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► Creative License and Historical Accuracy



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**Creative License and Historical Accuracy**

by Joe Escobar - Sunday, January 20, 2013, 7:09 PM

To post, you will click the "reply" link MY post. If you want to reply to a specific comment made by another student, click the "reply" link located on that student's specific post.

This topic may seem like a simple one, but it is not. The issue cannot be well analyzed in a few sentences. Be sure to think carefully about what is being asked. Afterall, this is a HISTORY class.

IMPORTANT - SUBJECT LINES

As in Forum 1, put something descriptive in the subject line of your post. Other students wanting to talk about the same topic can click the "reply" button to your post, thus helping organize this discussion.

Sum of ratings: -

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**I don't think the letter disturbs chronology**

by Micah Young - Monday, January 21, 2013, 10:16 PM

While the letter written by Major Sullivan Ballou was read by the narrator I wondered about when his wife received it. I tried to picture the logistics of mail from the soldiers encamped in Washington being delivered to their home towns. Our textbook describes the confusion that existed in the early days of recruiting and the disorganized months leading up to the battle of Bull Run. Because of this, I wondered if the letter ever reached his wife and I'm not surprised to hear that it didn't until after the war.

When I heard the letter read I did not think that the chronology of events were being misrepresented. When the narrator concluded that Ballou had died in the fighting at Manassas, I was a little surprised, not expecting to hear that since the narration of that

battle had already passed; I realized then that Ballou had already paid the debt he had told his wife he was ready to pay. I was impressed by his words to his wife only to then discover that she would, as his letter foreshadowed, never see him again; I think I was more surprised by the sad emotion that I felt than I was the misplaced chronology. I think of this letter similarly to how I think of the other journal entries and letters that were excerpted. It doesn't need to contribute to the chronological narrative but rather offer insight into the lives of those who so directly felt the effects of the war.

I am thankful for the analyses of the the quoted article and for how the author probes Ken Burns' methods and whether enough detail is given to the history of this letter. I have however, excerpted from the article the author's acknowledgement of the priorities of filmmakers: "As with any filmmaker, aesthetic and technical factors always influence and compete with the historical representations that result." There are strengths and weaknesses in teaching history through film and I think that this scene represents that. The strength is that it helped me empathize with the soldier who wrote this letter, with his family, and the others whose pictures were shown during the narration. The weakness was that it left out many details about the history surrounding the letter. I am okay with the narrative and methods of the film since there are many other good resources that analyze and teach the material that is not covered in this series.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: I don't think the letter disturbs chronology S

by Ashley Clark - Sunday, January 27, 2013, 6:39 PM

I agree with you on the emotion over detail comment. I found out about the letter not being sent when I looked it up later, wanting to remember what was said. I personally didn't care that it wasn't discussed in the film, because the effect created even without it was enough. Had more and more detail been piled upon about the fate of the letter, the emotional impact would not have been as much. That's the problem I find with many history books and documentaries-- they're so chock-full of information and dates that the actual significance of the event is lost. It's no wonder so many children find history boring. The Civil War was a defining era for our country. There was tragedy in the lives lost and the families broken, there was dread at the thought losing the great country that the United States had become, there was a strong sense of pride in the soldiers that fought for the cause they believed in. Through that war, we realized that we are strongest when together, and should never war amongst ourselves and let this happen again. However, this spirited era is clouded by a shower of names, dates, and details. The emotional appeal is lost when there is too much detail, and I think that Burns realized this. Many of the situations that critics nail him for are ones where the dramatic effect created by the words are far better than the detail that could be contained. He wants people to feel informed and interested, not lectured. That, as you said, is a good example of the strengths and weaknesses of teaching through video. The visual aid and narration give a new and entertaining spin on the subjects, allow viewers to be enveloped in the story. It tells about the events while still encouraging a passion to learn. It makes you WANT to hear more. I don't know about

many, but I've never read a history book that I couldn't put down. However, there are things to be lost, which is why the videos should be accompanied by a more detailed text source, like a "For more information, visit www.randomhistoricalsitewithdetail.org". Learning from the videos makes me interested in reading the textbook, and reading the textbook makes me want to hear the video's explanation.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Letters and Timelines

by Jennifer King - Tuesday, January 22, 2013, 12:45 PM

While viewing Episode One last week, I was impacted by the letter from Ballou to his wife. The reading of the letter, along with the pictures from the war left me with a sad feeling. Ballou was clearly writing the letter as if he would never see his wife Sarah again. "The memories of the blissful moments I have spent with you come creeping over me, and I feel most gratified to God and to you that I have enjoyed them for so long." The statement that Ballou died a week later at the first Battle of Bull Run only deepened the impact.

I was a bit confused as to why the letter came at the end of the episode out of chronological order. I personally feel Burns used the letter at the end to leave a dramatic on the viewer, and instill in them a need to continue watching the rest of the series. While this makes sense from the viewpoint of a filmmaker, it does confuse one who is watching the film in order to gain knowledge about the history of the Civil War. However this just proves the point that when studying anything in history it is good to have more than one source of information for reference. I feel like the letter would have had the same impact if Burns had put it in the film right before the piece on the Battle of Bull Run. Especially since this was such a bloody battle. In my own opinion, the letter would have helped me understand how significant this battle was.

I was surprised to find out that Ballou never sent the letter to his wife. I was imagining her reading the letter as I watched the film. I think this would have been good information to have, although if Burns had included it and the fact that the original had been lost it may have caused people to discredit his historical accuracy

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Letters and Timelines

by Ashley Clark - Thursday, January 24, 2013, 12:18 PM

I must say I disagree with you on the reason Burns took this particular liberty. While I'm sure that yes, he was hoping for people to be interested enough to continue watching the series, I don't think it was his sole motivation.

