Doing Rhetorical History of the Visual: 
The Photograph and the Archive

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DEFINING VISUAL RHETORICS: PRODUCT OR PROCESS?

Consider two rhetorical documents, both appearing at approximately the same moment in history. The first, President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s second inaugural address, is a text memorable not only for its association with the era’s most towering rhetorical figure, but also for its unique use of visual language. Roosevelt’s famous “one third of a nation” incantation comes at the end of a series of paragraphs in which Roosevelt outlines the ways in which conditions have improved since he first took the oath of office in 1933. On that day, Roosevelt reminds the audience, “We dedicated ourselves to the fulfillment of a vision—to speed the time when there would be for all the people that security and peace essential to the pursuit of happiness” (127). Now, in 1937, Roosevelt outlines the accomplishments of his first administration, then poses a pressing question: “Let us ask again: Have we reached the goal of our vision of that fourth day of March 1933? Have we found our happy valley?” Speaking as an omniscient narrator with all the available facts before him, Roosevelt literally tells us what he sees: “I see a great nation, upon a great continent, blessed with a great wealth of natural resources. Its hundred and thirty million people are at peace among themselves; they are making their country a good neighbor among the nations” (130). But the President also sees something more troubling:

But here is the challenge to our democracy: In this nation I see tens of millions of its citizens—a substantial part of its whole population—who at this very moment are denied the greater part of what the very lowest standards of today call the necessities of life. I see millions of families trying to live on incomes so meager that the pall of family disaster hangs over them day by
day, I see millions whose daily lives in city and on farm continue under conditions labeled indecent by a so-called polite society half a century ago. I see millions denied education, recreation, and the opportunity to better their lot and the lot of their children. I see millions lacking the means to buy the products of farm and factory and by their poverty denying work and productiveness to many other millions. I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished. (130–131)

This vivid litany fresh in its listeners' minds, the eternally optimistic Roosevelt hastens to add, "It is not in despair that I paint you that picture. I paint it for you in hope—because the Nation, seeing and understanding the injustice in it, proposes to paint it out." (131). In describing the conditions of the present and defining a plan for the future, Roosevelt speaks with a visual rhetoric, relying on the trope of **ekphrasis** to describe the scene, to literally make the audience see through his eyes.

Now let us consider another document from early 1937 that also visualizes conditions of poverty for its audience (see Fig. 9.1). In March 1937 LOOK, the new and popular picture magazine, published a two-page feature on conditions for sharecroppers in the American south ("Children of the Forgotten Man"). The feature used six images made by government photographers working for the Historical Section of the Farm Security Administration (FSA), an agency charged with managing and alleviating chronic rural poverty in the United States. As framed in the LOOK feature, the FSA photographers' images visualize to a great extent that which Roosevelt's second inaugural address paints in words. Using the trope of the "forgotten man," LOOK vividly visualizes Roosevelt's anxiety about current conditions of chronic poverty.

Both Roosevelt's speech and the LOOK layout are explicitly rhetorical documents in that they are products of what Thomas Farrell calls "the collaborative art of addressing and guiding decision and judgment" (1) though we could certainly argue about what specific judgments or decisions each would guide us to make. Both constitute visual rhetorics as well, Roosevelt relying upon **ekphrasis** in the context of a Western linguistic tradition steeped in ocularcentrism, LOOK deploying techniques of graphic design alongside the products of photographic practice. Yet, apart from these similarities, we probably would not consider these documents to be very similar; indeed, the differences might matter for a rhetorician interested in constructing a critical account. From the point of view of methodology, we may feel more comfortable engaging Roosevelt's textual picture drawn in the second inaugural than we are engaging the FSA's pictorial text in LOOK magazine. In the case of the LOOK feature, it may simply be less clear as to how we should proceed.

