

HST 209: American History: Civil War W14 (Escobar 32165)

Home ► My courses ► Winter 2014 ► HST 209 W14 (Escobar 32165) ► January 12 - January 18 ►

Forum 1 ► Introducing Ken Burns



Search forums

Forum 1

Display replies in nested form

Move this discussion to ...

(Introducing Ken Burns) Next >



Introducing Ken Burns



by Joe Escobar - Sunday, January 12, 2014, 8:51 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.

I strongly recommend that you do NOT attempt to answer all questions in a single post. There is no limit to the number of posts and replies you can make this week.

IMPORTANT - SUBJECT LINES

When addressing the materials and questions, DO NOT leave your subject line blank (or the same as mine... RE: Introducing Ken Burns). Put something descriptive in the subject line of your post, such as "Burn's Video", "First Article", or "Historical Problems". 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: -

Edit | Delete | Reply



Ken Burns short video



by Austin Crook - Monday, January 13, 2014, 4:03 PM

1. The video clip definitely intrigued me with Ken Burns' work for a number of different reasons. First of all, it definitely interested me in the process of creating these films. I have never done research on the steps taken to create a film or the process behind those steps. I enjoyed the short section about the voices chosen for these films. I would not have realized how important these voices could be for different roles, until I heard the variety of examples. It also drew me to trust Ken Burns because of his open-mind towards his film making and the process he described. I trusted his philosophies of never trying to fit some piece of the film to your pre-conceived idea,

and to allow yourself to be flexible. His quote that he and his co-workers have a “Joyful relationship to the process of learning something new” definitely stuck with me. The ability to learn something new is a gift that many people take for granted these days.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

Show parent | Edit | Split | Delete | Reply



Ken Burns First Article

by Austin Crook - Monday, January 13, 2014, 6:00 PM

After reading the first article I was pleased with the reviews I was reading about Ken Burns and his work. I expected there to be criticisms because there usually are with film or literature. What reassured me was that some of the critiques about this film were all things that could be very easily researched in order to find out what may have been missing. When I read Robert Toplin's quote, Toplin is a professor at the University of North Carolina, “*The Civil War* made a tremendous positive impact”, I knew I felt confident in this series. I also was reassured by learning that about 39 million people watched the debut of this series on PBS. Which means that it must be created by a well-respected producer and is a compelling story.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

Show parent | Edit | Split | Delete | Reply



Ken Burns third article eval.

by Austin Crook - Monday, January 13, 2014, 9:44 PM

1. In the third article by Michael Morrison and Robert May, there was one key section that left some doubt in my mind. I think it was the sincerity and seriousness in this passage that hit me the most. This particular section included, “Burns’ production probably conveys the pathos and ironies of the Civil War as effectively as it is possible to do on screen or in written narrative. But it is not accurate history.” This statement causes me to wonder how it is not accurate history? If it is as good as it gets for film or narrative, how can it even be acceptable if it is not accurate? This review was also very critical of the Introduction part to the series. It discussed that the opening debut that was supposed to cover the complex background of the Civil War era, was over in forty quick minutes. The critics do not believe that this could give an adequate depiction of the complex issues occurring during this time period.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

Show parent | Edit | Split | Delete | Reply



Re: Ken Burns third article eval.

by Christopher Plourde - Sunday, January 19, 2014, 8:58 AM

It is not "accurate" in the fact that it does not give a full accounting of *all* the various factors, events etc... of the Civil War. There are also some inaccuracies, though these are minor. While this is a valid criticism from the point of view of a historian it does not impact the educational value on the part of the layman. I personally think that many of the criticisms in these articles are by historians and for historians. I don't think they detract from the power of the series and the way they bring this conflict to life for the "uninitiated".

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

[Show parent](#) | [Edit](#) | [Split](#) | [Delete](#) | [Reply](#)



Ken Burns overall opinion

by Austin Crook - Monday, January 13, 2014, 9:45 PM

My overall opinion about this film series is a positive one. After reading and researching these various reviews, I am confident that this film is indeed "as good as it gets"(Morrison/May) for a film on the Civil War era. Some historians may or may not believe that the film does justice to our important history, but it seems as though the majority of people agree that this is the closest we can get to events so long ago!

