to a final film encapsulating, supposedly, what I learned in the school. Yet, right at the major plot point, the beginning of the third act, if you will, a twist invariably restructured the whole purpose of my graduate studies. I was now, unequivocally, and seriously, a screenwriter.

A Summer of Stories

My thesis chair and I opted to forgo the re-proposal process two weeks after my original proposal, deciding, instead, to re-propose at the beginning of the next school year. This left a whole summer of exploration and research to be done to find and craft a story that may be transformed into a script. Although my plan was to research three possible stories, including adapting my video game idea into a feature-length endeavor, I will truncate this portion of the story by focusing on my rekindling with the Civil War idea that I most graciously met years ago.

This idea bubbled up as a re-emerging candidate because of the potency of its thematic clarity. That dichotomy of photographing nature and photographing war stood out as one of the fiercest curiosities. I must research the intricacies of what it meant to be a photographer in the 1850s and 1860s and, simultaneously, clarify validations or inaccuracies that could arise in a fictional account. It is with an exciting fortune that research came easy, with the culprit being a geographical coincidence. As it was, developing a story about photography in Rochester was similar to developing a story about architecture in Columbus, Indiana. And even more fortunate was that the most qualified institution to deliver the resources necessary for adequate research, the George Eastman Museum, was a placed I worked at.
Guided into the recesses of the Eastman Museum library, a helpful librarian brought a cart filled with books about Civil War photography. Indeed, this day of research was devoted to war photography. I spent many hours hovering over page after page of details, from pamphlets to coffee table books. I came across an indelible source that will provide the basis to one of my strongest scenes at the Battle of Antietam, *The Blue and the Gray in Black and White* by Bob Zeller. Never verbose and cluttered with pretentious flare, Zeller’s writing made very clear the triumphs and difficulties of the photographers like Matthew Brady and Alexander Gardner. Through this same proficiency, the wet-collodion process was introduced to me, a process that will be performed in my story many times; the process used by photographers during this era.

Returning our regards to the Battle of Antietam, the book described an indispensable sequence of how photographers Alexander Gardner and James Gibson coordinated their shoot the morning after the bloodiest day in the war, their method of capturing an image and hastily developing it in the confines of a stuffy darkroom carriage. Reading these few pages ignited images so crystalline and powerful that I knew, even before structuring the rest of the narrative, I needed to have this scene as a pivotal moment for whomever my characters would end up being. I felt the sweat, grime, and heat build-up within these images; an anticipation grew inside of me to contextualize this moment into something more human. Even after the day of research, that connection was still lacking.

Sometime later in the season, Prof. Beck and I officially opted for this Civil War idea. It was not a neck-to-neck race. After the day of research, I knew no other idea I had was built with such sound resources and motivation. A hammer of scrutiny could have easily destroyed all my ideas, but at least I knew it would have the toughest time with this one. With the final decision made, I had all cylinders pumping, driving forth into the direction of even more Civil War, early
photography, and theoretical research. Even so, no research could really conjure up the humanity I needed for my story to be promoted from historically interesting or accurate to emotionally poignant. My aging dichotomy of nature and war showed its flaws and the unsatisfying structure that could be narratively built around such a dichotomy became ever more apparent.

A huge pivot point in my process initiated with a simple email from where his inquiry began: “Did you tell me about the avocation of photographing the newly dead bodies for portraits?”

I did not. I’m not sure where Professor Beck thought of this ‘avocation,’ other than looking at my idea from an angle I’ve never considered. Yet, the connection was almost obnoxiously profound. No, not profound but rather quintessential to any sort of thoughtful theme I can manage with material such as this. It didn’t take me long to interpret the simple email as a panacea. At the risk of overly dramatizing the moment, I recall standing up briskly from my computer, pacing around with self-congratulatory flare similar to a kicker in American football making a game-winning field goal. A puzzle that was my story had been created, with all of the pieces there for me, some more obscure than others, but I was ready to put it together.

**Sorting The Puzzle Out**

The inaugural week of school saw me pass, once again, the thesis proposal, armed with a skeleton of a Civil War tale of images and death. At the risk of muffling the importance of the proposal, the more important matter I need to discuss regards the philosophy of the story and the eventual difficulties involved.

First, the main character, whose appellation became Rutherford Holding, mid-nineteenth century photographer whose wife and daughter died five years prior to the start of the story. His
vocation of capturing an image, a present moment, lies in an intriguing relationship to his struggle to overcome the death of his family (whose images he did not capture). Holding will become the intersection of photography and death, of an emerging medium and the Civil War. He cowers at death but needs to confront it at the same time, especially given an involvement in any war. That was my protagonist concocted from original narrative pieces, but Holding is not complete; there are more ingredients to be added to this stew rooted in the historical. Reaching back into my research, motivated by a sense of convenience so that Holding can be present in the same places that the famous images were captured, I gradually assembled a Frankensteinian amalgamation of real people. Though there were many photographers whose lives I borrowed for this procedure, the most crucial piece was that of Alexander Gardner.

As mentioned earlier, he was present at Antietam, working for Matthew Brady at the time. Additionally, he was present at the Battle of Gettysburg, but not under the employment of Brady. Dramatically speaking, I could not have asked for an easier source. One man who appeared in two of the most important, albeit violent, battles of the war and was once a part of the great monopoly of Brady photography only to gain independence. As an aside, it must be said that the details of their breakup are not clear. But that only means I can make anything up for dramatic and narrative effect!

The secondary characters came easier and through much of the same process. There is a Brady character (not so subtly named Bronson) and a Gibson character (again, not too far off with Grierson). Bronson was less of an amalgamation and more of a dramatized version of his source material. Grierson was a light unity of real people, mostly influenced by photographer Timothy O’Sullivan who would later be a successful nature photographer after the war and was also Scottish. The rest of the pieces came from others who worked with Gardner and Brady.
Historical biographies notwithstanding, a large portion of this narrative puzzle constituted contemporary, to the Civil War, perceptions and understanding of death. I needed to assume that it must be different than what we think of now, even if it was just a little bit. Of course, modern sensibilities will trickle into all the compartments of this period piece, but I need not let it gain majority authority over the narrative because it would undermine the accuracies I wish to promote. Moreover, to really underline the importance of the photographic image during the period one should investigate the idea of death to procure a comprehension of how people really did feel about looking upon the corpses at Antietam or Gettysburg or wherever else.

Luckily, this avenue of research was not labyrinthine. In fact, it was easy. One of my Thesis committee members, Frank Deese, recommended the book *The Republic of Suffering* by Drew Faust, something I can only describe as an exhaustive cross-section of how the idea of death changed when six hundred thousand soldiers died between 1861 and 1865. Each page was inflated with examples and primary sources of letters and correspondence that unearth a multitude of voices expressing doubt, shame, sorrow, and some peace. Among this gratuitous presentation were several ideas that caught my mind, almost blinding me from anything else the book had to offer. American perceptions of death and war run twofold and contradictory. One details the ‘Good Death,’ an honorable end to your life knowing, maybe in the last moments of consciousness, the soldier crosses the threshold knowing he had served his country and his family well and that all are proud. The second, more systematic and spiritual, favored the idea that the family needs to be present when a member passes. For one, the proximity is for the practical means of care and comfort in the final hours. Additionally, being with a dying family member is also a spiritual motivation, whereupon the family can assume the spirit of the dead so that they can pass on with ease and direction. Even in such a somber time, closeness brings with
it a sense of reassurance. And in no surprise, the Civil War tore both perceptions to shreds unapologetically and with emphatic disturbance, laughing at this humanely absurd concept of the ‘Good Death.’ Faust described letters being written by soldiers before a battle or even dying on the field as a desperate means to maintain this ‘spiritual connection’ with their loved ones. It was not clear whether these letters served as suitable conduits, but what was clear was the rupture between homefront and battlefront, creating a void between them where the dead get lost, souls and spirits restless and wandering.

Reading this I began to understand more of the gravity of the situation, the heartfelt prominence that created a devastation I have even overlooked in my quest to understand the technicalities of photography. I'm not saying I took my narrative for granted, or maybe I am. Right now is a good time to recite one of the many lessons I learned through this project: always take care and respect your story. Even if it is yours sometimes it is easy to be ignorant of the emotional weight it can provide. Understanding the intricate stakes will always make for a more poignant delivery of the story.

Anyways, this idea of death exhibited by the many grieving individuals during the war needed to somehow bind itself with both the themes and the characters of the story. Alas, my puzzle was taking shape, its pieces being crafted, because at this point I fused together these ideas of death, with the importance of photography and war, and the specific subset of post-mortem photography.

Our protagonist, Rutherford Holding, would be a budding but decrepit photographer at the onset of the war, shamefully hiding from the motivational antics of enlisting. He is burdened by the death of his wife and child, of which he has no photographic record of either of them (he was not a photographer at the time of their deaths). Before being peer pressured into enlisting, he
would be swept up and recruited by his former mentor, Timothy Bronson, to help document the war through funding and permission by the US government. Holding would accept reluctantly, but with a determination to feel like he is providing something to a mobilized society.

Participating in documenting the carnage of war and the countless, nameless, dead populating the scorched grounds, Holding would question the benefit of his documentation, spurred on by his past suffering. He would stand, camera in hand, among the dead, questioning if what he is doing really is ‘good enough.’ Through certain revelations, Holding would find that developing post-mortem images could potentially bring respect back to the departed and to capture and freeze the wandering spirit that can then be delivered back to the grieving family. Thus, Holding finds his calling.