In the early 1990s, when I began work on the rhetorical aspects of visual culture, library searches of relevant databases turned up few responses to the search term, visual rhetoric. Today, however, a similar search suggests that vi-
usal rhetoric has gained currency in a range of scholarly contexts, including that of rhetorical studies. Yet, as the editors of this volume note in their introduction, increased use of a term does not necessarily constitute a universally accepted meaning; thus, the search for definitions, even broad ones, is useful. The first, and perhaps most obvious, way is to define visual rhetoric as a product—a proper noun, if you will—that names a category of rhetorical discourse that relies on something other than words or text for the construction of its meaning. Thus a photograph would constitute visual rhetoric insofar as it consists of non-textual or non-discursive features. But there are at least two problems with defining visual rhetoric as product. First, such a definition implies that there are substantial differences between "word" and "not-word." Jacques Derrida's discussions of the visual nature of writing as grapheme have reminded us that such distinctions are theoretically tenuous at best, not to mention pragmatically difficult to sort out in the context of real-life rhetorical activity. In addition, the construction of a category or genre of visual rhetoric has the perhaps unintended consequence of reinforcing the subordinate status of visuality in the contexts of rhetorical culture. That is, visual rhetoric is defined always to be visual rhetoric, whereas verbal rhetoric, or textuality, gets to be just rhetoric. Although it is understandable why some would want to privilege the oft-neglected visual in rhetorical studies, such distinctions may in the end reproduce the hierarchies that have discouraged analysis of the visual all along. Rather than focus on what makes the visual distinct, then, we might question instead why the two need to be separated in the first place. Following W. J. T. Mitchell's contention that "all media are mixed media" (98), David Blakesley and Collin Brooke observe that we might instead start "seeing visuality and textuality not as isolated phenomena, but as sharing a deeper level: some common roots in perceptual and linguistic processes" (2).

In order to make this move, however, we need to define visual rhetoric as something more than merely a genre or category or product. I offer that we conceptualize visual rhetoric as a mode of inquiry, defined as a critical and theoretical orientation that makes issues of visuality relevant to rhetorical theory. As a mode of inquiry, the visual rhetoric project would urge us to explore our understandings of visual culture in light of the questions of rhetorical theory and at the same time encourage us to reconsider aspects of rhetorical theory in light of the persistent problem of the image. As I have noted elsewhere (following W. J. T. Mitchell and others), such work "relies upon critiques of visio and visuality to illuminate the complex dynamics of power and knowledge play in and around images ... embraces the complexities of the relationship between images and texts and argues that visual images should not be artificially separated from texts for analysis" (Finneigan, "Documentary as Art" 39).

One goal (though not the only goal) of such inquiry might be the construction of a rhetorical history that accounts systematically for the ways in which images become conventional resources in the public sphere. This chapter argues for a method of doing rhetorical history of visual images that accounts for images as history as well as images in history. In doing so, it poses the question, "What is the place of rhetorical history in visual rhetoric?" Although others have proposed schema for the rhetorical study of images, this account is different in that it seeks explicitly to demonstrate how the rhetorical historian might engage the visual. In what follows, I model a way of doing rhetorical history of the visual by turning to the example of FSA photography as it was mobilized in LOOK. Through that analysis, I argue that those interested in visual culture may benefit if they mobilize the tools of rhetorical history to sort out three moments in the life of an image for which a critic must account: production, reproduction, and circulation. Using the example of the LOOK layout, I demonstrate how the rhetorical historian of images might make just such an accounting and how that accounting may deepen our understanding of the history in and around this body of photographs.

Rhetorical History Meets the Artifacts of Visual Culture

Although public address studies in the discipline of Speech Communication are decades-old, the practice of rhetorical history (often framed in the guise of "American Public Address") has a conflicted past. While Kathleen J. Turner argues that the past 30 years or so produced theory-driven criticism that de-emphasized historical work as "mere history" (1), David Zarefsky argues such a reading smacks of "strange defensiveness." The practice of rhetorical history, Zarefsky contends, is alive and well in a thriving culture of public address studies: "Even a casual inspection of journals and books will suggest that good historical scholarship in rhetoric does get published and that it attracts a healthy audience" (19). For Zarefsky, the danger is not the absence of historical work, but the undue attention paid to "distinctions that do not matter." For example, Zarefsky argues that traditional distinctions between criticism and history are unimportant, for if historical scholarship is sophisticated enough it will produce "critical judgment" that renders distinctions between history and criticism "superfluous" (22). Similarly, distinctions between history and theory are equally problematic because they erroneously imply that historical scholarship should be "noninterpretive and self-contained" rather than address the pertinent "so what?" questions of a given field (23).