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

[Show parent](#) | [Edit](#) | [Split](#) | [Delete](#) | [Reply](#)



Burns Video

by Melinda Parks - Tuesday, January 14, 2014, 10:30 AM

After watching the video, I had a good opinion of Ken Burns and his work. I appreciated how he presented their process, saying that they "approach our projects with ignorance and curiosity." His persona to me seemed very humble in that he admitted that they discover personal biases along the way, but still enjoy learning new things. I also enjoyed learning more about the research process, and it seemed from this video that the research team took care to be thorough. I thought that overall Ken Burns presented himself and what he is doing very well.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

[Show parent](#) | [Edit](#) | [Split](#) | [Delete](#) | [Reply](#)



Re: Burns Video

by Austin Crook - Tuesday, January 14, 2014, 12:39 PM

Hey Melinda, I also liked that he expressed his approach to creating films as "ignorant and curious". It gives you a sense that he is not out to prove anything with his films. He seems to be a guy that just enjoys learning new things and creating a story that other people can appreciate with him. He definitely seems to be very humble as well, which is what probably makes others confident in his work.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

[Show parent](#) | [Edit](#) | [Split](#) | [Delete](#) | [Reply](#)



First Article

by Melinda Parks - Tuesday, January 14, 2014, 10:42 AM

After reading the first article, I still had a fairly good opinion of Burns and his film, although this article made me recognize that of course the film has limits and is by no means perfect. One criticism in this article that, while I was reading it the first time, struck me as totally ridiculous was that some historians "criticized Burns' 'insistence on retaining visual beauty rather than tackling difficult questions.'" While tackling difficult historical questions is of course important, the very fact that it *is* a film almost demands that there be some visual beauty. The audience expects it, and that may well be what keeps the more casual learner of history interested. The article quotes Burns as saying, "[W]hat we were trying to produce is not a piece of academic paper. We were trying to speak to a very large audience ... and excite them and not be the last word or the first word." I think that sums up what I am trying to say very well. The film wasn't meant to be taken alone as the definitive word on the Civil War, and I think that visual beauty probably played a large part in keeping that "large audience" interested.

Overall, this article did not change my first opinion of Burn's work very much. While it made me recognize its limitations, I came away still thinking that this film was a very positive and admirable piece of work.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

[Show parent](#) | [Edit](#) | [Split](#) | [Delete](#) | [Reply](#)



Re: First Article

by Austin Crook - Tuesday, January 14, 2014, 12:42 PM

It is interesting that the critics brought up Burns' beauty in his film, and that they believed it was drawing away from answering difficult questions. I can understand that these critics may feel like some serious topics were left out, but I would not expect them to complain about what they called "visual beauty". Some could argue that Burns' pictures and photography are worth more than text or another story. Many people do believe that a picture is worth a thousand words.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

[Show parent](#) | [Edit](#) | [Split](#) | [Delete](#) | [Reply](#)



Re: First Article

by Kylie Emory - Tuesday, January 14, 2014, 5:50 PM

That same line struck me as well. I suppose if this film were made for an audience of strictly historians and Civil War buffs the visual beauty would be unimportant, but as you pointed out, it keeps the casual viewer intrigued. With the largest PBS audience ever, I would say that he did his job quite well! I think He did an excellent job of creating a balance between beauty and historical accuracy that appeals to a large audience.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

[Show parent](#) | [Edit](#) | [Split](#) | [Delete](#) | [Reply](#)



Re: First Article

by Austin Crook - Thursday, January 16, 2014, 6:59 PM

Ya I definitely think that it was intended to include a balance between the visual art/photography and the factual historical content. I think that if it had been too much of the factual history then many of the "average joe" viewers would not have been as intrigued by the series. Some of the critics who believed he relied on his photography too much probably did not take into consideration that Burns was trying to produce a show that everyone would be interested in watching.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

[Show parent](#) | [Edit](#) | [Split](#) | [Delete](#) | [Reply](#)



Admiring Ken Burns

by Lauren Grant - Tuesday, January 14, 2014, 1:42 PM

After the film clip, I did find myself admiring Ken Burns and his work on the film. I found his way of filming intriguing. I would have never thought of creating a historical documentary by filming openly without a strict direction of what had to be included and what had to be ignored. The way that Burns researched and went through archives for photographs personally with his own inner circle of people made me feel like he had a deep connection to the film and felt the need to be as historically accurate as possible. Burn's attention to detail from the music, voices, and photographs made me want to learn more about him and feel confident in his work.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

[Show parent](#) | [Edit](#) | [Split](#) | [Delete](#) | [Reply](#)



Burn's Video

by Eryne Grant - Tuesday, January 14, 2014, 1:42 PM

I have always enjoyed Ken Burns documentary style and work as a whole, as I have seen a few of his films. I admire how dedicated and passionate he is about his subject, and the video clip about him really emphasized that passion. The message he presented in his video clip was focused on how much time, effort, and dedication that is compiled into his films. For example, I was very impressed when Burns talked about how he films anything and everything that is related to his subject in the hopes of putting it in the film. I really liked the video clip and the light it put him in. I believe that he's a very talented man who wants to share his passion with the world and does so with a certain artistic and informative flair.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

[Show parent](#) | [Edit](#) | [Split](#) | [Delete](#) | [Reply](#)



Re: Burn's Video

by Austin Crook - Tuesday, January 14, 2014, 5:54 PM

Hey Eryne, I also liked the fact that Burns made it very evident that he goes in with an open-mind while filming for a project. He does not seem to have any problem with adding or editing material not matter how much work it takes to fix it. I am also

interested in some of his other films, so I was wondering which other films you have seen of his?