Consequently, the conflict for the protagonist becomes how Holding can overcome his sense of loss in a world full of death so that he can both come to terms with death and heal not just himself but others. At this time, the implications for the power of the image were either downright alien or misunderstood, so through this conflict I also would show how the photographic image became an efficacious tool in bridging the gap between homefront and battlefront, wherein Holding’s eventual post-mortem photographs became just another bridge that specifically transported the spirits of the fallen from an unknown netherworld to the hands and hearts of their family members. Ultimately, this would become a story about how to regain control over the bastardization of death; war destroys any respectful and meaningful concepts therein. It is through our serious consideration of death, whether spiritual or not, that can bring back the dignity violence and chaos strips away.
That was the puzzle, all sorted. The pieces, mind you, are not fitted together. They are accounted for and they have shaped appropriately. With all the crucial objects ready, it was now time to actually bring together the parts. And, finally, the act of screenwriting can commence.

**Act Two: Writing the Script (Process)**

With tough, rubber boots equipped, I trudged through thick mud, or maybe a slow-moving blackwater, eyeing the shore but feeling like, no matter how much I walk, I did not get any closer. Each and every step taken expends too much energy but I know that my goal is to reach the shore and get out of this mucilaginous zone. If I stop, I will surely be sucked into a forever state of idleness.

This sort of describes writing the script. Perhaps it is even an understatement. The goal is clear and the space of which the writing will be done, as in, the overall structure of the story, is equally clear. Yet, the fact that you know such parameters does not make the task easier. If anything, writing is always coupled with a torment of knowing where you are going, but having to take the longest route to get there. Writing the screenplay required patience since each scene must both be visually clear in my mind and succinct on paper. What follows is a review of several tribulations encountered during the writing process, each with a fruitful solution wrapped up in a unique challenge.

Clarity must be enforced with the method of expression I will use, in that it is possibly customary to insert my script in this paper as a compliment to my discussion. While this makes sense (though I might be wrong about this), there is also an unintended risk my paranoid mind cannot forgive if such a thing were to happen. I plan on submitting this script to festivals and writing competitions; *Camera Obscura* will act as the guinea pig as I experiment with exposing
my work in juried events, as nerve-racking as it will be. Consequently, I will only provide pages of my script sparingly and under the utmost necessity, avoiding the opportunity of leaving it vulnerable to some sinister malefactor to steal it. Call me irrational, but I figured me being a writer had already inferred such a determination.

**Setting Up the Coward**

Although most crucially the first act builds the world of the film and the character who inhabits that world, I needed some sort of hook to dramatically welcome the reader into my story. How to begin, or even just as crucially but sorely overlooked, *when* to begin a story is paramount to the potential resonance for the subsequent scenes. Admittedly, I had the first scene, this hook, well-nurtured in my mind for some time. Really, since Professor Beck supplied the post-mortem idea a sharp burst of an idea flashed in my head. I would begin my story with Rutherford Holding performing a post-mortem shoot. Essentially, my story will begin with a flash forward, forgoing any sort of ‘surprise’ or unexpected revelation that Holding would turn to photographing the dead. An initial reveal would provide discomfort for a viewer unprepared to see the staging of the photo shoot involving a deceased individual, in this case a child. Post-mortem photography, if it still proliferates, is something never considered in our image-saturated environment. I would use the discomfort as a way to curtail curiosity and entice the viewer to witness the end of the introductory scene, to lay eyes upon this moment of eeriness and grace.

Some faculty members grew skeptical of that choice, offering their two cents on the welfare of not revealing the eventual vocation of my protagonist. Yet, I remained with a steadfast grip that my story would not be hinged upon any sort of surprise or even a sudden change in direction that possibly instilled a sense of artificiality (at least as far as my main character’s greatest leap in progress is concerned). Vowing for a more organic evolution and nuanced
observation on Holding, I wanted to show the outcome first so that the rest of the story can be
focused on the process, whether it be the photographic process or the process by which one
grieves and becomes stronger through tragedy. Secondly, my climax will not be concerned with
Holding becoming a post-mortem photographer but why he did and what that significance
entails. Dramatic freedom appeared before me, and, as I will soon cover, made some of the last
scenes stand out more for their thematic interconnectedness than any shocking unveiling.

In spite of the pressure from those more experienced, I opted to retain this opening scene,
a recurring theme in the world of screenwriting, and a lesson that would become more apparent
later on concerning the degree to which you open yourself and your work up to changes and
close yourself off. The flash forward would give way to ten years’ prior, which is 1862 when the
North is beginning to mobilize in a nationalistic fervor. The first act can be understood through
dichotomy. I have Holding hide away in his disheveled photographic studio, favoring
motionlessness as he looks outside to the bustling mobility of the rest of the town, lining up to
enlist and celebrating the union cause. It is a dichotomy between action and inaction.

Conflict develops as action and inaction clash. Pulled from his hermitage, Holding must
justify being scared and his general disdain for death. This is met with great backlash, scathingly
organized by a wife, and sister, of fallen men of war, who puts Holding in his place. Our
protagonist knows there is a dichotomy, which lends much difficulty to how he expresses what
frightens him. I needed to show him by himself, away from confrontation, in order to give the
reader an initial glimpse of his mental impairment and the lingering resonance of the death of his
wife and daughter since we do not see such an event. At night, he clumsily drinks and wastes
plates on images of nothing—a pitiful scene. Functionally, besides showing the state of our
protagonist, it also introduces a fantastical element in this story. As Holding looks through the
focus plate, he sees his wife…we think. As soon as he lifts his head up to see her without the means of the camera, she is gone. Thus begins a visual motif of the spirit, one that will be echoed later on the battlefield, manifesting Holding’s guilt, leaving him drowning in self-deprecation.

(consider inserting pages of previously discussed scene and furthering analysis)

It is always a difficult thing to do to introduce a protagonist in such a helpless manner. Moreover, in such a way that clarifies their insistence on remaining helpless; positive perception becomes uncommon from readers. Nevertheless, I persisted in casting Holding in a slightly unfavorable light so that his arch is rendered impelling, allowing for more nuance. When Bronson visits and convinces Holding to join his photographic endeavors, Holding is in an awkward state of wanting to enlist as to not be seen a coward but unwilling to shed any of that fear from him. His choice to join Bronson comes off as reluctant but also as a relief. In this exchange, as well, the important relationship characteristic is revealed that Bronson has known Holding for quite some time, even knowing the intimate details of his struggle after the aforementioned deaths of the wife and child.

**Wandering Spirits on a Scorched Land**

If Holding’s reluctance is possibly a product of his little understanding of the power of the photographic image, then the second act details this procuration of such vital knowledge that will ultimately be transformed into a wisdom guiding him towards a mission he finds worthwhile. Trials and tribulations to get to such a place are always coated in the soot and dust of smoke and hellfire; Holding must witness unspeakable atrocity before he sobers up. Bronson takes him under his wing, and I wanted to heavily infuse a sense of parental control which would have Bronson treat Holding like a damaged child. Bronson’s knowledge of his acolyte’s
struggles is used as leverage to keep him under his employment, knowing very well the skill and eye of Holding.

Despite the manipulation, Bronson is never to be a bad man or even an antagonist. As it might turn out, the antagonist and protagonist could be the same person. Bronson is never menacing, he thinks what he is doing is right within his own frame of mind of both helping Holding and becoming the most important photographic studio for the Union homefront. His perception has rootage in corporate, but he is also smart and cognizant of photography’s crucial role during the war. Through Holding’s eyes, and later in the second act, we can sympathize with some of his contempt for his mentor, but not at the expense of imagining Bronson as a ‘bad guy.’

For now, Bronson sends Holding off with one of his experienced operators, Jebediah Crawford, to follow the Army of the Potomac. The photography duo would eventually meet with the army at Antietam.

If there was a scene that triggered an unnecessary amount of egoism, a scene that I would go to while describing the hopeful beauty of my story with delight and, most likely, obnoxiousness, it would be the battle at Antietam. Well, more accurately, the aftermath of Antietam. Camera Obscura is unequivocally a war film, but it is absolutely crucial to point out that to make this story ring true to the point of view of the protagonist and emphatic in regards to death, I needed to make a bold decision that subverts the definitiveness of the genre tropes: I will not show any of the battles. Rather, all our characters, and the reader vicariously, would see are the aftermaths. Another unpopular choice to be cataloged in an expanding list of unpopular decisions. One esteemed faculty member came up to me at the end of the school year to point out how my story wouldn't sell without a battle scene. I smile, nodded, and shrugged. There are reasons for such a choice which I will cover later in this dissertation. For now, the Battle of
Antietam was not going to be seen at all. What was going to be seen are the consequences, the
cost, the wandering spirits in a scorched land.

Hinted earlier, Zeller’s incredible history on Civil War photography provide one page of
fantastic detail that would influence the structure of the scene having Holding and Crawford,
complete with their darkroom carriage, surveying the embattled land and capturing a multitude
of scenes. Zeller informs of the horrid working conditions; the smell of death and a combination
of smoke and fog lingering low on the ground. The heat and noxious fumes of chemicals inside
the claustrophobic carriage pummeling the men as they try to remain calm and initiate the wet-
collodion process smoothly. All this had to be done quick as the Union soldiers buried most of
the corpses in mass graves hastily dug. The scene in the script plays out like a series of
connected vignettes of different locations and scenarios captured. I provided a miniature
character arc for Holding; the fear he brings on location slowly takes the better of him as he is
encapsulated by what looks like an infinite expanse of death. All the shots taken in the scene are
based off real shots, of course, the specific context surrounding them are dramatically tailored.
The following excerpt, originates from the Antietam scene.
On Holding, breathing irregularly.

CRAWFORD
Tripod. Rutherford.

Holding nods without looking and jumps out of the carriage and runs to the back. Opening the tarp, he pulls out the large, wooden tripod on the carriage floor.

Making haste back around the carriage, Holding finds Crawford standing in a calculated position. He points to his feet. Holding obeys and stakes the tripod in the ground.