Distinctions that do matter, for Zarefsky, are those that enable us to sort out the different senses of the term, rhetorical history. Understanding these senses is important, he observes, "useful not only for boundary drawing but for understanding the richness of our field" (26). Zarefsky goes on to outline four senses of rhetorical history: the history of rhetoric, the rhetoric of history, the historical study of rhetorical events, and the rhetorical study of historical events. I will set aside the first two in the list, for only Zarefsky's third and fourth senses are relevant to my argument in this chapter. In the historical study
of rhetorical events (sense #3), discourse is studied "as a force in history," as a part of the history of a culture, or as a microcosm for history itself (30). Using such an approach, a critic might study the history of terms relevant to particular instances of rhetorical discourse, attempt to uncover the history of the production of a text, or look for patterns in discourse that "suggest a rhetorical trajectory" (29). To return to an example with which this chapter began, the rhetorical historian might study the rhetorical event of Roosevelt’s second inaugural address from an historical perspective by engaging the text in light of Roosevelt’s general speech practices and looking for common themes, key terms, or arguments. One can imagine using the speech to construct a rhetorical portrait of Roosevelt himself, attempting to understand the rhetorical practices of the most dominant figure of the era by studying this speech as a microcosm of them. One might even tease out the process of composition of the text itself, utilizing archival materials to demonstrate the origins of particular phrases or ideas.

The fourth sense of rhetorical history takes something of the opposite approach and is one Zarefsky clearly prefers, for it is both the "most elusive" but also the most rewarding—the rhetorical study of historical events (30). Here, one uses the critical tools cultivated by one’s rhetorical sensibility to understand history itself, conceiving of people, events, and situations as rhetorical problems for which responses must continually be formulated, reformulated, and negotiated (30). If one were to study the second inaugural address in this sense, such an approach would entail investigation of the world around Roosevelt’s text with a sensibility cultivated to view the speech as a response to rhetorical problems operative at that historical moment: the continuing trauma of the Depression, the controversial status of New Deal reforms, prevailing beliefs and attitudes about poverty, and the like. Thus, rather than using history to understand the speech (sense #3), one would use the speech to understand history.

What I argue in the remaining portion of this chapter is that one may approach the LOOK feature in a similar fashion, with the caveat that doing rhetorical history of the visual must entail both the third and fourth senses of rhetorical history: neither is sufficient alone. Taken together, they enable the rhetorical historian to pay attention to each of three distinct but equally important moments in the life of photographs—production, reproduction, and circulation. Production must be accounted for if we are to know where images come from (literally) and why they appear in the spaces where we find them. Reproduction acknowledges that images are hybrid entities that we do not encounter them in isolation, and that their arrangement (at least in the spaces of print culture) is always the result of particular editorial choices and framing of ideas. Circulation must be accounted for as well, for—as Walter Benjamin reminded us long ago—it is the fundamental property of photography. Analysis of these three moments is possible when one utilizes the methods of investigation implied in both the third and the fourth senses of rhetorical history. Thus in what follows I study the history of the sharecropper feature as a rhetorical event (Zarefsky’s sense #3) by accounting for the origins of LOOK magazine, tracing the story of the production and reproduction of the FSA photographs, and tracking the key terms invoked in this particular arrangement of images and text. I also engage in the rhetorical study of the feature as an historical event (Zarefsky’s sense #4) by exploring the LOOK feature as one response to the complex problems of Depression-era poverty, both practical (how shall we care for the poorest of the poor?) and representational (how shall we attempt to make people care about the poor?). In doing so, I situate LOOK as it circulated in the context of Depression-era discourses about poverty, provide insight into public attitudes about poverty during the Depression, and illustrate the unique way visual images contributed to the rhetorical politics of the age.