I suppose I see where you're coming from in terms of the timeline confusion when looking for information, but I think that the effect created by the segment coming in the

end was worth it. Soldiers were not just lost in this particular battle, there were many, many others after that. I think that Burns was trying to emphasize the spirits of the soldiers and the mindset of the people at the time, to show what it was like for the men who had to leave their wives and those they loved behind, rather than put that specific battle into more perspective.

That's one of the bittersweet aspects of the series. While it is informative, the level of detail and in-depth analysis is lacking. It seems to me as though Burns is trying to provide insight into the emotional and personal toll of the war, rather than the history and specific events. While this is great for someone casually watching at home, it's not very helpful to students attempting to find an accurate account of the war.

I agree with your comment about needing multiple sources. It's interesting to read or hear about a specific event from one source and then again from another perspective. My understanding is helped immensely by having had experience studying the subject from other viewpoints besides Burns and McPherson's. Now that I've discovered that Burns' historical accuracy is off and that McPherson is highly biased in his writing, I'll be on the lookout for other sources, just to see what I can glean from the various accounts.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Letters and Timelines

by Jennifer King - Friday, January 25, 2013, 8:01 AM

I agree with you, I don't think Burns' only motivation with the letter was to hook viewers. I feel like he used the letters to emphasize the impact of the war as well. Especially considering that such a tragic letter was written at the mere beginning of the war. It makes you think if the first battle was that bad....how much worse could it get. I just felt the letter would have been better placed in the actual segment of Bull Run.

I agree that the film is not helpful for a student who is viewing it to try and get an accurate account of the war. I do feel it is a great supplement to what we are studying however. Personally it makes the material more "real". It's always been hard for me to remember dates and people from history, but the film has really helped out with that.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: Letters and Timelines

by Alexander Kristy - Saturday, January 26, 2013, 4:34 PM

I also don't think that Burns specifically put this letter at the end of the video for the sole purpose of drawing viewers back to see that rest of the series. Like

some other students have said I also think the letter would've been better placed during the segment of the battle. Or he could have had a short segment of multiple letters from husbands to their wives to really emphasize what many of the soldiers on both sides were going through.

I have watched many documentaries and from my experience none of them have ever provided me with all the details and in-depth analysis that one would want. Generally documentaries are the length of a movie, unless it's a series such as this one, how could a person expect to receive all the information on any given subject in this short of time? When you're covering something as large and important as the Civil War it's difficult to include everything. While I agree that Burns series has some flaws and some historical inaccuracies I wouldn't go as far to say that he isn't trying to provide some historical information. To say that he is trying to provide insight and emotional toll over history and specific events is a bit of a reach. Just in the first two videos he has discussed history and specific events. To me it seems as though the insight and emotional toll you are speaking of just seems to come out a little bit more. I think Burns does care about historical accuracy; it's just unfortunate he made some mistakes.

I'm curious on your feelings towards Burns and McPherson. You say that you now know that Burns accuracy is off, is that solely based on one thing or multiple mistakes that you have seen in the first two videos? As far as McPherson being biased in his writing, what leads you to believe this? I find that many historians and scholars tend to be a little biased in their writings and views, it's natural for humans to do this. We all tend to be more interested in specific parts of subjects and that can influence one's writing on the subject.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Letters and Timelines

by Ashley Clark - Sunday, January 27, 2013, 6:16 PM

I think your idea of putting multiple letters in a short segment would have been a good idea. However, I also feel that this particular letter illustrates the idea that most of the soldiers were feeling. "I have no misgivings about, or lack of confidence in, the cause in which I am engaged, and my courage does not halt or falter...I am willing—perfectly willing—to lay down all my joys in this life, to help maintain this Government, and to pay that debt." He describes a sense of national pride and an urge to do his country a service by preserving the Union. The fact that his letter is so long and passionate, that he sensed his own death and took the opportunity to leave final words to the woman he loved the most, that he describes with such accuracy the feeling that all the soldiers held; that is what makes this letter stand out above all others.

I did not mean to imply that he was intending to leave pieces out. Like you

said, it's a very broad topic and hard to cover in the allotted time. I think that his goal was to present the subject in an informative but still interesting way to the common public. I know that my family and I would be rather bored if the documentary droned on and on about every detail of every battle, dates and statistics and everything else that many history books provide. I believe that Burns' goal was to give the most in-depth analysis he could without making viewers want to turn the channel. He keeps the series interesting and entertaining while still providing a good bit of information.

My opinion is established by the instances I've witnessed. From reading the critiques and watching the videos, I've noticed that there are times when he can be a bit vague on certain topics, such as the moment pointed out by one of the critics, regarding when Preston Brooks beat Charles Sumner over a dispute over abolition. The documentary states that "Buchanan did nothing." The critic got rather hot and bothered, defending Buchanan and listing all of the things he WAS doing at the time. Now, I realized when watching the video that Burns was simply pointing out the fact that Buchanan took no action against this particular instance, but clearly the critic did not. If he didn't, there are sure to be others that didn't catch it. While the style was effective in emphasizing the point that slavery was a touchy subject with highly opinionated supporters and nay-sayers, it didn't hold the level of detail that this critic clearly sought. In realizing that, I was able to notice a lot of other points where Burns explained things in a way that could be interpreted to mean something else, which could change the narration entirely.