Sum of ratings: 1 (1)

Show parent | Edit | Split | Delete | Reply



Recommendations

by Eryne Grant - Thursday, January 16, 2014, 8:00 AM

Hi Austin, thanks for responding! I have seen a few, but the two I distinctly remember are "Jazz" and "Lewis and Clark". I really recommend "Jazz", it shows off Burn's style really well and I think it was equally entertaining as well as educational.

Sum of ratings: 1 (1)

Show parent | Edit | Split | Delete | Reply



Re: Recommendations

by Austin Crook - Friday, January 17, 2014, 9:26 AM

Oh ok I might have to look into one of those. I am guessing the Jazz movie is just about the history of Jazz? Am I wrong about that?

Sum of ratings: (1)

Show parent | Edit | Split | Delete | Reply



Re: Recommendations

by Tiffani Brizendine Schnetzer - Saturday, January 18, 2014, 7:34 PM

The War is really great too. My boyfriend and I have watched it so many times we decided to buy it.

Sum of ratings: (1)

Show parent | Edit | Split | Delete | Reply



Re: Recommendations

by Lauren Grant - Saturday, January 18, 2014, 11:13 PM

I also enjoyed "Jazz" quite a bit and would definitely recommend it to anyone wanting to watch more of Burn's work. The music is exceptional as in most of his documentaries and adds to the depth in which you can immerse yourself into the film. I found it an enjoyable look into another one of America's unique histories. It really makes me look forward to watching more of "The Civil War" to see how Burn's incorporates music as well as photos to make an entertaining and educational film.

Sum of ratings: 1 (1)

Show parent | Edit | Split | Delete | Reply



Conflicting thoughts on Ken Burns and his filmwork



by Kristine Wallace - Tuesday, January 14, 2014, 3:24 PM

After viewing the video clip and reading the two reviews of Ken Burns film, I had some conflicting thoughts regarding how I would feel after viewing the film itself. I felt that Ken Burns is definitely passionate about his film making and did attempt to put his heart into this documentary. Unfortunately, though he did admit that certain things did have to be omitted in the process. Now, I do not know what exactly he did have to omit in the film, but I am hoping that for the most part overall he did achieve what he was hoping to. I do believe he wanted this film to reach out to the viewing public and by doing it through cinema it would reach more people than books themselves. We do live in a television/movie age now so I think that this kind of media will touch more people, especially younger people who are more inclined to watch a television program than read a historical novel.

The reviews that were written seemed mostly favorable in saying just that-more people will be reached. Unfortunately, with the cuttings he did have to make and what I read about historical inadequacies in the film, I am concerned that myself and others will get misinformation. I believe the third article was definitely more thorough in its review, naming the inaccuracy and factual errors that were presented. There is a good more detail in this review and it probably should be one read by all people before they view the film.

As I mentioned in my last essay concerning McPherson's book that we will be reading this semester, it is most likely the best idea to go into the viewing of this film with an open mind. This would be best served by viewing the photographs in order to get a feel for the time period and the atrocities that ensued in the war. Also, listening to the diaries and journals that were written at that time would give the viewer another feel for what was actually taking place. But as far as historical dates and times and even figureheads that were important, I will most likely go back and fact check some of this material to make sure I do have the correct information. It is too bad, as suggested by the reviews, that certain prominent figures during this time were omitted or "gleamed" over but as Mr. Burns mentioned he was not able to put "everything" in his film.

Again, I will go into the viewing of this film with an open mind and enjoy it for what it is; a professional and masterful piece of media intended to touch a large audience. A piece of media that will give more people the chance to feel and experience what the Civil War was really about.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

Show parent | Edit | Split | Delete | Reply



Re: Conflicting thoughts on Ken Burns and his filmwork



by Melinda Parks - Sunday, January 19, 2014, 8:42 PM

Keeping an open mind is very important, I agree. I don't think you can really take any history book or movie as the definitive word on the subject. There will always be more to learn, different perspectives, new details.

Ken Burns is quoted in the first article as saying, "[W]hat we were trying to produce is not a piece of academic paper. We were trying to speak to a very large audience ... and excite them and not be the last word or the first word." I think you are right in saying that more this film probably touched more young people than a history book would. Although there might be history inaccuracies, as the second article points out,

this film was never meant to be taken alone. Like you, however, the one thing that concerns me is *misinformation*, but not necessarily *lack of information*. It amazed me the number of errors that the second article pointed out. Still, the feat that Ken Burns has accomplished in getting so many people to watch and enjoy learning about history is quite amazing.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

Show parent | Edit | Split | Delete | Reply



Burns video and music



by Kylie Emory - Tuesday, January 14, 2014, 5:41 PM

I do in fact admire Ken Burns. It seems he has put a thorough amount of research and effort into the making of his film.