THE HISTORICAL STUDY OF RHETORICAL EVENTS: PRODUCTION AND REPRODUCTION OF THE FSA PHOTOGRAPHS IN LOOK

Production

"Keep Informed!" the March 1937 cover of LOOK trumpeted (see Fig. 9.2). Inside, on pages 18 and 19, six FSA photographs appeared in a feature titled, "Children of the Forgotten Man! LOOK Visits the Sharecropper" (Fig. 9.1). Although, as I elaborate, the picture magazines made possible mass circulation of the FSA photographs, the picture magazines themselves were made possible by rapidly changing technologies of photographic production and reproduction after World War I. Although photographs had for years been reproducible in magazines and newspapers, it was not until the mid-1930s that photographs could be reprinted in magazines with the quality and in the quantity that came to be associated with Life, or, to a lesser extent, LOOK. In addition, the kinds of photographs reproduced in LOOK and Life and other picture magazines were different from images previously available. Beginning in the 1920s in Germany, changes in photographic technology created a revolution of sorts in photographic production and reproduction. The new technology of the "miniature" 35-mm camera made it possible for photographers to make large numbers of images quickly and relatively unobtrusively. The camera’s fast shutter speed, small size, and use of roll film (rather than cumbersome plates) made it easy to, as one Fortune magazine article put it, “shoot from the hip and get your man” (“U.S. Minicam Boom” 160). Furthermore, the development of 35-mm photography coincided with the introduction of the flash bulb, making it even more possible for photographers to make good quality images in less-than-ideal conditions (Carlebach 160–165).

The profusion of images provided much-needed fodder for the picture magazines. Life debuted in late 1936, LOOK just a few months later in early
1937. By 1938, it was reported that there were 13 picture magazines being published in the United States. In addition to Life and LOOK, these included Focus, Picture, Click, and See (Edwards 102). LOOK, in particular, was nearly as popular as Life, but considered Life's working-class cousin because of its poorer technical quality; it was published on lower quality paper of the type used in newspaper Sunday rotogravure sections. In addition, early on the magazine became known for having "salacious" content; after its debut, The New Republic ridiculed LOOK as "a combination morgue and dime museum, on paper" ("Picture Papers" 197). Editorially, the magazine lived up to its demand that readers "LOOK," providing a steady diet of celebrity gossip, self-help articles, and features that emphasized the odd and/or salacious ("Auto Kills Woman Right Before Your Eyes!"). But despite the magazine's early taste for curiosities, LOOK nevertheless reflected the new ideology of the picture magazine in that it sought to use photographs to tell narratives about real people in specific situations, but always in ways that cultivated universal interest.

In some ways, LOOK would appear to be an odd outlet for the FSA photographs. From 1935 to 1943, the Historical Section, a division of the FSA, conducted a photograph project designed to document American life during the Depression and chronicle New Deal efforts to relieve rural poverty. Photographs by the likes of Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, Ben Shahn, Arthur Rothstein and Russell Lee were used not only to demonstrate that profound rural poverty existed, but also to illustrate potential solutions. Such images were circulated widely to government and media outlets, their goal to educate and influence public opinion on issues related to rural poverty. In early 1937, the new picture magazines offered the possibility of mass circulation for the images, making it possible to expose hundreds of thousands, perhaps even a million, readers to the issues facing the rural poor. Until the picture magazines appeared on the scene, the Historical Section's photographs had not appeared in periodicals with circulations much over 25,000; thus although it was an unlikely marriage, Historical Section chief Roy Stryker pursued with interest publication of the photographs in magazines like LOOK.

Before the first issue of LOOK had even hit the newsstands, LOOK founder Gardner "Mike" Cowles, Jr. contacted Roy Stryker for pictures: "I should much appreciate it if you would mail me a fairly large number of pictures which show the worst conditions in the south, pictures which might run under the caption 'Can such conditions possibly exist in the United States?' " (23 Nov. 1936). Stryker replied promptly, providing Cowles with a set of photographs and offering even more: "At the present time we have a photographer working in Iowa and Illinois on material concerning farm tenancy. As soon as his pictures begin to come in, I will see that you receive some of this material as I am sure that it would be useful" (2 Dec. 1936). Although we have no way of knowing what pictures Stryker sent to Cowles, we do have the March 1937 sharecropper feature as LOOK published it (Fig. 9.1).

At this point, it may be useful to point out several moves I am making in my attempt to account for the ways the FSA photographs were used in the LOOK feature. First, in keeping with the third sense of rhetorical history (the historical study of rhetorical events), I have attempted to account, albeit very briefly, for the forces that made magazines such as LOOK possible in the first place, the history and goals of the FSA's project, and LOOK's interest in the Historical Section's photographs specifically. In doing so I have turned to secondary material that has enabled me to reconstruct the technological developments that made LOOK and other publications feasible, primary source material discussing the origins of and reactions to the picture magazines, and the archival ma-
Reproduction