As for McPherson, I can tell his bias through his tone. He tends to use a more praising attitude when describing the Union, whereas his Confederacy explanations feel as though he's speaking while rolling his eyes. Perhaps that's just my own interpretation, perhaps I'm reading too much between the lines, but I sense something in the words. While I realize that many historians are biased, I think that when writing informative pieces, one should try to keep personal arguments out. I despise slavery and am disgusted with the idea that people supported it, but I'm getting rather tired of books that speak about the Confederates like they were dirty dogs. There were plenty of men that fought that weren't in support of slavery, but fought because they wanted to defend their new country. In the words of the unnamed Confederate soldier, "I'm fighting because you're down here" (McPherson 311).

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Letters and Timelines



by Robyn Stevens - Saturday, January 26, 2013, 6:59 PM

I do agree with you on the providing insight into the emotional and personal toll of war. I think Burns was trying to reach his viewers on a personal level. I also think

Burns was trying to make this a documentary that people would want to continue watching. Having something as emotional as the love letter piece at the end of the episode would probably keep people interested enough to continue watching.

I know that a documentary usually is supposed to be about facts, but if the facts are distorted in any way or the film maker does not have the correct information, it ends up being just an entertainment piece.

I found myself wondering how many sources did Burns use on each piece of information he presented in his documentary. Did he know that some of the information he was using was not accurate and he decided to use it anyway for the sake of a more entertaining film or did the information he received from his research team not get the correct information? If this is the case, then shouldn't he let the viewers know before watching the documentary that not all facts presented may be totally accurate?

I still find myself wanting to watch each episode back to back to see if I have missed more than I should have and to now see if everything fits together in the right time frame.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Creative License vs. Historical Accuracy

by Alexander Kristy - Wednesday, January 23, 2013, 9:44 PM

I know it's been said that Burns' film is being creative, artistic, and for entertainment; and that because of this, the video shouldn't be critiqued so harshly, and I defended him as well, but I don't think documentaries are supposed to be entertainment. If one is entertained that's fine, but documentaries are supposed to be informative and accurate. The filmmaker is trying to present information about a subject and that information should be correct. It's misleading to the viewer if you're presenting things that are supposed to be facts when they aren't really accurate. For instance in last weeks assignment about the date of Lincoln's Lyceum Speech. (I gave Burns a pass for that, for the reason I stated in last weeks assignment). But, when Burns gives us information out of the timeline that he himself is setting up it becomes more difficult for me to respect the way he is presenting the information in his film. It makes it confusing for me. If he was going to do that he could have briefly put that into the narration. The letter being read and the photos accompanying them were a little confusing. I didn't know if any of those photos were of Ballou and his wife or just some other random photos. It's only been two episodes so far, but I feel myself becoming more critical of the series.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Creative License and Historical Accuracy

by Micah Young - Wednesday, January 23, 2013, 11:37 AM



After reading Escobar's most recent email about the forums and their content, I'm persuaded that my criticism of these films has been slightly weak. While reading his points and analysis I reflected over my post for this week's forum in which I tried to be supportive of the method used to conclude the first episode. I do think that dates, facts, and chronology should be correct, and I like that you write "documentaries are supposed to be informative and accurate." I agree with this and with Escobar saying that the goal of documentaries is getting history right, not so much art. I hope that those who make documentaries think the same way. One reason I have not been outspokenly critical about the historical mistakes in the series is because the supporting texts that we read already provide thorough analysis. Is there a limit to how many times a critique can be repeated?

Still, the placement of the letter didn't bother me, even if I was a bit confused by revisiting the Battle of Manassas. Burns' doesn't provide dates for the many excerpts taken from the writings of Frederick Douglass, but that doesn't disorient chronology because we realize that a thought is being expressed, not an event. I take this letter similarly.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Creative License vs. Historical Accuracy

by Jennifer King - Thursday, January 24, 2013, 8:42 AM

I have defended the series as well, and I agree with you that documentaries should be educational as opposed to entertainment. The letter was a very moving way for Burns to end the film, however the fact that the letter was out of order in the timeline was a bit confusing. I think the letter itself was a great piece to add, as it showed the viewer the true hardships these men were facing. But I feel like it would have had the same impact had he included it at the end of the segment on Manassas.

I too am becoming more critical of the series. I feel like it is still a great addition to our materials for class, but I am glad we have our book to fill in the gaps that are becoming more apparent in the documentary.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: Ballou love letter

by Robyn Stevens - Tuesday, January 22, 2013, 8:51 PM

I have to say that I thought this was a nice way to end the first episode. I could picture him actually writing the letter with the emotion that he was feeling and hoping that his wife understood what he was saying to her. When Ballou says that he is perfectly willing to lay

down his life to help maintain the government and pay the debt of those who came before him in the revolutionary war, you can almost feel and hear the sincerity of his voice and the point that he is trying to make to his wife. He is telling her that his love for her is deathless but his love for country is just as strong. He wants her to understand why he is fighting and hopes she knows of his love. I think this was the point Burns was trying to make with his placement of this section. Burns puts this at the end of his video about the first battle of the war because he wanted you to feel the intensity of it and what these people must be feeling. War is an terrible thing for families to go through.

I thought that the pictures of the couples made it more meaningful as the letter was being read. To show that there were many couples and families that were all have similar experiences with the realization that they may never see one another again.

I think this information about the letter not being received until after the war was over and if it is completely accurate, was up to Burns with how he used it in his documentary. You will always have different information from different sources. Does it make a difference in how I am going to watch the series now that I know some of the information may not be 100 percent accurate? No it will not. While I watch this documentary, I am trying to watch it with the understanding of how this war impacted history and the changes that were made because of it. Some information may be misrepresented or may not even be represented, but I try to remember that I have more than one source for any information I may need.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Creative License and Historical Accuracy



by Adam Duff - Wednesday, January 23, 2013, 9:41 AM

After watching the first episode and looking back at the last seen I was amazed at the power that letter left for views like me to think about. The fact being that in the video the director made it seem as though the wife was reading the letter before he died when really she didn't get it tell way after his death does not bother me. It helps with the emotional effect of the movie and I think that is what the director was trying to get.