I love that they create 90% of the music before they are done editing. It is such a huge part of the film, and as he stated in the video, has a very organic feel to it. I never would have thought that music would have such a large impact on a documentary, but it really enhances the mood and emotions. When I watched episode one, the music guided the tone and feeling of the show, whether it was ominous, or excitement, you could feel it.

I am slightly concerned that the second article says that the narrated text is critically flawed, but it would seem impossible to make a film that depicts everything from the period in total accuracy. Every story has a side, or six, and trying to tell all of those sides is not possible. Burns seems to do a good job depicting as much fact as he can.

I am very confident that this is an excellent source of information for our class, and if there are issues, we have our books to back it up.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

Show parent | Edit | Split | Delete | Reply



Re: Burns video and music



by Austin Crook - Wednesday, January 15, 2014, 6:22 PM

I was shocked when I heard that 90% percent of the music was done before they are done editing. It definitely shows that they put a lot of time into choosing their music for a film. I would've thought that they would've spent more time trying to match music to what pictures and footage they filmed as well.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

Show parent | Edit | Split | Delete | Reply



Re: Burns video and music



by Kristine Wallace - Saturday, January 18, 2014, 3:52 PM

I do agree that music does have a huge effect on ANY film. If you think on all the movies you have watched through the course of your life, music did enhance the

scene. Music can touch you in different ways than just acting itself--it can uplift you, make you sad, inspire you, cause anger. I believe that this film will definitely be enhanced by the use of music that pertains to that time in history.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

Show parent | Edit | Split | Delete | Reply



Re: Burns video and music



by Tiffani Brizendine Schnetzer - Sunday, January 19, 2014, 2:40 AM

The second article put doubt in my head as well, and I agree having the book is a nice cushion to round out some of what was missing from the film. I looked at the critics as a source also, they have a lot to add to the bigger picture this class is trying to make for us.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

Show parent | Edit | Split | Delete | Reply



Re: Burns video and music



by Christopher Plourde - Sunday, January 19, 2014, 9:04 AM

The fact that they decided on the music before creating the documentary intrigued me as well. I am still trying to wrap my head around how they pulled this off. But perhaps that is what gave this series its continuity and flow, which it has in abundance. One certainly cannot argue with the final product (or any of the other Ken Burn's documentaries). I have watched several and the pull me in as effectively as any film. Of course I have always loved history so I am somewhat biased. That being said, I have seen other documentaries on the history channel that I thought were awful.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

Show parent | Edit | Split | Delete | Reply



The methodology of Ken Burns' Documentaries



by Christopher Plourde - Wednesday, January 15, 2014, 8:34 AM

In the video Ken Burns described the process and mentality with which he approaches his documentaries. It is difficult not to appreciate his attitude of "ignorance and discovery" for it should be the way in which any of us approach new material, be it in this class or life in general. It is clear he is fully involved in producing an end product that is satisfying on many levels, from the selection of the musical score, images, voices and narration. Personally I can say that this caring shows. I have seen several of his documentaries (The Civil War, The West, The National Parks, The War (about WW2)) and they are as much works of art as they are mediums by which to inform those who wish to know more about history. The fact that they have reached so many and have achieved such broad acclaim is a testament to power of the process used to produce such extraordinary films. When I sign up for this course I was hoping that this documentary would be used as I have always thought that it was an excellent way to introduce those who wish to know more about the Civil War who would not be open to a more academic approach and as a "gateway" to further study. I have watched it several times and each time I am pulled into it. I hope others

have the same experience.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

Show parent | Edit | Split | Delete | Reply



Re: The methodology of Ken Burns' Documentaries



by Austin Crook - Sunday, January 19, 2014, 8:54 AM

I definitely think that approaching something new with "ignorance and discovery" in mind is something that many people cannot do anymore. Our society has created this idea that you have to always be right and you always need to get the answer quickly. So for someone like Ken Burns to make this film with such an attitude is impressive.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

Show parent | Edit | Split | Delete | Reply



Criticisms of Ken Burns' "The Civil War"



by Christopher Plourde - Wednesday, January 15, 2014, 9:17 AM

First it must be stated that I have been a big fan of the series. As I read the article "Ken Burns' fans and critics have their say" I had to keep in check my initial aversion to what was being said and judge it on its own merits. That being said I found myself scratching my head several times wondering how certain criticism were really relevant. Several instances of this stand out:

"failed to reflect the profound changes in the way history is recorded." Scholars today seek to discover lost histories by including the voices of ethnic minorities and women who did not have the leisure to keep diaries, Litwack said."

"The Civil War was "safe, risk-free, upbeat and reassuring," Litwack added. It portrayed the "essential passivity of blacks and women," "perpetuated the notion that 'This need not have happened at all,'" and "celebrated the reconciliation of North and South while ignoring the brutal and violent racial repression on which that reconciliation rested."

"As Confederate and Union veterans were embracing and socializing at their reunion--underneath all that marvelous newsreel footage--the white South was winning [through] terrorism and murder, legal repression, what it had lost on the battlefield--footage that's not so nice," said Litwack.