Crawford runs back to the carriage and, in the back as well, carefully grabs the camera. Holding follows and, when there is space, goes into the back of the carriage.

INT. DARKROOM CARRIAGE - CONTINUOUS

Holding takes a plate out of the crate, wiping off hay. He takes a rag and smooths it out in a circular motion.

EXT. ANTIETAM BATTLEFIELD NEAR DUNKARD CHURCH - CONTINUOUS

Crawford has just finished placing the camera on the tripod, quickly securing it in place. He opens up the camera and looks through the focus frame; a framed image of the cluster of dead rebels, upside down, coming into focus.

INT. DARKROOM CARRIAGE - CONTINUOUS

Holding pours collodion onto the glass plate, carefully titling this way and that for an even spread.

He places the plate into a bath box of silver nitrate.

EXT. ANTIETAM BATTLEFIELD NEAR DUNKARD CHURCH - CONTINUOUS

Crawford walks up the tripod closer and lowers the camera on the tripod.

A DUNKARD MAN watches this scene from afar.
Urgency is a mood I hinge this scene upon, only a portion shown above. I wanted to show how this urgency disrupts the carefulness needed for the photographic process; it is, at the very least, extremely tedious and messy. This scene must be sweaty, grimey, stinky, and any other adjective reserved for unpleasantness. Besides mood and feeling, the photographic process remains fixated as an aspect to remain true towards in all of its claustrophobic and repetitive glory. As made somewhat clear in the figures, the dialogue is minimal. For the rest of the ten-minute scene, dialogue is purposefully restrained. Through the sense of urgency, of which photos are being captured and developed, the readers take the role of an observer, watching the activity with, hopefully, emotional involvement and curiosity. I, of course, have to uphold an assumption that many people are unfamiliar with photography of the Civil War.
By the end of the scene, I want it to feel exhausting, a tremendous feat accomplished with much personal and emotional cost. A tired Holding superimposed with a tired reader. Margaret reappears in this scene as a means to further connect Holding’s loss and the loss experienced by those who sent their family to war. Yet, at this stage, Holding is not able to find both a common problem and a common solution. For now, he is over-encumbered by the massive weight of this moment. Crawford comes to his aid.

**Homefront and Battlefront**

Their fieldwork completed, it was time for Holding and Crawford to bring the boon of images from the recent destruction. Act two can be broken up into three large segments with Antietam as the first. Homefront is an apt title for the second segment, depicting Holding in the civilian world having just lived through an episode of war. It is the time where Holding sees the images he captured on the battlefield perceived by a populace detached from any intimate horror, though, in spite of this, a sense of melancholy hovers over them as they wait for their loved ones to hopefully return alive. In general, this is where Holding begins to see the functionality of his images and the emotional turmoil he suffered during Antietam is contemplated on, eventually giving rise to a new direction for our protagonist.

There are several important scenes here, the first being the Antietam exhibition. Historically, Matthew Brady quickly assembled the Antietam photographs within a month of the battle into a watershed exhibition titled “The Dead at Antietam.” In *Camera Obscura*, we remain faithful to this series of events. Like many other instances of the real story, this moment was ripe for dramatic usability. I sentimentality envisioned the spectators walking into Bronson’s studio,
unknowing to the images they will soon lay their eyes upon. Their faces fixed in a shock and
dazzling curiosity. Yes, it's horror, but there was something cynically attractive to the spectacle
of looking upon death. War has never been so close and if we regard this moment in the
development of information diffusion, war is beginning to claim its stake within the homefront;
photos make way for newsreel films which make way for television which make way for the
internet.

A development as monumental as this needs to be governed by some questions to provide
inspiration. Namely, what does it mean to re-contextualize images of war? Could any of the
intensity of the real scene be lost through its representation in frozen two-dimensionality? Lastly,
in what ways would people connect with these images? The exhibition scene is prefaced by what
I like to deem a thought-scene, which is a scene that is built around the wonder of a particular
concept or aspect. This concept was the captions attributed to the images. Matthew Brady took
part in re-contextualization of the Antietam images with dramatic captioning, almost applying a
story to the subjects, usually dead, frozen within the frame. Spurred on by a wondering of how
these people decided on captions, I created a scene that both reveals and critiques the ideation of
text to go along with the image. Bronson and Holding have a passive-aggressive standoff as to
what should be said about a particular image and the supposed irony emitted by this strain hints
at a futility.

If the darkroom carriage and the corpse were important visual nodes constructing the
scene of Antietam, the face of the civilian is what the exhibition scene revolves around. And it is
these faces that Holding looks upon almost with the same intensity as he did the corpses on the
battlefield. Drama is created through the answering of the question on how people could connect
with these images by asking a follow-up: What if someone sees the body of their dead loved one
in an image? Or, a more cynical question would be: what if someone saw something in an image that may or may not actually be there? If any determined cinephile is reading this, boasting of their extensive moviegoing experience, then they would note the last question is of very familiar importance to a 1960s English film, *Blow-up*. In a story about a photographer who is unsure of whether or not he has captured a murder, I rework this premise and have a fragile husband and wife clumsily convince themselves that an obscured dead corpse in a small image is their son. A delirious moment ensues, causing the rest of the patrons to look on in surprise and pity. Holding steps in after a few beats of the awkward stillness and in this moment he does something that, whether he knows it or not, will determine the ambiguous ramifications of his future vocation: Holding will lie. Rather than try and fight the whimsical claim made by the parents, Holding decides to not necessarily affirm the claim but rather insinuate closure, as seen in Figure 3.
Closure is what Holding seeks and by creating a well-meaning lie, he found some sort of closure for the bereaved husband and wife. But this lie will become very crucial to the idea of post-mortem photography, something that will be discussed in greater detail in subsequent scenes. Bronson comments on the scene afterward as a subtle rejoinder to the previous caption
scene; the white lie Holding uttered is not dissimilar to the dramatized caption. More importantly, though Holding performed a good deed, his closure is unaccounted for.

The homefront may be just as tormenting towards our protagonist as the battlefront. Holding has more time to think for himself. At night, he cannot sleep, and he is weary. Bronson, once again assuming that parental role, suggests he see a medium. While not extremely popular even during times such as the Civil War, a séance was often considered as a means to connect with the dead, especially those abruptly severed from the ties of those who love them. It is well known Abraham Lincoln sought advice from mediums, and he certainly was not the only one. Holding is on the fence with Bronson’s proposition, but also in a position where he has nothing to lose in trying it out. Now, coming into a scene involving a seance, a medium and the brief glimpse of the supernatural might run perpendicular to the historical realism the rest of my story promotes. So I used the ambiguity of the medium’s authenticity to start building my scene. Maybe it is not about Holding unconvinced with a séance, maybe it is more about him convincing himself to be true because he needs some connection. In general, maybe people did not see mediums because they thought what they did was real but it was the support and idea of connection that brings them some peace. It was never clear, and the séance scene plays along with the uncertainty. The character of the medium also carries with her an acknowledgment to the unstable nature of her work, but I hope this knowledge also allows her to connect with struggling individuals like Holding and to appear more human than bizarre. In fact, the medium makes a subliminal remark about the similarity between her work and Holding’s. Although not much more is explicitly stated, the similarities hinge upon the lie that governs their work (or will govern the work of Holding soon); they lie to make people feel better. Re-contextualizing images detach the moment from its inherent truth and this occurs right from the beginning when a
photographer chooses the framing of a shot, to what is in the frame, to conclusively where it hangs on a wall in an exhibition. These lies, or manipulations, ironically herald the possibility of certainty and, with that, solace.

In terms of Holding’s arc, his experience with the séance borderlines the traumatic. He may or may not have spoken with Margaret through the medium but a wavering truth does not impede his emotional response. Imbued in him is a sense of personal urgency, that he needs to make a change or he will truly lose it. I’ve been omitting a major plot point brimming since the caption scene that I will introduce now, though I’ve certainly premised it when explaining Bronson’s overbearing control over how Holding should feel. There is only so much someone can take of oppressive support, and Holding’s urgent change in direction pushes the dormant issue out onto a lighted stage. Now, Holding can see clearly that in order to really alleviate the pain that has controlled his rampant melancholy, he needs to rid the guide that controls his happiness. The caption scene hinted at a possible conflict between Bronson and his employees since Crawford found out that their photographs they painstakingly captured at Antietam are revealed to have Bronson as the signatory, essentially claiming the images as his own.

After a sleepless night, Holding confronts Bronson and announces his resignation, not because of the unfair authorship but because he must not be chaperoned in his quest to heal; any recovery should be made through his autonomy. Bronson, subdued of his power and reluctant towards this surprising chain of events, agrees. If he truly cares about his mentee, then he would certainly grant permission to let him go.

Holding would start another studio with Crawford, who inevitably left because of the false authorship issue. They are joined on loan by another Bronson photographer, James Grierson, who had since softly idolized Holding. With a new studio under his name and the
freedom to do whatever he wants, Holding was ready to continue documenting the war that raged on. Thus constitutes the middle section of the second act, if we are to use such categorization. In fact, I would lean towards the structure organization used by Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa and his writing team which used a four-act structure and this moment would be the end of the second act. From here, the goal manifests in Holding's struggle to figure out, how exactly, does he create something that will lend to an emotional and spiritual recovery.