One thing that stood out to me in this scene was the thoughts and feelings coming from the soldiers. And I don't just mean the one who wrote the letter. I feel that the reason behind showing the other pictures of couples was used to help express the same feelings that were shared by all the men in the army. As I was looking at all those pictures, I felt like it wasn't just one person writing to his wife back at home, but rather it was all those soldiers writing to their wives and telling them not to worry and that they were proud to die for their country and that they would be with them always.

Sum of ratings:2 (1) [Show parent](#) | [Edit](#) | [Split](#) | [Delete](#) | [Reply](#)**Re: Creative License and Historical Accuracy**

by Mark Gorski - Wednesday, January 23, 2013, 12:41 PM

I to believe that I may have been much too forgiving of Mr. Burns in my postings last week. In fairness to these films they were not produced with the intent that they be used in a classroom setting. Therefore I can understand why he would feel the need to carefully choose how he ended each episode. After all, he had to end them in a way that would pique the viewer's interest to watch the next episode. The accompanying music and images merely served to give the letter that much more dramatic effect.

That being said I agree that in a historical documentary accuracy should definitely trump dramatic license. The Ballou letter would have carried much more weight had it been presented immediately before or immediately after the segment on First Bull Run.

I was disturbed to learn that Major Ballou had not sent this letter prior to his death but perhaps this is an indicator of the great overconfidence held by most in the north of their ability to quickly and easily defeat the forces of the south. It could also be taken as an indicator of a complete lack of faith in the mail system. Personally I think it may have been written primarily as one of those letters to be sent only in the event of his death. I can come up with no other explanation for why he would write such an emotional letter and then place it in his personal trunk? I can also sympathize with his wife. After 4 years of war and having not heard from her husband since right after the war began I am certain that she knew in her heart that he had been killed. While the letter may have given her some closure I am pretty sure it reawakened all the pain and sorrow.

To me this discrepancy only serves to remind me that the primary goal of a film maker is to entertain and that documentary films should be viewed with a skeptical eye. They should be used primarily as a launching point for further research.

Sum of ratings:3 (1) [Show parent](#) | [Edit](#) | [Split](#) | [Delete](#) | [Reply](#)**Re: Creative License and Historical Accuracy**

by Jennifer King - Thursday, January 24, 2013, 8:48 AM

I agree with you in that I also feel Burns placed the letter at the end of the film in order to ensure his viewers tuned into the next episode. I also agree with you in that I feel like the letter should have been placed in the segment about the battle itself. If Burns had placed it at the end of that piece it would have, at least for me personally, increased my awareness about the significance of this battle.

You make an interesting point about the fact that Ballou had not sent the letter prior to

his death being an indicator of the overconfidence of the North. I wonder if that is why Burns may have left that piece of information about the letter out? It could have been he chose to omit it because he did not want his viewers to draw that conclusion.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Re: Creative License and Historical Accuracy

by Alexander Kristy - Saturday, January 26, 2013, 5:12 PM

I agree with much of what you have to say. I can see how Burns felt the need to place the letter at the end of the episode, but I'm not so sure he did it for that sole purpose. I also think that the letter would've been better served in the segment of the battle.

I disagree with you a bit as far as why the letter wasn't sent. I know multiple individuals who have served or are serving in the military; and after speaking with some of them it seems like a common thing to have a written letter for a loved one, or family. None of them ever sent those letters. As far as what you say about the mail system, I don't agree with you there. While letters could take awhile to be received there is a part in the second video that speaks directly about mail. It's around the 30:30 point in the video. It talks about soldiers writing and receiving mail; and how they had a post office, post master, letter box, and a mail carrier.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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The Love of Wife and Country

by Adam Coutts - Wednesday, January 23, 2013, 8:26 PM

It's very true that this particular part comes at the end of the episode when it probably should have been near the front but what I've found from this "creative license" is something far deeper which is mentioned is Sullivan's letter. He wrote about and mentions frequently to Sarah that there is a debt to be paid for all those that came from before, and Sullivan believes in the Union, the government, his president but more his country that his ancestors fought and bled for. And should the need for his life to be used to pay that debt he goes gladly to meet it as he stated in the letter that his love is deathless that only god can break and his love of country bears these great chains. The relevance that this piece represents that after everything that you've seen in this first episode, men from both sides are still joining up and fighting their brothers, their own countrymen for their ideals of government and love of country.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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**Creative license is good, but should not be overused**

by Ashley Clark - Wednesday, January 23, 2013, 8:24 PM

I personally don't mind the creative license used by placing the letter at the end of the episode. I think it was a good effect, leaving the audience with something to remember, as well as accentuating the sacrifices that had to be made during that time period. I know I personally was brought to tears by the idea that this soldier would never be able to see his wife again or watch his sons grow into "honorable manhood," and I believe that this was the effect that Burns intended. In watching the videos and reading the various critiques that went along with the introduction assignment, I realized that this series is not meant so much to give a proper education as it is to encourage learning and inspire thought. By moving the letter to the end of the episode instead of in its chronological place, Burns made a strong impact on the audience, making them realize how hard it was for soldiers and their family during those times. It also left me with a small spark of patriotism, hearing Ballou speak so passionately about fighting to defend his country and what he believed in. To take an excerpt from the critique, the scene was intended to "simply to highlight the emotional hardships of wives on the home front or the strong desire for loved ones to remain connected during war." There's nothing wrong with wanting to leave a lasting impression, especially when discussing a topic such as the Civil War. As far as this creative license goes, I'm in complete agreement.