In addition to production, another equally important moment in the life of images is reproduction. We need to understand, not only where images come from, but also what they are made to do in the contexts in which we discover them. In doing so, we investigate what Barthes called the "rhetoric of the image"—the ways that the arrangement of image, text, and caption work to create meaning in the contexts of particular rhetorical events like the reproduction of the FSA photographs in the LOOK feature.10

The feature is made up of six FSA photographs accompanied by textual material in the form of headlines and captions (Fig. 9.1). Visually, the feature reflects LOOK's early editorial and graphic fits and starts, pitting the magazine's purported interest in "facts" against its desire to increase readership through the use of dramatic photographs and vivid captions. We might begin by noting the feature's placement within the rest of the issue of the magazine. Readers encountering the sharecropper feature would find it sandwiched between a 2-page illustrated feature on marriage in Zululand, titled "A Savage Buys a Wife," and a two-page centerfold of actress Myrna Loy, posed provocatively in a bathtub filled with flower petals (the caption announcing that Miss Loy "wears only tailored underwear" ("Myrna Loy" 21). Although this arrangement of materials may appear jarring (to say the least), within LOOK's vision of the picture magazine there is no cognitive dissonance here. The "savage," the sharecropper, and the sexy starlet all merit equal representation and treatment in the genre of the picture story; as we shall see, however, such treatment does have implications in terms of the rhetoric of poverty made available in the magazine. Analysis of the feature reveals several themes reproduced in this particular arrangement of text and image: the use of candid, often crude images, a layout encouraging surveillance on the part of the reader/viewer, an emphasis on children that encourages an infantilized view of the poor, and dramatic captions and headlines that narrativize the experiences of the poor at the expense of offering a context for understanding that poverty as real, material, and pressing.

The sharecropper feature offers a crude layout, cropping the FSA photographs into odd shapes and cutouts. The dominant visual element is a large cutout of a small child crying. Dressed in ragged clothing, the child has a face distorted in pain or tears; he is clearly in distress. Each image in the feature is accompanied by a caption; this one states in part, "Alone and Hungry: This is no child of destitute European peasants. He is an American whose parents work all day in the fields of our 'Sunny South.' He is the son of a cotton sharecropper. America has eight million like his parents" ("Children" 18). The shocking image, combined with this caption, makes the child a visual synecdoche, encouraging the reader/viewer to see him not as an individual child, but as representative of literally millions of others living in similar destitute.

There is strong shock value to this photograph, thanks not only to its content but to LOOK's distortion of photographic scale in the layout. The image appears crude and not particularly respectful of its subject, yet Roy Stryker wrote approvingly to LOOK's Mike Cowles of the layout of photographs in the sharecropper feature and mentioned this image specifically: "I think the placing of that little boy in the burlap clothes in a prominent position as you did was extremely effective" (6 Feb. 1937). Stryker's reply is disconcerting, but as I will note later, not surprising given the institutional constraints that Stryker faced in attempting to keep the FSA's photography project alive.

All of the images in this feature reject the formal pose of the photographic portrait in favor of more "candid" subject matter. A search of the negative numbers of the images reveals that most of the photographs were made with the relatively new 35-mm technology, which produced visual effects different from those of larger format cameras. One of the primary effects of the use of candid, somewhat crude imagery is that the feature constructs for the reader/viewer a stance of surveillance. We are positioned to look in on the giant image of the crying child dressed in the burlap sack or to surveil the pregnant mother and her children in the doorway. Cropping also encourages surveillance through the use of odd, cookie-cutter shapes. The images of the African-American children, in particular, demonstrate the strange rhetorical impact of such cropping. In the top left corner, an African American girl is isolated in a circular cutout frame. The cropping of the photograph, coupled with the layout of the image in a circular shape, isolates the girl and makes her appear as though she is under surveillance—seen as if through the camera's circular lens.