**John Brown’s Body**

When it comes to structuring historically-rooted stories, chronology is an immense issue simmering just beneath the more obvious issue of accuracy. In fact, chronology feeds into the sense of accuracy because when we watch works of historical fiction, there should never be a point where we query a sequence of events because of the illogical nature of the flow of time according to the filmmakers. Blatant and obscure manipulations of time in the context of a real-world past render moments shown on screen as artificial and purely functional to plot progression rather than an attempt at audience connection through emotional authenticity and objectivity. It’s a slippery slope to assemble a dramatic arc for a history that never unfolds itself so conveniently. Our jobs as writers is to mask manipulation of time through respect towards the subject as it is compromised. There will never be historical fiction films to satisfy all sense of objectivity (that is sort of the point) but in spite of this realization, one must always consider the rippling effects that each and every compromise creates so that your film is both digestible but cognizant of its limitations.

*Camera Obscura* takes a lot of liberties, much of them discussed in the first section of this dissertation, the way in which I freely amalgamated real characters into one, for example.
Difficulty only increases when you’ve plotted major story events to match major historical events, irrevocably forcing myself to lay out scenes proceeding the match in a way that seems temporally logical. Why am I discussing all of this right now? As much as I think I am over-exaggerating the issue, it nevertheless is important, and Holding and Grierson, after establishing an independent studio, head off on a collision course with the armies at Gettysburg. No questions or suspicions may not have conjured up in your mind, but from the time Holding returns from Antietam to the time he departs for Gettysburg intrinsically feels brief. Antietam occurred in September 1862. Gettysburg occurred in July 1863. Eleven months go by, apparently, in the diegesis of the film, though none of this is mentioned or felt. As I write this, I realize that I am both detailing the complicated mechanisms governing narrative decisions while exhibiting the endless stream of doubts and obstacles that can cripple the writing process. Maybe a title card denoting, “July, 1864,” is all I need to do for remediation. Maybe not. Either way, it is worth confessing some of the mistakes made that have yet to be resolved.

Chronology withal, Jebediah Crawford heads out towards Mississippi and Vicksburg while Holding and Grierson head towards Gettysburg. As I managed to juke and weave around the temporal problems of history and drama, I only realized that potential issues wait in front of me regarding the story’s dynamism. Namely, the return to the battlefield and whether or not it is a return to the same approach used in Antietam. I needed to differentiate the functionality of the Gettysburg scene as to not repeat the tone and feel of the previous battle, nullifying precious moments of uniqueness that should differentiate the two. One way to make Gettysburg a singular experience within the story is to take advantage of Holding’s character change since Antietam. A man who was once petrified now arms himself with determination. He sees the aftermath with a sense of purpose, though still dressed in an unknowing plan of action. We as the audience must
see the battlefield differently. Though this determination is apparent, so is Holding’s little patience to provide something he thinks is utile. But I did not want to stop there in my depiction of the aftermath of Gettysburg, which saw over fifty thousand men die in three days, around the same number of American men who died in all of the Vietnam War. Combating the impatient determination of Holding is the fatigue and cynicism of the dead, a seemingly infinite increase of dying men. As Holding tries to figure out what to do, bored by the same types of photographs made during the Antietam campaign, he sees all around him the burying of bodies stretching in what seems like all directions towards the brumous horizon. To show both of these phenomena happening, interacting, and producing a more anxious environment, I crosscut between Holding and Grierson capturing monotonous images while companies of soldiers bury the dead. In addition, these soldiers who must take on this deplorable task are drunk and singing a contemporary tune, *John Brown’s Body*, a song that is in some way triumphant but in this context morbid.

As the crosscut accelerates, the images piling up on each other, Holding throws a fit, angry at the world, it seems. Another apparition of Margaret even appears, but instead of painful nostalgia, Holding responds with irk. In taking much liberty with the context surrounding the famous image of the rebel sharpshooter (see Figure 4), I externalize Holding’s maddening demeanor by having him move the body of a rebel soldier to a rocky nook similar to the one in the real photo (see Appendix A.2.). If he aims to control the situation, he forces this idea in the moment, harshly commanding his associate to help him relocate the corpse. Bantering ensues as Grierson, rather anachronistically, exclaims the image loses its truthfulness and Holding is taking advantage of his position as image-capturer. Their argument suddenly ceases when they hear a
groan. Under some pile of dead men near them, a wounded Union soldier lays. There is no other option but to transport the soldier using the darkroom carriage to the nearest field hospital.

It is here where Holding confronts the moment of brutal clarity. Among the dying and screaming, the field hospital is the last place Holding would want to linger; the decaying landscape teleports him back to the frightful moments of witnessing the death of his wife and daughter. But he must stay, he must stay to help the soldier through a harrowing amputation. He must stay to look after him as the nurses run through the human maze, overworked and exhausted. He must stay because this soldier asks him to. Overnight, Holding is sitting by the side of a man teetering between life and death. Eventually, the soldier falls into delusion and, subsequently, passes. It is not so much terror akin to the sensations felt in Antietam but rather a personal helplessness as he watches a human being slip away from his clutch yet again. In a most somber moment, the Civil War and Holding’s personal history intersect. When the soldier has no more breath to take, Holding refuses to let him be buried in the same way countless others are, unknown and disregarded. Realistically, he has no power over the funeral processions or lack thereof, but his photography perhaps can provide welfare in the afterlife. Rather than capture the image of the dead soldier as is, he plans on staging the dead body in a clean and orderly fashion. This will be his first (true) post-mortem photograph. Holding and an understanding nurse clean the body up and tidies his uniform, propping him up and lightly decorating a surrounding set. When the picture is taken, the moment is captured and, if we recollect the research done going into the writing process, potentially a spirit has been preserved. Holding was ready to return to the homefront once again.
Only the Dead Have Seen the End of War

Oliver Wendell Holmes published an essay on photography in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1863 as it pertains to teleporting war to the naïve eyes of those far from the Antietams and Gettysburgs, saying:

Let him who wishes to know what war is look at this series of illustrations. These wrecks of manhood thrown together in careless heaps or ranged in ghastly rows for burial were alive but yesterday. How dear to their little circles far away from them! - how little cared for here by the tired party whose office is cosign to them to the earth!

Holmes seems to scream of despair through his words, now bearing witness to the irreparable carnage wrought upon both the Earth and the human body. According to Professor J. David Hacker in a 2011 *New York Times* article, the number of casualties (soldiers, civilians, slaves based on census data) is well beyond 815,000. When I stated the intricacies involved in labeling my film as a war film, and knowing the drama conjured up by the intertwining of battlefront and homefront, maybe it is more accurate to consider *Camera Obscura* a war film of consequence. This is a war film not concerned with the blood-spilling mania of the battles themselves but of the number 815,000. War is a tremendous fissure, riving families apart and bastardizing death while granting a quagmire of fear and hatred to proliferate within the minds of all. And with an image, the indexical measurement where everyone can enjoy the ruthlessness, war seeps into households and stores and institutions. The persuasive power of the image was made clear in photography’s infancy and an axiom was, thus, born through violence: seeing is believing.

So if the populace can be convinced of the dishonorable nature of war through the realism of images, they may also be convinced of the assurance images may bring as well. In a way, the second part of Holding’s mission after returning from the pivotal battle in Pennsylvania is an unconscious effort to destigmatize the brutal honesty of the photographic image. The spirit
of the dead soldier may still be intact, preserved in the image to be returned to his family. And this re-contextualizes the image in a contrasting way to the Antietam exhibition hosted by Bronson.

After searching the name of this fallen soldier and what state he is from, Holding is able to take time from his work and visit the bereaved family. To do away with traditional narrative structure once again, I consider the *Camera Obscura* to have two climaxes or two points of dramatic radical shift. Not in the sense that each climax furnishes a question (will our hero do this or that?) but in the sense that Holding gains a level of understanding paramount to his character growth. The first climax is Holding’s decision to create a post-mortem image countering the dehumanizing aesthetic of war. He is finally able to face death truthfully, overcoming the suffocating fear of past trauma. The second climax is when he delivers this post-mortem image to the family of the deceased, witnessing the benefit of his work and erasing the idea of his own worthlessness. In an intimate and extended moment, Holding is able to truly confide in people who have gone through kindred tragedy. Thus, the unity of form and function within the photographic image and the historical circumstance of which it reigns creates the prospect that to heal himself Holding must help in the healing of others. It is played out as if Holding is meeting long-lost family members. They’ve never known each other’s existence, but at this moment, no one else understands each other better.

Grief expressed carries with it a lasting torture of living during times of self-destruction yet this last moment offers a glimpse of the communal bond through a shared experience, where even though the dead are the only ones to truly see the end of war, a refined closeness and respect between people may proliferate. Yes, idealism wins out over what seems to be insurmountable cynicism, but it is a reserved idealism, knowing full well the scale of the
problem cannot be easily solved. Holding laments at the limitations of his own mission, of all the people he could not document, of all the spirits still aimlessly wandering across landscapes of violence. All of these revelations and moments of clarity produce closure desired so vehemently by a protagonist withering from a self-imposed weakness. I’ve put Holding through a lot and, from time to time, that weird guilt as if I was sending my kid off to some boot camp enters into my mind. Writers can be conductors of some of the most bizarre forms of anguish. Yet, we can choose to save, and the end of Camera Obscura looks towards healing as Holding experienced. It is as vital a process as the process used to capture an image through the controlled obfuscation of the camera obscura.