I don't think it really compromised my accurate understanding as far as the timeline goes, as it did specify when the letter was written. It doesn't take much work to mentally move the letter to its proper chronological spot. Where the understanding that the letter wasn't sent until much later is concerned, I was surprised. I'm sure many others got the mental image that the critique mentions, of Ballou's wife reading the letter shortly after it was written, perhaps accompanied by the news of her husband's death. Discovering that it wasn't sent until far after the war ended, as well as the actual, original letter being lost, upset me. I suppose I shouldn't be too shocked. After all, there were higher priorities at the time than searching through a lost soldier's belongings for letters that he may or may not have written. Still, the fact that this was left out of the documentary is disappointing.

Although this particular instance didn't bother me much, I worry what other liberties Burns took for the sake of creative license. Although I do appreciate the effect that was created, I still wish for an accurate and informative account of the war.

Sum of ratings:3 (1) [Show parent](#) | [Edit](#) | [Split](#) | [Delete](#) | [Reply](#)**Re: Creative License and Historical Accuracy**

by Courtney Merrell - Wednesday, January 23, 2013, 9:33 PM

I currently have a fiancé who is serving in Afghanistan, although he knows the everyday dangers, he's proud to be there. Unlike the women waiting back home during the Civil War, I get to hear his voice almost daily to know he's ok. I think it was important for Burns to include the excerpt narrated by Ballou's letter. Even though it is misplaced by several

months, I think asking if it being out of chronological order ruins it, ruins the point. Burns is doing this on purpose in order to showcase the hardships of everyone involved with war. It is meant to be a powerful moment. At the end of the first episode Ken is wanting the viewer to understand the death and mere tragedy that each battle caused, to show how many Americans lost their lives, and how many wives that waited for months for husbands that would never come home.

I don't believe putting Ballou's letter out of order altered Burn's credibility in the slightest. He put the segment "Honorable Manhood" at the end so it would really set in. It would be the last thing we learned from that episode. As mentioned, the Civil War was fought by the low, working class. Honest men who didn't have the funds nor the slaves to escape the draft. As said by Ballou, "I am willing to lay down all the joys in life in order to protect this government". These "Honorable Men" gave their lives for the freedom of this nation, it was only right for Burns to dedicate a segment to them. One as powerful as the segment he delivered.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: Creative License and Historical Accuracy



by Robert Stimpson - Thursday, January 24, 2013, 2:03 PM

I think that must have been hard for soldiers and their families back then, even more recently, to not be able to get a hold of each other and let the others know that they are alright. It's good to hear that you can still talk to your fiance daily and know how he is doing even though he is halfway across the world serving our country.

As for your other part I somewhat agree with you. The letter at the end did give us much more impact than it would have in chronological order. I feel though, and it might just be me, that it was confusing, since I didn't know that it was from way earlier in the war. I think if he had given mention of it before, or put more emphasis on the period of the war it was from it would have set better with me.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: Creative License and Historical Accuracy



by Courtney Merrell - Friday, January 25, 2013, 9:18 PM

Yes it is a relief to be able to talk to him, thank you for your reply. I know you thinking the letter placement as confusing is your own opinion but I do not agree. The movie clearly states the ending of that year, 1861, prior to the "Honorable Manhood" segment. Then he clearly states in the "Honorable Manhood" segment that the letter was written in July, so about 6-7 months out of order. I do agree that he should have made mention prior to the end of the year, that would of tied everything together and avoid such a debate, as our class is now doing.

Sum of ratings: 1 (1)

1

[Show parent](#) | [Edit](#) | [Split](#) | [Delete](#) | [Reply](#)**Re: Creative License and Historical Accuracy**

by Robert Stimpson - Sunday, January 27, 2013, 5:01 PM

Then it was just me, I think I might not have just paid attention or failed to catch it the first time. But I didn't give it a thought until the discussions on it started.

Sum of ratings: (1)

0

[Show parent](#) | [Edit](#) | [Split](#) | [Delete](#) | [Reply](#)**Accuracy Comes Second**

by Jacob Pusey - Wednesday, January 23, 2013, 9:42 PM

The letter that is read is beautiful and is fitting for any soldier to send to his wife before he goes off to battle. It is a perfect conclusion to the end of the first part of the series. That being said, it really has no place in the movie. Why would the director use a letter that was written before the first major battle, right after a segment that wraps up the end of 1861 and focuses on the realization that this may be a longer war than anticipated. The First Battle of Bull Run took place in July and was only the very beginning of the war. It was placed right before the credits because Ken Burns is a filmmaker first and a historian a distant second. While it does give a wonderful example of how many soldiers may have felt before major violence occurred, it is still historically unacceptable because there were so many other letters written at the same time that can still be authenticated. The fact that the original letter is missing and multiple versions remain, gives me the impression that these were not the words of Major Ballou. While other letters may not have been so eloquent, they at least can be verified. I imagine that Burns did not have any pictures of the Major and his wife which is why he chose to use pictures of other unnamed couples and families. The "creative license" that he uses is to pull on the heartstrings of viewers and to draw them into episode 2.

Sum of ratings: 3 (1)

3

[Show parent](#) | [Edit](#) | [Split](#) | [Delete](#) | [Reply](#)**Re: Accuracy Comes Second**

by Mark Gorski - Thursday, January 24, 2013, 10:45 AM

After reading everyone's posts yesterday I went back and viewed episode 1 again and I must say that knowing that letter was presented out of chronological order disturbed me. However, what disturbed me even more was the apparent dismissal shown by Mr. Burns towards all the other families who lost loved ones in this struggle. We can be fairly certain that most soldiers, on both sides, wrote letters home to their families and I am sure a good many of those letters survived and can therefore be validated.