These are strange to me for several reasons. One the Film was about the Civil War, not about the reconstruction that followed which, in truth, could easily justify another series of equal length. The same can be said about the struggle for civil rights by African-Americans. History is like an onion, you peel off the outer layer only to find another layer. The more you look the more you find, with each new focus exposing a wealth of new information and new connections. It is quite impossible for a film series of the finite length of "The Civil War" to cover everything that each of these historians thought was missing. The difficulty seems to rest in the fact that the historians themselves seemed incapable of recognizing the limited perspective of those not as informed as they are; that what appears narrow and thin to them is both broad and comprehensive to the uninitiated.

The second problem I have is with the criticism of "beauty". A film is, above and beyond

its educational intentions, a work of art. It is intended as such, as Ken Burns makes clear:

"One thing that we haven't really said is how much history has been murdered by people who are professionally employed as historians," responded Ken Burns. "[W]hat we were trying to produce is not a piece of academic paper. We were trying to speak to a very large audience ... and excite them and not be the last word or the first word."

While I think "murdered" is somewhat melodramatic, it refers to the inaccessibility of most works of history to the general public. The beauty of the "The Civil War" is what has enable it to achieve so broad an appeal and that, in and of itself, more than makes up for its lack of inclusion of every detail. Introductory documentaries of this type I think are invaluable in getting people interested in history; a launch pad, so to speak, for further study. Consequently, there is no need to be, as Ken Burns states, to the "the last word" on the Civil War.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

[Show parent](#) | [Edit](#) | [Split](#) | [Delete](#) | [Reply](#)



Re: Criticisms of Ken Burns' "The Civil War"



by Melinda Parks - Sunday, January 19, 2014, 9:04 PM

I thought it odd as well that Litwack mentioned things that happened after the war, since that doesn't appear to be what the film is focusing on. It is so true that that would take a much longer series or another series altogether to cover. I think that Robert Toplin hit the nail on the head when he said, "Film is not really comprehensive....It can't be wallpaper history; it cannot cover everything." I didn't understand why the critics in the first article were so harsh on this series, because obviously one film couldn't cover every single aspect of the war. I think that this film could be used as an excellent starting point for someone just getting into Civil War history--but I don't think that it should be taken alone and assumed to be the last word on the Civil War, and neither should it be criticized as if it had claimed to be the last word.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

[Show parent](#) | [Edit](#) | [Split](#) | [Delete](#) | [Reply](#)



A more valid, but still somewhat puzzling, criticism of "The Civil War"



by Christopher Plourde - Wednesday, January 15, 2014, 9:48 AM

The second critical article "The Limitations of Classroom Media: Ken Burns' Civil War Series as a Test Case" is a more valid criticism of the series. In this article a number of inaccuracies and simplifications in the film series are exposed and does require one to take a more cautious attitude. There are incorrect dates that should have been caught during the editing process, over simplifications "Meanwhile James Buchanan did nothing" certainly create a false impression. It is good that we have McPherson's book to fill in the gaps and correct some of the errors.

One still gets the impression that the author belabors the short comings over much. When correcting the errors he seems more within bounds than when he talks about what the film should have been. That being said, it is the job of historians to "set the record straight" so, as a consequence, I appreciated the content far more. Film is a limited device to convey the vast complexity of history, but it can be the most effective in reach the most

people. I think it is important to recognize the strengths as well as its limitations and see it as only one arrow in the quiver of an educator. For what it is, Ken Burns' "The Civil War" has done a fine job of hitting its intended target....the people still capable of approaching the subject as Ken Burns did.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

Show parent | Edit | Split | Delete | Reply



Meet Ken Burns Video



by Jacob Hutchins - Wednesday, January 15, 2014, 3:05 PM

I very much find myself admiring Ken Burns after watching this short video and I think his message is great. This is history made accessible to the average person. His entire attitude of discovery, and the process with which his crew approaches it, lend strong credibility to his motivations as someone attempting to essentially perform a public service. Mr. Burns is not some big shot Hollywood producer; this guy works on public broadcasting specifically so that these subjects can be made available to people that otherwise may not be able to access it as readily.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

Show parent | Edit | Split | Delete | Reply



Re: Meet Ken Burns Video



by Austin Crook - Sunday, January 19, 2014, 9:07 AM

I agree that Ken Burns did a great job making this very complex and historical era available for all people to enjoy. Not many people would take time out of their day to watch a history show on t.v. But Burns was able to have enough variety in his series that kept people drawn into this important civil war era.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