By December of my first semester, I had a first draft completed as part of a plan to, at least, have two drafts finished before I graduated. It's a laborious task to crank out the first draft, like forging a new path in the white snow, each and every succeeding page white and empty. Yet, the difficulty in breaking ground pales in comparison to revisions. In this stage of the writing, you look upon all of the vomitus decisions you made in the name of, what you thought, was dramatic storytelling. It’s as if someone read to you an organized list of all the bad things you’ve done in your life, knowing full well what you have done and wanting to hear none of it. Editing was the gauntlet I was entering, armed only with a timid reluctance to visit scenes I thought were ‘perfect’ in my mind. No, I knew they were not perfect, but the alteration of my grand image still required a circumvention of personal obstacles. Revisions challenge the completed work, question the validity both logically and narratively, and instill humility within a writer. Reluctant as I was, I knew it was necessary.
Act Three: The Script Reborn and Beyond (Evaluation)

If the script for Camera Obscura was some sort of fortress once the first draft is completed, the rest of the life of the script is about the fortress withstanding a continuous and maybe infinite assault of critique, scorn, and double-guessing. That's not fair, actually, since there's much of this time devoted to polishing, amplifying, securing elements of the story so that depth and fullness and grace is created. In this case, I could speak ad infinitum about how I went through page by page to look for errors and illogical situations and dialogue. I'll forgo such exhaustive depictions and focus more on the general challenges, highlighting major changes and concerns that may or may not be still up in the air. In fact, some of the most important decisions are made after the first draft at least in this experience. Again, the first draft's goals are mainly getting something down on paper, forging that new path. Most of the time, the script is infested with the grammatical plague or cardboard dialogue written by malfunctioning computer A.I. To be bothered with that in the first draft, at least as far as perfection goes, will cause more collateral damage to your story than imagined. After the first draft, one could go crazy on the excruciating details.

Say What You Have to Say

One major improvement plan involved that cardboard dialogue. Okay, that is not to say I really consider my dialogue mundane and flimsy, but re-reading some pieces from my scenes, particularly the scenes I wrote cringing, gave me pains. Two scenes come to mind, one in the story's preface where Holding and Grierson, ten years after the major events took place, reminisce about their time as war photographers. I needed the dialogue to place hints on both thematic material and future events. In a whim of indecision and, perhaps, thoughtlessness, I
implemented the trope of the deceased’s object. In other words, Holding is always wearing or grasping a necklace of his dead wife. This is not my proudest moment, but I still have this implemented in the story. Anyways, our focus is on the dialogue. Consider this small but annoying example. In my second draft of the script, again regarding the preface scene between Grierson and Holding, the former proposes that Holding go with him to the West and photograph the exciting and relatively new landscapes. Through this, there is some light cogitating on photography. Between the second and third drafts, much was changed in this small moment. The necklace is referred to as an amulet in these excerpts.
HOLDING
A most generous offer, James. As much as I would love to accompany you, I am bound here.

GRIERSON
And continue to take these post-mortem images?

A quiet nod from Holding.

GRIERSON (CONT.)
Continue clasping that final memory.

Holding draws his breath and sticks out the necklace.

HOLDING
Like the necklace around my neck, that image is your archive for all your memories no matter what part of the world you walk upon.

James gives a smirk and nods once again, shifting his focus back on the image of his daughter. He then gets up and walks to a nearby table, placing the image carefully. In a satchel, he rummages through some papers.

HOLDING
(staring at necklace)
Yet it still carries so much weight.

Holding takes a sip of wine.

HOLDING
(whispering to himself)
Margaret. Eliza.

He carries a faint smile.

(CONTINUED)
CONTINUED:  

HOLDING
I don't know if that would help. I know what I know.

No answer. James returns and sits with another image in his hands.

GRIERSON
In regards to objects containing memories, I have here something that you may or may not have seen.

James hands him the image and Holding's eyes slowly widen upon inspection.

HOLDING
By Providence!

James looks at Holding sending his eyes across all corners of the image.

Close on the image, which shows four men standing together in a photography gallery. Two of them are James and Holding and they stand with two others.

HOLDING
The floodgates are open. I now remember this moment fondly.

Holding gives a big sigh.

GRIERSON
All a part of Bronson's photographic regiment at the time.

Close on Holding pointing to one of the men.

HOLDING
I have not seen Crawford in ages.

Beat.

HOLDING (CONT.)
Was this the day I met you?

GRIERSON
It might have been.

Holding gets up promptly and paces across the fireplace and chairs.

(CONTINUED)
CONTINUED: Revision 2

HOLDING
A most generous offer, James. As much as I would love to accompany you, I am bound here.

GRIERSON
I anticipated that answer and admire your allegiance.

HOLDING
I am sorry.

GRIERSON
Don’t apologize. I would have felt guilty not to have asked you.

Grierson gets up and walks to a nearby table, placing the image carefully. In a satchel, he rummages through some papers. Holding stares at the amulet.

GRIERSON (O.S.)
I have here another image. I’m not sure if you have laid your eyes upon it.

James hands him the image and Holding’s eyes slowly widen upon inspection.

HOLDING
By Providence!

James looks at Holding sending his eyes across all corners of the image.

Close on the image, which shows four men standing together in a photography gallery. Two of them are James and Holding and they stand with two others.

HOLDING
The floodgates are open. I now remember this moment fondly.

Holding gives a big sigh.

GRIERSON
All a part of Bronson’s photographic regiment at the time.

Close on Holding pointing to one of the men.

HOLDING
I have not seen Crawford in ages.

Beat.

(CONTINUED)
Allowing my insecurity to govern my writing for a moment, I see a very large pimple of text in the first rendition. Almost involuntarily, I groan anytime I read this portion. Maybe somebody somewhere in this universe likes this bit but my position in how I feel is adamantine. I am discussing the large portion of the second draft where Holding seems to lose himself in his philosophizing and musing on photographs, turning to the amulet and whispering remarks of his dead family members. “Like the necklace around my neck, that image is the archive for all your memories..” Holding says to Grierson referring to the post-mortem photograph taken of the latter’s deceased daughter. An acrid stench billows from this block of dialogue. Let me interpret this for you into what he really is saying: "Here is the theme of the story before anything has happened. I am profound so, please, revel in my elegance."

I know you can feel the overwhelming nature of my arrogant bias in critiquing my own work, so here is a balancing caveat; though script writing is indelibly crucial, it is only the first phase of the story being interpreted for the screen. The second is the directorial interpretation while the tertiary phase is popularly considered the edit. Of course, between these phases, other elements of film form show their hand in sculpting the story through their given characteristics, from color to sound design to the film’s score. As far as emphatic simplicity goes, those three phases are the most determinative. Having established this evolution in the story, I could forfeit my lack of confidence and allow the wretched piece of dialogue to pass through my scrutiny.
because perhaps the director can work with that dialogue and infuse a much-needed dose of naturalism into the stiff lines. So let us assume that sort of decision was made among the thousands of other decisions we as artists need to make before the film is projected on a big screen. Maybe the performance of the line was not adequate; the performer never made use of effective inflection or the face drooped, whatever. Maybe the line was delivered perfectly. An editor can simply choose to cut around such a line. Lines are dropped all the time and it only becomes noticeable for a spectator if they watch the film with the shooting script on their lap. Audiences are logically and inherently oblivious to such changes, so watching the film in the theatre gives no indication of the line ever existing. If there is a lesson in here it would be some decisions could be made later on in the production process. Indeed, it is always necessary to get your story as ‘right’ and prepared as possible before shooting but realize particulars in the story are never final until the projector runs the finished film.

Nevertheless, despite the nicety of such a tangent, the scope of my thesis excludes the interpretive phases of direction and editing; sitting at the computer returning to the cursed block of dialogue I forced myself to aspire for greater devastation of my work. It did not help that I had my protagonist whisper to himself, "Yet it still carries so much weight," ignorant of the fact that all of this being said will never be visualized in my story so I am setting something up that will not pay off; this is exposition not used as ammunition (a storytelling term often coined for useful exposition), but exposition used as shiftlessness. When comparing the second draft to the third moment by moment, you will see the whole embarrassing episode gone, thrown in the trash with other failed episodes, hopefully, to be forgotten hastily.

It must be said that quality is not the only determination towards cutting this part. My second draft was around 135 pages. As per the practical advice from my thesis committee, a goal
of mine was to get it around the 120-page mark, what the bulk of marketable films are structured to be. Even though I made many nontraditional choices for my story before, I figured I would get into the habit of abiding by some unwritten laws as a way to familiarize myself with industry trends while also forcing myself to think deeply upon the nature of my revisions.

With a metaphorical scythe, my first approach to cutting down the length of my script was to get rid of dialogue drenched in obtuseness. Slashing this way and that, I severed any sort of emotional tie I had with each of these lines. This example I have provided is one of the many that I could elaborate on (and there were many more in that same scene I changed); the implicative violence of the editing is more reasonable than you might think. I favored succinct lines that either explicitly say what a character is thinking because they need to be honest and open or the subtextual dialogue that hints more than it reveals. In the case of the above example, I ultimately favored an action of Holding staring at his necklace over him attempting some Shakespearean monologue. Quick with the addendum, in the case of my story, if I could reveal some facet of *Camera Obscura* and its world through action or visuals, I will gladly substitute that solution in for the one that banally announces with the spoken word.

**Tripped Up on Tropes**

Editing dialogue, changing scenes here and there are all natural alterations in the editing process. Since none of this can be done with stark rapidity, there is a tendency that on month number nine of writing and rewriting the script you find thematic problems you never considered when writing the first draft or a treatment for that matter. Internalized double-guessing may be the culprit for these newly developed doubts, but I would not throw them out on a whim. The next two sections of the dissertation are reserved for the two biggest concerns that have grown
with force in my mind as I had polished the story. These issues hold a visceral power because they fell on my lap while I was refining the story; a growing sense of confidence through refinement almost veiled my eyes from larger, external issues at play.

If you’ve read this far, you’ve probably developed an assumption that the story carries with it a lot of death, confirmed by much of the writing I dedicated to delineating Camera Obscura as not just a war film but a war film of consequence. To state a corollary, my film is about death, through and through; it’s fabricated into the threads of my reproduced historical world to meet my given thematic end. As calculated as my theme and presentation became, there is never a guarantee of the infallibility it might generate towards problems of depiction. Namely, is a film about death unable to escape the death trope?