Why is it then that Mr. Burns chose a letter that did not survive in its original form and

cannot be validated? The answer is quite simple really, he chose this letter because it is eloquent and tugs at the heart strings in such a way as to relate to the viewer the horrors and hardships of war.

Why is it that Mr. Burns chose to place this letter at the end of episode 1? Clearly out of chronological order? Again the answer is simple, Dramatic License. He needed the viewers to return for the second episode. Also, many viewers may have been irritated had he interrupted his presentation of the battle of Bull Run to present this letter. Imagine the hubbub that would have caused.

Yes this film is a documentary but it was a documentary presented in episodic form. If you watched the first episode of a new television show and it did not pique your interest would you watch the next episode the following week? Probably not! As a film maker Mr. Burns knows this.

That being said I can appreciate the message he was trying to convey with this letter and can also appreciate why the letter was presented when it was.

Quite simply put Mr. Burns ran right up against the very thing that causes most people to not be interested in history. While facts and figures cannot be disputed they are very boring and most people quickly lose interest. As a film maker Mr. Burns has chosen to use selective dramatic license to hold our interest while he presents those facts and figures. I have no problem with this. If something doesn't sound right to me I do a little research.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

3

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Re: Accuracy Comes Second



by Jennifer King - Friday, January 25, 2013, 7:54 AM

I also think the letter is quite beautiful, and it made for a good ending. But I feel the letter would be more appropriate in that placing had it been a movie for entertainment rather than a documentary. I think the letter itself would have made more sense had it been included in the piece about Bull Run.

Looking at it from the viewpoint of a student viewing it as part of a history class, I agree with your opinion that a letter which could be verified would have been a better pick. However, since the use of the film in classrooms came after the fact, I see why Burns chose such an emotional letter to use. And I agree with your opinion that it was to move his viewers and entice them into watching the second episode.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

1

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Re: Accuracy Comes Second



by Ashley Clark - Sunday, January 27, 2013, 10:31 PM

The letter's place is to tell the heartbreaking story of only one of the many, many soldiers that had their lives taken from them in the war. It shows the man's patriotic spirit, the love he had for his wife and the regret he held for all his past wrongs. It shows the mindset of most of the brave men that signed up when war was declared.

As far as to why the letter was chosen, I believe that it was because of the passion and eloquency. While I'm sure that Ballou was far from a Shakespeare, he did have a certain way with words that conveyed his emotions well. From reading the textbook and listening to the other quotes presented in the movie, it seems as though many of the soldiers were rather illiterate. Certainly, their letters were just as heartfelt, but the stylistic wording of this particular letter was a more understandable and heart-wrenching illustration.

Yes, I do believe that it was something to keep the viewers interested, but I don't think it was a simple ploy. I get no impression from the videos that Burns is trying to pass off as a historian. If he were, he'd be doing an extremely shoddy job. I believe that he's out to be more than just a "let's keep them watching so we can get ratings" movie producer, though. He seems to have a topic that he holds a genuine interest in, with an honest intent to be true to the story without being overwhelmingly droll. He talks about the battles in vivid detail, expresses the stories from the soldier, civilian, and politician viewpoints with the littering of quotes, and transitions it all with musical accompaniment. He does have the flare of a filmmaker, but not so much that he doesn't present his story well.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Ballou's Letter and Creative License

by Robert Stimpson - Wednesday, January 23, 2013, 10:25 PM

Before looking at the discussion for this week and seeing what other people were saying I hadn't given much thought to that letter. Now I realize the impact of it. When I had first heard the narration of the letter I didn't notice how early it was in the war compared to when it was put in the video, I thought it came after all that happened in the episode, not around the time of the first battle of the war.

I think this is one way that the creative license gets people. If I had not read about it being way back in the history of the war I would have thought it happened at the end of that time that they were talking about and not given it a second thought. For people like me, this can jumble the facts and make a person think something happened at a certain time when it was a completely different time and place. I think this also takes the historical accuracy into account, since a person studying could get confused and be very innacurate on the retelling of the event to people, or even putting it into an assignment and getting a terrible grade because they learned their facts wrong. I do realize that this was done to give impact to the trauma that can happen in war and to get an emotional response at the end of the episode, but for something that is trying to get across historical facts and teach someone I find it somewhat unprofessional.

Sum of ratings:3 (1) [Show parent](#) | [Edit](#) | [Split](#) | [Delete](#) | [Reply](#)**Re: Creative License and Historical Accuracy**

by Jessica Cadenasso - Thursday, January 24, 2013, 12:06 PM

I believe that during the war the messages to love ones were not a priority to the army only the soldiers. When the war was over was when she got it I think was because they were not on top of belongings and who died when. I think it was very hard for the union to keep track on everything, so going through personal items and returning them was not high up there. The letter does show how the soldiers still thought and loved their families very much. It was a very touching letter.

Sum of ratings:1 (1) [Show parent](#) | [Edit](#) | [Split](#) | [Delete](#) | [Reply](#)**Re: Creative License and Historical Accuracy**

by Robyn Stevens - Thursday, January 24, 2013, 8:23 PM

While I watched this again and really tried to put this in perspective, I wondered what I would think, as a wife, going 4 years without any communication from her husband who was away at war? How would you know if he was still alive or dead if the postal service was not working well. Would you automatically assume your husband is dead after a period of time? How would you feel if you thought he was still alive after 4 years, but then get a letter and personal belongings, after all that time has passed, knowing he was killed in action.