Another theme of the feature is a focus on children. Few images in the feature show children with adults. The dominant figure is a crying child, with no adult anywhere present. The irony of the title "Children of the Forgotten Man" is clear, because the sharecropper himself, the "forgotten man," is utterly absent in the photographs. The mothers, while present, appear passive and anxious. An Arthur Rothstein photograph of a pregnant mother leaning in the doorway, with three children of various ages gathered near her, is captioned: "More Children Indoors: Sharecropper children are often hungry. Underfed, scrawny, with large heads, misshapen bodies, they are easy prey of disease" ("Children" 19). Using vivid and crude language, the caption implies
that the mother, though present, cannot care for her brood. The hint of “more children indoors” suggests slyly that the place is literally overrun with children, that the perhaps excessively fertile mother cannot care for her “scrawny” and “misshapen” offspring. In fact, a check of the Historical Section file in the Library of Congress reveals that there are several images made by Rothstein of this family; they show only one additional child not featured among the group of three here, not the unspecified large brood implied by the caption. As a result of the feature’s emphasis on children, the reader/viewer’s direct visual encounter with the poor happen with the children, not the adults. The impulse on the part of editors is obvious: Use children to create pity in the viewer, and sympathy for the plight of the poor, by showing those most innocent and helpless in the face of poverty. Yet, at the same time, the emphasis on children in both features has the effect of infantilizing (and thus disempowering) the poor, particularly the non-White poor.

The two images of African-American children demonstrate this point most vividly, and suggest another aspect of this feature’s rhetorical stance: its reliance on dramatic captions to accompany the images. LOOK uses both images and captions to point out that although tenancy impacts both Black and White, the “news” is that Whites are suffering. We can see this most vividly in the photograph of the three boys at the water pump. The barefoot children stare at the camera from inside an oddly cropped image that, like the image of the African-American girl, frankly invites surveillance. The caption below the image reads:

Many Sharecroppers are Negroes
But not as many in proportion to whites as there used to be. Fifteen years ago 65 out of 100 croppers were Negroes. The tables are turned now and there are 60 whites and only 40 Negroes in every 100 sharecroppers. (“Children” 19)

Here the images of Black children are deployed to reference the shift toward greater White tenancy, erasing the children’s experience at the same time that it is presented visually. Although White adults do appear in the guise of the passive mother, no African-American adults appear in the feature; they may be the truly “forgotten men” and women LOOK so dramatically announces. The feature’s reliance on images of Black children not only functions to erase the Black experience of tenancy from consideration, but it does something more insidious by erasing the African-American adult experience entirely. Thus LOOK not only infantilizes the poor, but particularly the African-American poor, reinforcing plantation-era stereotypes about dependence and the “childlike” nature of the Black laborer.

The text not only infantilizes the poor and reinforces an interest in White sharecroppers, but it does so with often vivid crudeness. Indeed, the “factual” nature of many of the captions is undercut by their tendency to dramatize the conditions the captions are describing. So, for example, the sharecropper feature declares, “Humanity Hits Bottom ... In the Deep South.” In describing the dangers of unionizing, LOOK observes, “Black terror stalks the cotton fields.” Headings such as “black and white,” “alone and hungry,” “homeless,” and “sharecroppers declare war” function to capture reader attention. At the same time, the captions reinforce a narrow treatment of the issues facing the sharecroppers; the reader/viewer is given no context for understanding how the sharecroppers depicted came to be in this dire situation. The captions do offer some information about sharecropping, explaining for example the “furnishing” system in which tenants buy food on high-interest credit from plantation owners (18). But the “factual” information offered in the captions is not credited to any kind of expert who might testify as to the accuracy of the facts. The feature does suggest possibilities for change in the future, but here, too, little context is present. “Sharecroppers Declare War,” announces the heading of one caption:

Sharecroppers have organized a union. The plantation owners are fighting it. Floggings, kidnappings, and lynchings by night riders have resulted.
Black terror stalks the cotton fields. But the union is growing and sticks to its demands for better pay (it asked $1.00 for a 10-hour day last spring). (19)

The caption here refers obliquely to the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU), actively organizing in the South (particularly in Arkansas) at the time. Another caption goes on to suggest that the STFU has also “meant eviction for hundreds of sharecroppers. They wander the rutted roads, no shelter, no relief, no food. Some are living in tents and old autos” (19). But unionization, one potential solution readers might infer for themselves, is immediately dismissed by LOOK as a hopeless and downright dangerous option.