To understand exactly how this anxiety is spawned, defining the trope is useful. Although one could quickly assume the Disposable Woman trope sets all of the story in motion, the more precise trope used is referred to as the Lost Lenore (from the Edgar Allen Poe’s The Raven). A loved one needs to have died before the beginning of the story and have a major impact on the emotional orientation of the protagonist. For clarification’s sake, the Disposable Woman trope kills off a woman usually in the film’s plot that abruptly changes the protagonist’s goals while the Lost Lenore kills off a character before the plot unfolds. Tropes are not inherently negative things to parse and admonish in order to hastily deem films as worthy or unworthy. Tropes are patterns identified among films that inform us of the time and place of which the film was created and the sensibilities governing the production. They become problematic as a tenuous form of manipulation to force a story into something it otherwise wouldn’t be. Care is substituted for convenient universality which harkens a false sense of gravity in moments as they run along a cursed link from the interchangeable plot device. Using a trope might be necessary, but here is
another instance where taking great care in your story is indispensable so that the trope can
snuggle in the swathe of the many story threads. Margaret, Holding’s wife, and Eliza, Holding’s
daughter, are the Lost Lenores quietly but assuredly dominating the way our protagonist looks at
the world.

What I have written is not set in stone, but the organization of motivation, conflict, and
goals had been intricately sorted out. Yet, I firmly believe I have failed to free myself from a
trope that some may see as baffling. It is one of the reasons I never want Holding to fall in love
again; I did not want the pain of his dead wife to become a function of intimacy with someone
who might feel something similar (a wife losing a husband in Antietam, perhaps). Maybe that is
still an unconvincing argument, but my confidence stems from a broader look at how death plays
in my story; maybe Holding is not the only one who yearns for a Lost Lenore. What he thinks is
a singular calamity forcing him into an isolated domicile is actually a relentless epidemic that
afflicted many other men and women. Essentially, the trope is expanded upon or unfortunately
propagated; many of the characters we meet have had someone die. And through this expansion,
my themes of the ‘Good Death,’ or the rupturing nature of war can be discussed. I felt the source
of these themes would seem all the more pronounced if the protagonist was familiar with death.
Hopefully the respect I have given to the themes and the trope satisfies readers and viewer.

**Whose Story?**

For most of America’s cinematic history, many films dealing with the Civil War often
left out the biggest reason for the conflict: slavery. Lack of any suitable narratives focusing on
African Americans and the Civil War is no doubt an issue we, as filmmakers, should correct.
Unfortunately, *Camera Obscura* is not a story with that focus. To say that this has kept me up at
night is not an exaggeration. I would turn in for the night after hours of writing the script or revising, happy with the changes I made, only to have that profane doubt lock my head in a nasty vice grip. My film only has one scene with a black man involved. Thus, the harsh truth is that they remain unseen. On one hand, I am completely unwavering to change my regard for historical accuracy. Yes, much of this accuracy is footnoted with amalgamations and dramatic conveniences so how much of that real history is debatable. But I drew a line in the sand with artistic choices, telling myself this story will be as close to what actually happened as my story allowed. For that reason, none of the photographers are black, as there were never any known black photographers present for these battles. And although there were many black soldiers fighting against those that oppressed them, many of the images are of white soldiers especially those that influence the images captured by my characters.

The lone scene is purposefully acute and I basically dramatize one of the most powerful images developed during the war. Before I get to the details of the scene I need to elaborate on the motivations that brought me this idea. A name like William Harvey Carney probably does not ring any bells for most people though his story is one that desperately needs its own story. Carney was the first black man to receive the Medal of Honor having fought in the assault at Fort Wagner, the same assault depicted in the film *Glory* of which William Harvey Carney is nonexistent. He was also born a slave, though such a disadvantage did not impede upon him living a life well-spent. He is also the subject of an image that left an incredible impression on me at a young age. Carney stands proudly upright, though leaning to his right just slightly. Supporting him on one side is his cane, most likely from the wounds he suffered in battle. In his other hand, he holds the American flag diagonally. For at least the first three drafts of my script, I had a previous idea where Holding and Crawford would encounter a runaway slave and
photograph the scarred back seen in another famous image taken by Southern photographers. For the most part, it was a satisfying choice comforted by the potential ignorance of the significance this one scene would express. When I stumbled upon Carvey eventually, his photograph nagging me from the recesses of my memory, I made a realization that might have exposed itself more obviously to others. If I were to make this decision and only feature one scene with a black person in my story, why show someone the immediate and well-known costs of slavery, highlighting the struggle of black people for my protagonist. With Carvey as an influence, I could contextualize his image into my story, of which a black soldier, wounded and crippled, is proud and determined.

Admittedly, this is not a justification for the shortcoming of narrative marginalization. This requires more contemplation and discourse with peers that are more sensitive and have greater stakes in such consequences than I do. 'To be continued,' is an apt description of this issue, one that has a habit to nag me from time to time presently. Compromise must be made between historical precision and dramatic awareness. Either way, I hold true many of the major decisions sculpting this narrative, even its predominantly white cast, for it is the story I wanted to tell so long ago, and there is a thematic interest I want to pursue. Maybe the best solution is to encourage marginalized stories from others who are more qualified. Or maybe that is an inexcusable deflection. Creating stories can be arduous as much as they can be addicting; that is the sort of combination that makes for what can only be described as sadomasochism. In similar fashion to the proliferation of the Lost Lenore trope, I hope to acknowledge potential shortcomings due to the restrictions placed with these tropes while continuing to craft a story respectful of the content and mindful of how I can still create benefit with such a structure. Whether or not that convinces anybody is certifiably debatable.
A Rehearsal of a Brief Sense

If there is something to be said about the academic context for which my thesis is being created it would be the obscurity of direction. Fault can be placed on me, but sometimes it was difficult to know what was expected of a scriptwriter. Inherently, we come into the final year at a disadvantage. While animators and live action will have something to show by the end of the year, a tangible product that a future employer or some investor can see that will make a decision based on the results. In other words, when SOFA screenings roll along towards the anxious-ridden end of the Spring semester, those films can be critiqued and discussed. The artist can learn from it and on to their next project. For a screenwriter, screenings are a time where they can share a dollop of a story, show a scene they filmed haphazardly, and hopefully garner one or two whims of criticism that hopefully will not encapsulate the suggestion of changing the entire story. Audience members have no preparation for any script and thus can only react from a synoptic presentation. In this case, our works do not have a definitive ending, doubly so when considering any aspirations we might attach to our work after screenings including selling the script or submitting to festivals. Each of these options requires more re-writing but SOFA policy only requires a screenwriter to complete one draft by the end of the thesis year. While that is in no way an easy thing to do, it is certainly not an optimal thing to do. Leaving out revisions in an academic year used to indicate all that you have learned previously is almost counterintuitive. Hence the decision to finish the year with a second draft completed. Even so, the only thoughtful critiques I would be expecting came from my thesis committee.
Relative to most other students, this sort of expectation places screenwriters in a creative limbo. Unsung filmmakers might be an understatement to describe the position screenwriters are pigeonholed into within the department. Yet, with enough determination, writing is writing no matter the initial recognition, and the lack of any source of limelight did not bother me.

Screenwriters would also need to present a scene of their script via a recorded script read. Script reads are exactly what they sound, except laboriously boring an audience that has no inclinations of the story consists of. At an average of ten minutes for a given scene, there is nothing enticing about watching actors read a script among the hundreds of films that need to be screen in the next several days. Beginning even in the Fall semester, I desired to, at the very least, present something that at least the audience can gravitate towards, something that will be less likely to induce sleep. Since there were technically no limitations to what I showed save for the length, I opted to shoot a rehearsal of a pivotal scene, namely, the passing of the soldier at the field hospital. Having actors act out parts seemed more flattering than sitting and reading.

Additionally, I wanted a narrator to read the action (anything in the script that is not dialogue, essentially) and have the narrator be a character in the scene, creating this reflexive and postmodern rendition of a scene for a script yet to be complete. In my own world, it was gleefully ambitious, warping the system that creates low expectations. In the reality outside of my own egotism, it never really mattered, but at least it made for interesting conversation whenever I had to explain it.

So, for one day on one of the last weekends of the semester, I rounded up probably my best crew I have ever had when shooting a film, an ironic realization that only induces an exaggerated sigh from me. I rounded up a cast, though I’d rather not unearth many of the details involving casting since I buried them immediately after shooting; dealing with actors, with no
offense intended, is one aspect of production I don’t miss when writing in solitude. The shoot
day went very well and, for maybe the first time, I assumed the role of a director without the
curse of multitasking, a petulance inflicting shoots with very little help. A notable technique
utilized is the initial shot, which sets the rehearsal stage while also revealing the deliberate
reflexivity of the piece; the camera begins on the narrator, who presents the scene. The camera
pulls back and, with the lights slowly brightening, we see Holding and the dying soldier. The rest
of the piece is standard fare, occasionally cutting between the narrator and the action.
Interestingly enough, I was wholesomely content with what I made, though this contentedness
was acknowledged by others if they knew the limiting context of its creation, which most didn’t.

Either way, screenings were inevitable and I presented my thesis with nervous
professionalism. The scarce comments to come from the crowd were positive, but nothing
insightful or remotely revelatory. No malice was generated inside me, I expected such a
response. With that, I graduate, but graduation may be a turning point, an act change, to most,
but if we are concerning my script, there was nothing terminal about graduation.

Summer Coda

Similar to the previous year (time seems to move at two times the speed of light), the
impending summer offered opportunities of continual work. Moreover, there was another
deadline I could aim for, applying another writing milestone. In early August 2017, I was to go
to the University Film and Video Association conference in Los Angeles. There, I was to present
my script to a small committee to have a scene read and critiqued. I generated a third draft in
June and July, impossibly alternating between Camera Obscura and a script adaptation I was
writing on spec (I was being paid just to write a draft). Many writers advise against writing
multiple scripts simultaneously, I would add my name to that list of sagacious practitioners.