I do understand the horrors of war and what it does to a country. When my husband was in Iraq and Afghanistan, we would usually talk every other day in some way. Technology is a wonderful thing to have that was not available back then. I think what really bothers me about this is, questioning if this actually happened, how can we be so sure of the timeline. I know that the Instructor said in the opening document that the authenticity of the letter was in question because the real one had been lost. This also raises big questions as to what was added, taken out, or when it was really delivered.

I think to myself now do I watch this as entertainment the way it was meant to be used for or to use it as a tool to actually base facts on? I think I will still be open minded and watch it. I would love more information on the letter. Time to do some research.

Sum of ratings:2 (1) [Show parent](#) | [Edit](#) | [Split](#) | [Delete](#) | [Reply](#)**Re: Creative License and Historical Accuracy**

by Robyn Stevens - Sunday, January 27, 2013, 8:45 PM

I went to the PBS.org website, clicked on The Civil War, went to historical documents and found the copy of Ballou's love letter. Actually reading it was more moving to me then listening to it. I also noticed that one point was left out of the film and that is when he mentioned his son Edgar in the letter. I wonder why Burns did not have the entire letter read? It was a very emotional letter. I think reading it all would have made it even more moving. Although, what he already put in the film was enough to make you want to continue with the series to find out more interesting facts.

Also after the letter, there are some facts about the family if you would like to know more. I was very interested and surprised by what I read.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Re: Creative License and Historical Accuracy

by Robert Stimpson - Sunday, January 27, 2013, 3:59 PM

I think that is a very good point. The armies probably didn't put too much worry into getting the letters to their loved ones, especially since they had almost all of their man and vehicle power going towards the war, they didn't have much to spare in returning post to people while the fighting was going on.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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accurate understanding of the history of this war

by Mark Gorski - Friday, January 25, 2013, 10:41 AM

If one were to limit themselves to only watching the Ken Burns Video Series or reading Mr. McPherson's book one would be presented with a vision of the civil war that is somewhat off chronologically and somewhat biased towards the north.

Now if all your after is a better understanding of the time period you would have achieved your goal because while slightly off and slightly biased these two sources do present us with a lot of good information and do give us a good feel for how things were. The average American with an interest in the subject is not going to find these discrepancies disturbing. Or at least not disturbing enough to dissuade them.

If, however, this course is your first step on the path to becoming a historian of the American Civil War you would do well to seek other sources to corroborate or refute these sources. If your goal is indeed to become a historian of the American Civil War then you already know that there is no way you will get all the information you need from one book and one video series so in all honesty this argument is actually moot.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: accurate understanding of the history of this war

by Jacob Pusey - Friday, January 25, 2013, 12:03 PM

I think you make a great point when mentioning how the average American might feel about the discrepancies. They would most likely not care at all considering they likely just learned more about the Civil War in an hour or so than they had their whole lives. It is easy to be critical and try and only view the series from a purely historical perspective, but I need to remind myself that the movie was actually meant to excite average people about history and not to cater to actual historians who are dying to pick apart every detail and pounce on any mistake that they might see as blasphemous in the eyes of history. You are absolutely right when you say that anyone who is actually interested in studying the Civil War should already know that they need a few more sources.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

2

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accurate understanding of the history of this war

by Mark Gorski - Friday, January 25, 2013, 10:42 AM

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Sum of ratings: (1)

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Re: accurate understanding of the history of this war

by Micah Young - Sunday, January 27, 2013, 4:28 PM

I agree with you that the two resources that we are using for this course have certain inadequacies. And, that they are nevertheless useful for improving one's understanding of this time in history. I don't think though that the debate about the quality of the film as an historical resource is moot. Although, sometimes it feels that way after reading many forum posts based on this one event in one episode. I think to

see the goal of the debate we have all been participating in it helps to consider whom is presenting it.

The excerpt in this week's forum came from an article written by a history instructor who helps other history teachers incorporate the "The Civil War" documentary into their history curriculum. The lengthy article we read from last week was written by two professors of history who were debating the series' usefulness in a classroom setting. Now, our history instructor has us debating the same thing. Considerations about the film's techniques and accuracy have thus far been raised by historians, particularly regarding the series' usefulness for teaching history. I think this is relevant because those who are teaching history don't want to only improve the knowledge of their students, but, more completely, they want their students to end up with good and adequate knowledge of the history being taught.

I think that there are two things that a history course like this one can nearly guarantee: upon its conclusion it will not have produced an historian, and, it will have improved its participants' knowledge of history; no one will be great but everyone will be better. I think that this agrees with your posting. I think that the point of these arguments though is based on the goal that people should not only be better, but they should be good. And, if it's fair to make that distinction, I think that is why arguments like this are important. Obviously, the film will give a person better historical understanding, but how good will that better understanding be? It is a very useful resource, but what is the best way to use it for learning history?

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

3

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Ballou



by Courtney Merrell - Friday, January 25, 2013, 9:37 PM

I find it interesting that half the class is saying how "confused" they were about the Ballou letter at the end of the episode. I feel that if it hadn't been a discussion topic, these individuals wouldn't have realized the difference or not. He did it in a way that didn't make it feel like it was out of order, sure he added it in there at the end to really make the tragedies of war hit home, and I'm sure there was also a little bit of greed behind it, to make you eager to watch the next episode. But it was a terrific ending to a very educational documentary.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Re: Ballou



by Jessica Cadenasso - Sunday, January 27, 2013, 8:20 PM

i agree with you that is this wasn't a topic we wouldn't have gave it a second look. But i do think it has a good impact on how familys at home felt about the war. And how the soldiers were thinking about love ones and trying to get home to them. If we didn't know that the wife got the letter after the war it wouldn't have brought up a lot of