Although the photographs published in LOOK had great potential to expose viewers to the FSA’s plans, the picture story itself suggests that, really, there is nothing to do but look. The magazine positions the reader/viewer to be a passive spectator, to see and consume images and text in a vacuum devoid of context or history. The cumulative impact of the feature, then, is that there is no difference between the American sharecroppers and the “savage” taking a wife in Zululand. Sharecroppers are just as much a “curiosity” to be looked at, a “them” to be surveyed, as are the “savages” of Zululand or the celebrity centerpiece in the bathtub. Although LOOK’s picture stories were ostensibly meant to educate readers and generate sympathy for the poor, the content and layout of the feature largely undermine such goals. By constructing the picture story as a closed, relatively ahistorical narrative, LOOK constructs a rhetoric of poverty that keeps the reader on the outside “LOOKing in.”

Yet again, at this point let us break away from my sketch in order to determine where we are in the construction of a rhetorical history of the LOOK
feature. In the last several pages, I have moved beyond issues of production to consider issues of reproduction, attempting to understand the feature’s placement within the magazine itself and the themes raised by its peculiar arrangement of images and text. Yet we cannot stop here, for we have yet to take account of circulation. In moving to the realm of circulation, we attend to the feature in terms of the way it fits into broader social, political, and institutional discourses about poverty circulating during the Depression. The move to circulation, as we shall see, allows us to tap into the “elusive” yet vital realm of Zarefsky’s fourth sense of rhetorical history: the rhetorical study of historical events.

THE RHETORICAL STUDY OF HISTORICAL EVENTS: VISUAL RHETORICS OF POVERTY AND LOOK

Circulation

LOOK’s marriage of the FSA photographs with vivid, largely ahistorical captions produces a rhetoric of poverty that makes certain narratives about the poor available while curtailling the availability of others. As I have just briefly noted, the sharecropper feature says little, if at all, about the causes of the poverty depicted in the images, nor does it suggest much in the way of solutions to the problems so vividly visualized. LOOK’s failure to do so is partly the result of the generic constraints of the picture magazine. LOOK was never meant to be a “news” magazine. Bookended by picture stories that reflect LOOK’s primary investment in human interest stories—celebrity entertainment and “curiosities”—the sharecropper feature stands in isolation from the current events of the day. Each picture story, even the sharecropper story, is presented as a hermetically sealed narrative. The reader is not encouraged to go beyond the narrative for further investigation of the issues, for this is not the function of the magazine. LOOK’s primary interest is in showing—in encouraging (indeed, commanding) the viewer to LOOK. Realization of these limitations of the genre of the picture magazine is vital if we are to understand how the LOOK feature operates within broader public attitudes about rural poverty as well as in terms of the institutional goals of the FSA.

The LOOK feature needs to be understood in terms of how it participates in a complex web of discourses about poverty during the Depression. Neil Betten argues that discourses about poverty in the United States have historically operated along a continuum between the “hostile view” and the “environmental view.” What Betten calls “the hostile view” treated poverty as a moral flaw, “a sickness freely chosen through laziness, drinking, extravagance and sexual vices” (3). These rhetorics of poverty resounded with echoes of what William Ryan has called “blaming the victim”—if one were poor, one had somehow caused that poverty. A second view, the “environmental” view, argued that poverty was not always the result of an individual’s failings, but of structural inequities in the socioeconomic system. By the early 20th century, for example, progressive-era social reformers were coming to define rural poverty in terms of the oppressive nature of the socioeconomic structure of the farm tenancy system that left sharecroppers at the bottom of the economic ladder.

It might be tempting, then, to suggest that the LOOK feature simply communicates a “hostile view” of poverty that blames the victim and suggests moral failings are the cause of the sharecroppers’ poverty. Although, as I have shown, there is evidence for such a reading, such a conclusion would not reflect the complexities of Depression-era rhetorics of poverty. As many scholars of poverty discourse have shown, an era’s conception of poverty is not “either/or.” Robert Asen argues that a range of views about the poor appear and reappear throughout American history, “subjected to alternative inflections, recombinations, and reversals as advocates have deployed the discourses of poverty in a shifting and conflicted terrain” (25). For example, just as the LOOK essay seems to invite a hostile reading of the sharecroppers’ plight through its use of vivid images and dramatic text, it also suggests a more environmental view through its deployment of the powerful trope of the “forgotten man.” Revised by Roosevelt during his 1932 presidential campaign, by 1937 the forgotten man was a powerful symbol of both the promise of American capitalism and its apparent failure: the forgotten man is not to blame for his poverty, but rather is someone swept up by forces largely beyond his control. The trope of the forgotten man was rhetorically available not only in political discourse, but in art and popular culture, too; by the late 1930s, references to the “forgotten man” were quite frequent in the visual arts, movies, and popular songs.