Having to mentally shift gears between two intricately detailed narratives is taxing.

Somehow there was perseverance and I flew to Los Angeles for the first time with an incredibly naïve curiosity for the city and an insatiable focus on having my script critiqued. Though the attendance at my presentation was very small, my respondent, who had the task of reading my script, gave me a few elucidations that I did not see so clearly. My respondent harped on the notion of lying and the authenticity of the photographic image; he made clear the ways in which characters lie in the film to benefit others. Although I contemplated in a jovial repose days after this critique, I also lamented the possibility of more people joining in on the ritual.

After the conference, I had to temporarily deem Camera Obscura on sabbatical while I finished with the other script and the new year of school started up. I am at a slippery point where the motivation and passion for this project could abruptly deflate to make way for impending ideas overwhelming my artistic psyche. Trust when I say these ideas are flagrantly intoxicating, tempting me to release my grasp of the script I’ve worked on for just over a year. Yet, I have not slipped, holding my own for some rush of newfound enthusiasm. The minimal effort I’d like to apply on the script would be to try out festivals and competitions; consider it a guinea pig in a professional world, eventually educating me on the ways in which a script can be noticed and succeed on the festival circuit, or how a script can crash and burn in the void of obliviousness.

We now rest in the present, observing the writer continue to forge a new path in their creative ambitions, uncertain in what the outcome may be but determined to narrow the range of possibilities for the outcome, increasing the probability of good fortune. A thesis script, or the thesis year in general, is never an ending point highlighting the culmination of academic
achievement. It is not a starting point either, igniting the movement towards a lifetime goal both romanticized yet visceral. *Camera Obscura* is merely a point, a beat change in a scene that I seek to gain control over, part of a process that is being made up along the way. Attached to this beat change is a more intimate relationship with the writing medium, with words and syntax and structure. Language has inflated tremendously in a similar fashion to the theoretical beginnings of the universe itself, offering me an almost infinite wealth of artistic possibilities while validating the overwhelming sense of aimlessness. The point is that, amidst the whole, frightening universe that surrounds me, or language, prose, and imagery, I remain bizarrely fixated before a mirror staring at myself with an awkwardness that makes people repulsed. Am I able to parse out a figment of a post-mortem photographer? Can I reign in the expanse of the written universe into a brief moment of a Civil War story? There is, indeed, a power writers have in concocting stories from an unlimited landscape, a power that can be misused, or misjudged. While writing the script I often found myself thinking of the ways in which I created a breathing world of historical rootage, dealing with its own conflicts and turmoil, and that individuals lived in this world. Somehow, maybe in a loosely symbolic manner, I can see such details in my reflection, the willingness to animate objects and characters originally isolated and immobile. It is a completely vulnerable experience, but to be the writer I strive diurnally to be, I must accept facing myself and my most humbling vulnerability.
Appendix

A.1: Screenshots from Rehearsal Shoot
The following are screenshots of the rehearsal shoot produce at the end of the Spring semester in my Thesis year. Shot on an Arriflex D-21 by Jacob Mallin.

Title shot, overtly announcing the continuation of the creative process and the acknowledgement as a rehearsal.
Rather than try to create an authentic portrayal of 1860s America for a rehearsal, I opted on emphatic reflexivity, revealing all of the means of production that made the rehearsal possible, setting the stage as something inauthentic.

Greg Ludek plays Rutherford Holding, witnessing the passing of a soldier, reliving a moment he tried to repress for many years. The soldier, Lt. Porter, is played by Nate Taylor.
Furthering reflexivity, Dana Paxson plays the narrator, a position not in the actual film. Paxson literally reads the scripts action and direction. The other ‘characters’ are not aware of his presences but he looks upon the scene with serene omniscience.

Holding meticulously sets the scene of his first post-mortem photograph, unobtrusively confronting death.
This short was screened May 2017 to a full house. Although it was not required for me to shoot something of this nature, I wanted to engage in implementing a scene as something more than being read.
A.2: Historical Reference

*Camera Obscura* maintains a historical integrity despite its dramatic manipulations. There are many real photographs I used as points of narrative contextualization, offering moments or scenes in my script that surround the making of these photographs. All photos were shot by Alexander Gardner unless otherwise noted. All photos are from the National Park Service unless, again, otherwise noted.

The white house in the background is the Dunkard Church, riddled with bullets and artillery. The Dunkards were said to be pacifists.
A grisly image of a dead soldier…can someone look at this image and make out who this man is?

The sunken road, its appellation being ‘Bloody Lane,’ is a makeshift burial for hundreds or thousands of soldiers. In the script, this is where Holding sees the apparition of his wife tending to the wandering spirits.
One of the most fascinating, if not depressing, finds in my research had to do with an image of a dead horse of a Confederate general. Does it not look alive? Even more so, does it not look to be at peace? There is possibly a bullet wound in its midsection, but the posture of the horse suggests something perpendicular to the chaos of which this horse had fallen. Discovered in a New York Times article, ‘The Dead at Antietam,’ by Terry L. Jones, the image’s original source is from the Library of Congress.
One of the most famous images of Gettysburg, also shot by Alexander Gardner, of a rebel sharpshooter. There is speculation as to the authenticity of this image, wherein the photographers may have moved the body. From the Museum of Modern Art Online Collection.
The photo of William H. Carney that settled into my mind for most of my life, only to resurface with potent force upon writing my script. Source: National Museum of African American History and Culture

A.3: Thesis Proposal

Camera Obscura
A Screenplay by Dan LaTourette

Thesis Proposal
MFA Screenwriting
School of Film and Animation
Rochester Institute of Technology
Rochester, NY

Approved for Submission by:
Logline

Struggling to overcome the pain of his dead wife, a 19th-century photographer, during the midst of the Civil War, tries to figure out how to use his vocation as a means of moving on.

Rationale

Many different personal motifs converge in this story, a war story of sorts. Interest in the creative process; in this case, the photographic process early on in the development of photography and its laborious and tedious methodology that we take for granted today. Interest in perception; within the development of the medium, how does photography change the way we look at something, anything. Photography was still very young in the advent of the Civil War and although it wasn’t the first war to be photographed it was the first to be readily captured and proliferated to the public. What is the significance of documenting the generals, the soldiers at camp, and, most provocatively, the dead? Lastly, there is certainly an interest in telling a story, within the context of a popular wellspring of stories that is the Civil War, about individuals who are usually not the first people we associate with the event. This story is not about the soldiers and generals or politicians. It is not even about the slaves. Instead, we turn our gaze upon people who knowingly expand the expectations of an evolving medium, who arrive after the battle has been fought, and hold with them invaluable documents of a horrid episode in American history.

Most importantly, though, it is a human story. All my films explore the ambiguities of humanity, a complexity that tempts to be simplified but only manages to reveal itself as more complicated. The complexities I want to explore in this story combine the philosophical significance of photography and the image (as in, what does it really mean to look at a photograph...is it a memory? Is it dead? Is it unchanging?) and the struggle to move on from a painfully anchoring past. It is a history film but the facts lie more in the ideas and implications of the historical event rather than the accuracy of notable moments and figures, although the photographic process, itself, will be depicted as accurately as possible. Indeed, the protagonist
will be a conglomeration of famous photographers, yet it is their ambition and discoveries he will embody and his conflict lies in what it all means.

So as we look back upon the first time a war has been broadcasted to a populace, we can place its contemporary relevance in how we view wars, atrocities, and just any image for that matter. We can link back to the impact television and news had on the Vietnam War. *Camera Obscura* is a human film about one man’s strife with loss, a historical film about Civil War photography and the ramifications, and it is a modern film about the way in which we perceive these images of war and chaos and internalize the information presented.

**Treatment**

Philadelphia, 1872, we are inside of a photography studio as Rutherford Holding is carefully turning the head of a little girl, which is caressed by the arms of her mother who sits there watching somberly. It is revealed that the little girl is dead and Rutherford Holding is no ordinary photographer: he is a post-mortem photographer. Holding gently directs the mother in how she should look at her deceased daughter who likes like she’s sleeping. Another man, the husband, named James Grierson, sits by the camera watching in complete fixation.

The mother comments on the gracefulness of Holding’s direction. Holding places the daughter’s arm on her mother’s as if exhibiting a lovingness. A tear begins to roll down the mother’s cheek. Holding waves Grierson to come over. Instinctively, he walks behind his wife and places a reassuring hand on her shoulder. Holding nods and begins walking towards the camera; an assistant prepares a plate. Holding looks through the viewfinder; an upside-down image appears of the family. Holding then is given the plate, prepares the camera, and readies the family. The picture is shot. Grierson thanks him warmly, and it is revealed through their mutual reminiscent that Grierson was an assistant for Holding during the Civil War. As they talk late into the night, the smell of alcohol from Grierson’s opened bottle sends Holding’s memories back.

Flashback: Vermont, 1861. Holding downs some whiskey as he fiddles with his camera obscura. His studio is sort of a mess. Holding captures an image of an old man with a long white beard. He is seated right next to a painting of his. After the capture, the man asks if copies can be made for his family. Holding apologizes as he can only afford enough paper for one copy per
patron. Holding, living in Vermont, runs a small-time studio and struggles to make ends meet with the photography fees and rent he must pay for the building. It is more difficult when he spends much of his income on booze, in which the bottles of alcohol mix with the bottles of chemicals. His life is lived in this redundant melancholy. We see him go to a gravesite, bottle in hand, and sit by a tombstone, reading ‘Margaret Holding 1824-1859.’ Holding talks to the tombstone as if it was alive, albeit drunkenly.