controversy about the timeline of the war.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Creative License

by Adam Coutts - Friday, January 25, 2013, 10:56 PM

When artists, like Ken Burns, use creative licenses they often provoke controversy by offending those who resent the reinterpretation of cherished beliefs or previous works. That is what this letter does; for one thing it's out of place, for another the letter is shortened possibly to give a greater sense of duty rather than the last letter to his wife and the grief and loss that he will never see his sons grow to "honorable manhood". The letter in my opinion did what it was supposed to in this light; it was to reaffirm that the men who went off to fight and die for their country did so at this great sense of duty for their Union or Confederate country. This letter is really left to us to interpret how we feel at the end of this episode: a great sense of sadness for all those that lost their lives, in the course of one's duty you may feel a loss of loved ones not only for those heading to war but the ones who also wait for their loved one's return.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: Creative License

by Jacob Pusey - Sunday, January 27, 2013, 9:27 PM

I think that the letter really did a great job a wrapping up what the first episode was about. It gives the audience some personal background of how so many of these soldiers ended up where they did and how they may have felt once they got there. I do have issue about the letters validity because it is likely not the original words that Ballou wrote. However, it also serves a purpose at the end of the film because it does foreshadow what was to come. Many people in the North really believed that the war would be short and an easy Union victory. Obviously this was not the case and it is actually very interesting that the only intended reader of the letter did not see it until after the fighting was over. This gives me an idea of just how chaotic the country was in those years. I think if Burns would have been clear and given the whole story, the letter would have had nearly as much depth as the narration that he did include.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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These are things that cause me to question accuracy

by Micah Young - Sunday, January 27, 2013, 12:45 AM

It is difficult to rely on the accuracy of the history that is in the film. I think that the film intends to be, and is, informative and insightful, but it is limited by its techniques. This perspective has grown on me over the last two weeks by watching how the film is narrated

and through reading the series of critiques that we have been assigned.

One example of a technique that provides insightful information but compromises on detail is the Ballou letter. We have already discussed it's date and how it is placed out of the chronology presented in the film, and the fact that the original letter no longer exists. However, Ken Burns made a further editorial decision about how much of the letter's content he would use, since there are parts of it that he leaves out. PBS has the letter, in the form that it was presented in this series, on its website and they recognize the abbreviations via its format: "My very dear Sarah: The indications are very strong that we shall move in a few days—perhaps tomorrow. Lest I should not be able to write again, I feel impelled to write a few lines that may fall under your eye when I shall be no more . . ."
http://www.pbs.org/civilwar/war/ballou_letter.html. This article ultimately shows four different parts that have been abbreviated; it is also easy to find full versions of the letter and see the several parts that were not included by Burns for the PBS series. It doesn't bother me that Burns shortened the letter, and I might have done the same thing if wanting to excerpt a longer document, but I would have liked to know that he had shortened it. Another option instead of removing content would have been to read it faster as it is read, I suppose, at about the same rate that it was written. I think that this is an example of how the techniques the film uses don't provide a great context for accuracy and information. There is no opportunity in the format of the series to reveal how material has been edited (at least text will show it) and to provide contextual background for the material that is included, such as the details surrounding Ballou's letter that have already been discussed.

The mistaken date for Lincoln's speech to the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield is another example of inaccuracy. I'm quoting Escobar's recent email about the forums, and it's kind of funny to quote an email, where he asks "if Ken Burns is so dedicated to his work and takes such care in his subject matter, why didn't he or his staff get that simple fact right?" I ask the same thing, because it seems if his historical panel existed to safeguard accuracy then something simple like this would not be missed.

One last thing about the film techniques that I think limits them is their pace. After watching episode two I thought that it could have fit a lot more information into its short run time. The film frequently had periods of time where the only sound accompanying the visuals was music. And, when the history is being narrated, the narrator speaks so deliberately and slowly. This does make it easy to follow and I have enjoyed the narrative. However, with this pace, it won't be possible to add a lot of details to clarify some of the contexts and nuances that can be confusing. So, I agree with one of the last reviews we read about the film that it is "Superbly produced" but limited," and that its limitations include the uncertainty that it will properly represent historical details.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Creative License vs. Creative Arrangement



by Alexander Kristy - Sunday, January 27, 2013, 10:17 PM

The more I read other students' forum posts and think about the Ken Burns series the more I want to know about what liberties a documentary filmmaker should and shouldn't take.

Although a bit short, I have found a decent article discussing this.

<http://www.writersstore.com/creative-license-vs-creative-arrangement/>. This article talks about creative license vs. creative arrangement. The author Sheila Curran Bernard's, an upcoming documentary filmmaker, opinion is "In general, the term "creative license" doesn't apply to documentary filmmaking, because documentary filmmakers--who are something of a hybrid between artists and journalists--may not take liberties with the facts as they're generally acknowledged to be true." I agree with her opinion. She talks a little bit about misleading the viewer, and I think this is what has happened to a certain extent with Burns' series. I think that Burns has taken more to the creative arrangement side, and this seems to have led to some of his historical inaccuracies, such as wrong dates.

Bernard speaks about creative arrangement this way. "A documentary might open at the middle or end of the event being covered, and then work its way back to the chronological beginning." "Multiple story threads might be interwoven. In making these choices, however, filmmakers must be careful not to violate the story's overall factual accuracy." I enjoy Burns' documentaries and I think overall he does a pretty good job, but it does feel like sometimes he gets more caught up in setting a tone for the series with his music and old photos. I think the problem lies with his trying to create a beautiful documentary and maybe the mistakes are because he spends more time and energy on these aspects than making sure he is providing correct factual information.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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