Show parent | Edit | Split | Delete | Reply



Fans and Critics Have Their Say



by Jacob Hutchins - Wednesday, January 15, 2014, 3:17 PM

I believe the title of the third section of the article, "Superbly Produced but Limited", sums up much of what critics seem to feel was the biggest failing of the film; it didn't go far enough. I couldn't care less about that. I mean, this may be a fairly lengthy documentary (as movies go) but the Civil War is such a vast subject that there was never any way Ken Burns was going to avoid this criticism. I have read 1,000 page books that critics rake over the coals for not being extensive enough in certain areas (I believe this is one of the criticisms McPherson got for Battle Cry of Freedom- something far more scholarly than what Ken Burns put together). This is not to say I want to simply write off people criticisms of this documentary. It really does take a very broad overview of much of the Civil War with some things simply omitted entirely. But I have never watched a documentary expecting it to be as comprehensive as written, scholarly work. Ken Burns is not a historian, and, as he said himself, he approached the project with a "sense of ignorance" so that he could discover the subject and work to create something about it at the same time. People don't

watch t.v. looking to get the same thing out of it that they would from a text book or academic journal; most people hate reading that stuff. Mr. Burns had the task of presenting the material in as accurate a fashion as a non-historian could, AND make it pleasant to sit through and watch for several hours. Ultimately, I think his work is a resounding success despite some historical inaccuracies and brief or omitted areas of discussion.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

Show parent | Edit | Split | Delete | Reply



Re: Fans and Critics Have Their Say

by Eryne Grant - Thursday, January 16, 2014, 11:52 AM

I absolutely agree with your points, such as Ken Burns is not a historian, therefore "he approached the project with a 'sense of ignorance' ". You made some great points with the addition of appealing to people who watched the documentary series on T.V, I never would have thought about the series in that light since we're watching it in a class setting. Your point of view on the critique sums up the main issues very well and I really enjoy your point of view.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

Show parent | Edit | Split | Delete | Reply



Re: Fans and Critics Have Their Say

by Kylie Emory - Thursday, January 16, 2014, 4:29 PM

It seems that somebody is always going to be a critic. I also think that he did a great job portraying what he could, and the important parts of the war. If he would have gone much farther it would have become very monotonous and dull to watch. Burns is able to share a lot of information this way, while still intriguing the viewer.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

Show parent | Edit | Split | Delete | Reply



Re: Fans and Critics Have Their Say

by Kristine Wallace - Sunday, January 19, 2014, 9:51 PM

Limited is most likely a very good way of explaining the film. Of course, with any textbook, film or media of your choice, there is only SO much that can be put into it. I believe that most writers, directors, producers etc. would like to be able to include EVERYTHING but that is virtually impossible. I believe that for most of us, we wish we could all be viewers on the sidelines of the real happenings at the time that it did happen but of course that is impossible too. So, for what we have, we can take the best parts and as always, FACT CHECK which I am very big into. There is always problems with the real facts so for us to be able to gain the most knowledge, it is best to put a bit more effort into it. Read more, watch more, search more.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

Show parent | Edit | Split | Delete | Reply



I just met Ken Burns.

by Robert Richardson - Wednesday, January 15, 2014, 8:29 PM

How Ken Burns can go out with a camera and an idea, stay open minded about his shots, film way more than he'd initially planned, alter his idea, and keep track of everything is beyond me. I don't know how he and his crew can dig through all of those piles of film and come up with a cohesive documentary but the outcome is pretty amazing. There is so much more to the process of making his films than I'd imagined. After getting a glimpse of how much work goes into these documentaries, it is astonishing to hear him say that he hopes everything he makes will air on public broadcast, that is where his passion shines through the most, he just wants the fruits of his labor to be seen, he wants to help to educate people.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

Show parent | Edit | Split | Delete | Reply



"Wallpaper History"

by Eryne Grant - Thursday, January 16, 2014, 11:41 AM

I believe that the quote "It can't be wallpaper history; it cannot cover everything" said by Professor Robert Toplin in the second critique of Ken Burns accurately describes my understanding of why Burns puts the information that he does inside of his documentary. It is impossible to fit every tiny detail of history into one decent-length documentary. So, because of that fact, critics will comment about a lack of certain details, viewpoints, or ideas. A film of any sort cannot satisfy every viewers wants or expectations. I think Ken Burns takes what he has and puts his work into a compilation that tries to explore two different sides war with equal respect. If Burns wanted to make his film a wallpaper history lesson, he would have left out small details, artistic pictures, and everything that takes time away from the main historic moments of the civil war. My concerns with this article were minimum, I actually really enjoyed the criticism and felt like what they had to say was valuable to a view of Burns documentaries.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

Show parent | Edit | Split | Delete | Reply



Re: "Wallpaper History"

by Kylie Emory - Thursday, January 16, 2014, 9:28 PM

I thought that was an excellent quote! It certainly could be the wallpaper in the white house and still not completely cover every event in the war. As it says, in the first episode, "The war was fought in 10000 Places".. How could any one thing cover all of it? Three Million men fought in the war, and each one experienced something different I am sure.

I just wanted to share what images the quote brought to mind for myself. Have a great term!

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

2

Show parent | Edit | Split | Delete | Reply



Article 2

by Jacob Hutchins - Friday, January 17, 2014, 4:42 PM

I read the second critique article a few days ago, but wanted to give myself some time to let it digest and approach it fresh.