Such ambiguous blending of the hostile and environmental views persisted in government, as well, often influenced by the paternalism for which Roosevelt was so legendary. Though Roosevelt championed the right to economic security for all citizens, Roosevelt and his New Deal appointees agonized over “the dole.” In his second inaugural address, Roosevelt described “the need to find through government the instrument of our united purpose to solve for the individual the ever-rising problems of a complex civilization”—thus seemingly invoking an environmental view of poverty. Yet Roosevelt also consistently spoke of his preference for work relief over “cash” relief because he feared creating a population of dependent individuals (127). Often, such conflicting views of poverty were articulated by members of the public as well, with bizarre inconsistencies. In 1938, the FSA participated in a photography exhibit in New York City. Many of the agency’s most powerful images of the poor were hung, and visitors were provided comment cards on which to write their reactions. One visitor wrote, “Wonderful pictures! Pitiful sights! They need help sooner than many worthless W.P.A. [Works Progress Administra-
circulated the FSA photographs to support a social science rhetoric of poverty that sought to demonstrate the importance of federal, bureaucratic solutions designed to manage rural poverty "scientifically" (Finnegan "Social Engineering"). In attempting to understand the rhetorics of poverty made available in LOOK, then, it is important to recognize the fluidity of the circulation of the FSA photographs. Because the FSA images circulated in a range of contexts and tapped into the complex variety of discourses about poverty during the Depression, they need to be understood as both products of that history of poverty discourse as well as a process by which poverty itself was visualized.

CONCLUSION

In this essay I have proposed and modeled a way of doing rhetorical history of the visual that accounts for three key moments in the life of photographs: production, reproduction, and circulation. Although it may be easier to envision how one might do a rhetorical history of a more traditional text such as Roosevelt's second inaugural address, the path one should take when engaging visual culture may seem less obvious. Yet perhaps the differences are not so great after all if we utilize the tools of rhetorical history itself. I have suggested a way that we might invigorate our study of visual culture with a methodology that accounts for both the history of images as rhetorical events and the rhetoric of images as historical events. For those of us interested in "defining visual rhetoric," the issue of methodology would seem to be particularly important. A definition of visual rhetoric(s) alone cannot be useful unless it simultaneously suggests a way of seeing that combines an understanding of the unique qualities of visual discourse with a rhetorical sensibility that can account for how visual discourse comes to mean something in the public sphere. It is my hope that I have at least gestured toward one productive possibility here.

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NOTES

1. Richard Lanham defines ekphrasis (or, alternatively, ekphrasis), as "a self-contained description" that can be "inserted into a fitting place in a discourse."
It is a subcategory of enargeia, a "vivid description which recreates something or someone, as several theorists say, 'before your very eyes.'" In Latin, *enargeia* would be translated as *descriptio* or description, one of the techniques of rhetorical amplification. See Lanham 62, 64; see also Thomas O. Sloane 220–221.

2. On the implications of ocularcentrism for philosophy and visual culture, see Jay; Levin; Snyder; Jenkins; and Cray.

3. The terms, *pictorial text* and *textual picture* are W.J. T. Mitchell's; see Mitchell.


6. This history has been traced by, among others, Medhurst and Benson.


8. The invention of the halftone process in the late 19th century made such reproduction possible; see Taft 436–446; Mott 3–10. On the technical aspects of producing *Life* in the mid-1930s, see Spencer; Wainwright; Baughman.

9. For a detailed account of the assumptions grounding the picture magazines' approach to narrative, especially *LOOK*'s, see Mich and Eberman.

10. I would argue that much of what passes for "rhetorical analysis" of visual images operates at this level by invoking (either explicitly or implicitly) Barthes' notions of "code" and "non-code" messages to get at the semantics of meaning in a given context. Thomas Farrell has called this approach "the study of images as little visual speeches" and suggests that it only takes us so far in understanding the broader role of visual culture in the public sphere; I agree. See Barthes; Farrell, personal communication with the author.

11. The Historical Section photographs are catalogued and numbered in the FSA-OWI Collection in the Prints and Photographs division of the Library of Congress. Each Library of Congress negative number contains a letter designating the format in which the image was made; the letter "M" indicates a 35-mm photograph.

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