One day, Holding gets a knock on his door, he was sleeping in the studio of which he works. Grumpily, he opens the door, his face widens. Matthew Brody stands before him, a man who has made the most famous photography studio and gallery on the east coast. Brody proposes Holding come down to Washington D.C. and help him photograph the swelling and youthful Civil War. At one point, Holding was Brody’s apprentice. After a pass of surprise, doubt, and confusion, Holding is convinced.

At Washington D.C., going through the expansive real estate of Brody’s company, Holding meets Jebediah Crawford. Holding will be an assistant to Crawford early on. Soon, they head out with the Army of the Potomac under the command of Gen. McClellan.

September, 1862. The Battle of Antietam has come and gone, leaving a devastating landscape of corpses and smoke. Crawford and Holding, with a wagon passing as their darkroom, hastily move among the dead, placing the camera in strategic locations, capturing the moments of chaos. Crawford would take the image and give the plate to Holding and he would quickly enter the wagon and develop the image. It was a hot day and sweat, smoke, and chemicals mixed as Holding worked in the cramped confines of the wagon. At one point, though, as Holding is giving Crawford a plate, he spots a woman in white standing so gently among the grey and dark blue corpses. “Margaret,” whispers Holding as his eyes widen. This woman, or spectre, Margaret, lifts her hand up when suddenly Crawford shouts to Holding to take the exposed plate. Ultimately, they would take thirty pictures of the aftermath. In the evening, some miles away from the trifled hills and scorched trees, Holding and Crawford drink to their work. Crawford asks how Holding entered into the field of photography, in which he states that his father was interested in it, recalling a time where he and his father stood quietly inside of a dark room as the camera obscura projected an upside image of the Vermont wilderness around them.

The two travel back to Washington with the photographs. Meeting up with Brody, they begin developing an exhibition of the battle images, making decisions on frames, captions, and
the assembly of the images in the exhibit space. Holding, not sure how to approach the 
dramatization of such content, is taught by Brody the way in which a spectator can be drawn in 
by giving each image their own story. Although Holding is suspicious of fabrication, Brody 
merely suggests it is, “...a manner of sympathy for the departed.”

October 1862, the exhibition is open to the general public. Flocks of curious and cautious 
spectators make their way into the Brody gallery space as the photographs from Antietam as well 
as others documenting the Army of the Potomac between battles, dot the walls. Some are small 
images, others large, but many of them are stereoscopic, forcing the spectator to view the double-
images with specialized lenses, producing a three-dimensional image. Holding, Brody, and 
Crawford greet and observe their patrons and focus on their reactions. A sense of awe 
encompassed the majority of the people but also distributed is a sense of uncertainty and power. 
A woman peers close to one of the images. Maybe it is her grief taking control but maybe she is 
on to something, but as she looks closely her eyes widen and mouth opens. “That is my son!” she 
proclaims with much volume. Her husband, who investigates the image, says there is no way to 
tell. Nevertheless, the woman gets caught up with the idea and breaks down. “I want to hold him 
in my arms again!” The husband unsuccessfully consoles her. Holding, witnessing this 
intensifying moment, steps in. Speaking tenderly to the bereaved mother, he exclaims he 
understand how she feels and, “...your son, in that image, died for the Union cause and died 
bravely.” He further consoles her, wrapping his arm around her; the scene dies down in the 
gallery and the rest of the spectators return to the images. Brody later tells Holding, “...is it 
deceitful to give such reassurance and certainty to those who suffer from this war?”

Crawford is assigned to the Southern front, following the likes of Gen. Grant whose army 
is marching towards Vicksburg. Brody asks Holding to fill the role of Crawford following the 
Potomac and to have a new assistant, James Grierson, a Scotsman eager to learn photography. 
Holding, with reserved excitement, agrees. As the new couple tag along the swiftly moving 
army, Grierson must deal with the heavy drinking of Holding who, since the scene at the 
exhibition, has remained unfocused and cynical.

July, 1863. The Confederate army, chasing the retreating Union army, meet at a small 
Pennsylvania town of Gettysburg. Three days of atrocity proceed and when the cannon fire has 
subsided, the photographers step in. With their wagon, Holding and Grierson move through the 
small, winding lanes of grass between groups of dead bodies. It is already late in the day, with
Holding indecisive. They eventually spot a dead sharpshooter lying on the ground away from other groups of corpses. Holding stands over the corpse for a moment. “Grierson, lend a hand,” he shouts to the wagon. Holding explains that he intends to carry the body of this soldier to the rocky nook at the top of the hill and place it there for a more visceral photograph. Grierson protests and complains about the validity of such a photo. Holding doesn’t want to hear such things and explains that, “No matter where he is placed, his death was at this battlefield.” Grierson is not convinced and they begin shouting at each other, though they do so as they prepare the shot with Holding leaning the soldier’s gun on the rocks near him. Holding is about to take the picture when Grierson’s ranting breaks him, he lashes out at Grierson, “What do you know about death? About the dead?” Holding goes on to say that he really began venturing into photography after his wife had died. The pain of the changing memories of her created an obsession to freeze and capture memories and moments that do not change, like the photographic image. Nevertheless, it has only fed an obsession tormenting him and this photography has not eased his pain much. He is still searching for relief, essentially, a way to let go.

Grierson is stunned by the paralyzing revelations but such awe is interrupted by a faint voice they both hear. A groan next, and the two photographers run towards a pile of corpses. Removing some of the bodies reveal a Union soldier coughing and groaning. He has been shot near the heart and has bled extensively but he is still alive. Holding and Grierson quickly clear the darkroom wagon to lay the injured soldier in. They travel to the nearest field hospital, a temporary location sprawling with blood and the screams of the dying. Holding and Grierson carry the man to the first available doctor, though the doctor’s hands are full at the time so the two wait with the man. Holding, hand firmly in hand with the soldier’s, utters words of encouragement. The soldier, slightly delirious, begs for his family. Grierson steps up and applies pressure to his wound. The doctor finally arrives and looks at him. He turns him over to see that there is an exit wound. Coupling such a finding with the amount of blood loss, the doctor is almost openly pessimistic. Holding speaks closely with the soldier, introducing himself as a photographer. The soldier, with much difficulty, asks if there was a way to take a picture of him, alive or dead, to give to his family. Holding affirms such a possibility but the man grimaces, breathes heavily, and dies. Holding, trying to hold back tears, backs away. He eventually sends Grierson for the camera.
With the doctor’s permission, Holding takes the soldier’s body and opens up his coat, cleaning the wound as well as his face. He sits the soldier up at a chair and uses an extra tripod and another holding device to prop the soldier’s head up. Carefully, though his hand shakes, Holding opens the eyes of the soldier, places his arms in a way that look welcoming, and puts his gun next to him. Grierson brings the camera, and eventually Holding takes an image of the dead soldier, who now looks to be at peace.

Back in D.C., Brody is a little disappointed with the small number of images captured in Gettysburg, though content with the quality of those images. Since there is not enough pictures to create another exhibition yet, Brody insists they continue to follow the army but Holding declines, as the war has become too traumatic. Besides, he wishes to deliver the developed image to the family of the fallen soldier. Brody understands. Holding says goodbye to the to Brody and Grierson, the latter returning to war.

Holding manages to track down the family and with a careful approach and wording, Holding reveals the picture taken of their son upon his death. The family, at first unsure of how to react, becomes immersed in the vitality of the image and the mother and father smile as they take in the opportunity to see their boy one more time. They compliment Holding on the quality of the image in which Holding humbly rejects. Nevertheless, he is changed by such a moment.

Holding returns to Brody, who is surprised to see him here, and pitches the idea of opening his own post-mortem photographic studio. “For me to keep on moving forward, for my wife, helping people is such a way can ease my pain.” Brody likes the idea and likes even more that Holding is doing it and offers to help fund the business.

Later on, maybe after the end of the war, Holding returns to the graveyard, to his wife’s tombstone, and talks to Margaret with more optimism and without the use of alcohol. “My memory may fade, but I still will know that I have spent part of my life with you, and now, that is enough to make me happy.” The sun begins to set on the quiet patch of land of the dearly departed.
Vision

_Camera Obscura_ is, essentially, a war film. Yet, it is a war film in which focus is applied to the aftermath, the consequence, and to the people that end up tormented by the amount of death involved. We will never actually see a battle but at the same time the battle is always there. In a way, we see the Civil war through the eyes of the people at the exhibition, who can only forge any thought of the event through the photographs made by Holding and Grierson. Other than that, the war is like a menacing void their kids go to vanish, never to be seen again. Most of the time the families never see the faces of their fallen sons and are at the mercy of their volatile but otherwise fading memory. And that is another battle waging, a battle being fought not by the soldier but by the photographers, who see that to combat the fleeting nature of memory, they need to capture images of moments and individuals gone by. Thus, the main character, who is struggling to move on from the death of his wife, faces this same conflict, a way in which he can ease his pain through the significance of photography. Though it takes some time, he finds it in easing the pain of others who have experienced similar trauma by photographing their passed loved ones. As a story filled with death, and to use a cliche that, in turn, will become a pun, it is apt to say that in this story, “Only the dead have seen the end of war,” and the struggle is how to help the living which, I believe, makes this story more about life, itself.
The picture on the left is an example of 19th century post-mortem photography while the picture on the right is a famous Civil War photo, 'Home of the Sharpshooter,' shot by Alexander Gardner, one of the inspirations for the Rutherford Holding character.

**Ideal Timeline**

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**Budget**

Reflects “worst-case scenario” in anticipated costs if I did shoot a scene from the script (as opposed to shooting a reading).

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Bibliography