I suppose the sense I take away from it can be summed up by saying that, as a critique, the article seems to do 2 things: It attempts to offer precise criticism about the historical failings of the documentary, and it attempts to provide evidence and reasoning to suggest other ways Ken Burns could have presented the information to make it more accurate.

I believe the first failing of this approach is demonstrated in the opening sentence of the article:

"Americans usually watch t.v. to be entertained"

I believe this represents a fundamental misconception by the authors- presumably because they are historians and not film makers- that taints the entire thing:

Americans **always** watch t.v. to be entertained. Regardless of the content on the screen, nobody watches t.v. if it can't hold their attention, even on PBS. If you want a history *lesson* you open a book. I don't think it's too much of a stretch (as much of a shame as it is) to assume most Americans don't want to spend their time pouring over history books. It may sound like i'm nitpicking here, but in all fairness I felt the authors of this article were doing something similar throughout it.

The reason I find this to be a failing of their approach is because I believe it shows that these authors, while accredited historians, are attempting a scholarly review of a subject that is being delivered outside of their own medium and failing to recognize it, even if it is their field. Not to say that a historical review of a historical documentary is somehow inappropriate; quite the contrary. I just think that they are reviewing this thing like it was... I dunno... a book instead of a movie (if that makes sense). Their critique of his presentation does not take into account the true nature of the medium he worked with, in my opinion.

Moving on.

My next issue with this critique is that it presents some of the problems it accuses Ken Burns of having within his own work. To put it another way, it came off as a bit contradictory.

For example: They take serious issue with Ken Burns at multiple points for his explanation of the cause of the war. In fact, his interpretation of the war's cause is the main thrust of their issue with the film, it would seem. Beginning on page 2, the authors take Burn's interpretation to task and do not stop until the end of the article. They say things such as:

"The episode passes in forty swift minutes- considerably less than 10% of the documentary's total footage. This is simply not enough time for a complex story that historians have traced back to the Constitutional Convention of 1787"

Ok- the authors have an issue with how brief his explanation of the cause of the war is. And yet, scrolling down to the end of their article, the summation they give for the "*actual*" cause of the war is roughly 2 pages. The section titled "The Cause- The True Story" begins a quarter of the way down page 8 and goes roughly another quarter down page 10. So they have accused Burns of being too brief, and yet somehow manage to sum up the entire cause of the war in just a couple pages? I don't think so. Perhaps, just perhaps, the subject is so broad and hotly debated that any work done must simply operate within the constraints of space allowed by their respective medium. Ken burns had an episode, they had an article. Both structured their case around the space allotted.

Also, I felt like the authors were so wrapped up in their own explanation that they failed to realize that it tacitly agreed with what Ken Burns had to say! Call me crazy, but what I took away from Ken Burns explanation of the wars cause can be summed up with a single sentence: The South feared that the North was in the process of phasing out the institution that they relied on. The common man may not have cared about it one way or another, but at the political level this is certainly true.. And the authors of this article agree, essentially, with this summation. On page 8, at the end of the first paragraph, they drop this gem: "It was the Southern unwillingness to accept what the Republicans considered a rather moderate position on slavery which led to disunion. Again, call me crazy, but I truly feel this is not contradictory to what Ken Burns presents. I almost feel like they are parsing words to belabor a nuance that does not need to be dragged out.

In fairness to the authors, they have plenty of legitimate criticism, particularly in regards to the historical accuracy of some of the information. As they point out, there are things said and dates quoted that are simply wrong. But does this mean the entire documentary is inaccurate? Of course not. The authors, however, felt the need to write the entire thing off with a pen stroke:

"Although TV Burns' epic may well represent the finest film yet produce about the American Civil War, it has severe limitations as a teaching device. Burns' production probably conveys the pathos and ironies of the Civil War as effectively as it is possible to do on a screen or in written narrative. But it is not accurate history" (emphasis added).

There are some things wrong here, but to write off the entire piece of work, as the last sentence does, is silly. The specific areas of inaccuracy the authors produce do not constitute anywhere near a majority of the content within the film.

In summation, I felt they did not treat this documentary fairly. They reviewed it almost like a book, not a film, and raked Ken Burns over the coals for being too brief when they themselves were forced to be brief in their own analysis. I felt like they were over-emphasizing areas of weakness in an attempt to write off the entire documentary. I think that any teacher using this film in a class should most certainly address areas of omission and inaccuracy. It is of the utmost importance that students get information as correctly as possible. But history is a living thing, hotly debated, and cannot be cast in iron. I feel Ken Burns, as a non-scholar, did a great job of presenting mostly accurate information in a way that can actually hold peoples attention. The authors of this article should be thanking him for breathing life into a discipline that most view as stodgy and totally boring.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

Show parent | Edit | Split | Delete | Reply



Re: Article 2

by Melinda Parks - Sunday, January 19, 2014, 9:39 PM

I thought that the article brought up several valid criticisms, such as inaccurate dates and the errors related to John Brown's raid. It seems to me that both of those particular errors should have been caught in editing.

That being said, I agree with you that many critics of this series seemed to judge it as they would a scholar-researched book. While certainly most present valid arguments, surely a film cannot be judged by the same standard as a history book! A film, especially one that was intended to reach as large an audience as The Civil War was, needs to keep the audience interested, and I don't think including every single aspect and detail would have done that. Simply *because* Burns was trying to reach such a large audience, he needed to limit the huge amount of information that he could have put into this series. I think his hope was that this film would get people interested in the Civil War, and then they would go and do their own research.

As regards using this film as a classroom teaching device, I find it interesting that the article says, "But, because of their tendency to simplify history, films are rarely an effective substitute for book-based teaching." I agree with this statement in that it says that films are rarely an effective *substitute*. However, I think that films are a good way to pique students' interest and could be used effectively to *compliment* book-based teaching.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

Show parent | Edit | Split | Delete | Reply



I Have Confidence In Ken Burns

by Eryne Grant - Friday, January 17, 2014, 9:44 PM

I have a very high confidence level in this Civil War Series as our main video source of historical information for our class. The information given in this documentary is correct, therefore everyone studying The Civil War should learn about it. We cannot expect to know everything about the time period and war time frame because none of us experienced it first hand. As a student, I would rather take notes from a documentary than take notes from a text book. Having visual and audio aids to help the learning process make a huge difference in my understanding of the content. Although Burns said he wasn't trying to make an academic paper, the information is still valid, therefore giving off an academic vibe. I'm really enjoying watching these episodes and I believe it is a great learning method when paired with a textbook.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

Show parent | Edit | Split | Delete | Reply

Re: I Have Confidence In Ken Burns



by Tiffani Brizendine Schnetzer - Sunday, January 19, 2014, 2:33 AM

I completely agree. If I only have a textbook in front of me, it's sometimes difficult to be fully immersed in what I'm reading. Having a video to watch helps me stay focused and absorb more information. To watch a film about the topic I'm studying then go to a book provides me with background so that I can more easily understand and picture what I'm reading about.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

Show parent | Edit | Split | Delete | Reply



Its not just Facts

by Kylie Emory - Saturday, January 18, 2014, 9:28 AM

"I think a lot of people out there believe that history involves a simple, tidy operation of gathering the facts, laying out the chronology, and what is out there in the way of the story is all so obvious," Toplin

This is basically how I have always believed history to be. The chronological timeline at the bottom of the page with events and dates has always been my go to source for the "facts" of history.

I am quickly learning that I have been very mistaken! History has multiple sides, opinions and reasons. I have long thought that the civil war was fought over slavery, even though I have heard people allude to the fact that isn't true, I never learned what they meant. The first two weeks in this class have taught me more about the Civil War than I learned exploring the battlefields!

It has already become very obvious that a single source of information cannot cover any fraction of the Civil War. Every person in the war had their own reasons for fighting, their own experiences in each battle, and their own opinions of the outcomes.

I think Ken Burns has done about the best job that he can though given the circumstances. There is only so much that can be covered in a few hours of film for a war that lasted four years, and was fought over such complex issues as states rights, slavery, pride, location, property, and liberties.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

Show parent | Edit | Split | Delete | Reply



First Article

by Lauren Grant - Saturday, January 18, 2014, 11:02 PM

After reading the first article I began to see Ken Burn's The Civil War in more critical light. While after watching the video clip I found myself admiring Burns, this article made me reevaluate my perfect thoughts regarding the historical accuracy of the film. Although I still have an overall positive view on Burn's film, I realize that it has its flaws. However, some of the critiques seemed to me to be quite ridiculous. The one that stood out to me the most

was the critique that Burns was "insistence on retaining visual beauty rather than tackling difficult questions". For a filmmaker who is wanting to captivate the public, visual beauty is very important to make sure that people pay attention to the key points in any film. Burn's himself said it best, "[W]hat we were trying to produce is not a piece of academic paper. We were trying to speak to a very large audience ... and excite them and not be the last word or the first word." After reading this article I see that the film has historical flaws and is a beautified retelling of the Civil War, but I can now understand why it was told in this way and I don't dislike Burn's message any less because of it.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

Show parent | Edit | Split | Delete | Reply



Re: The articles together

by Tiffani Brizendine Schnetzer - Sunday, January 19, 2014, 2:23 AM

It seems that most everyone has sided with Burns. While I ultimately side with Burns as well, I couldn't help but notice how many questions that popped up in my mind during the first episode, are addressed by the critics. One big issue I side with the critics on is what was left out of the episode. Morrison and Mays attack this issue multiple times, and I confess to wanting to know more about stories Burns didn't elaborate on. For example, James Buchanan, he was very briefly mentioned in the video, and I caught myself wanting to know more about him. In the film I felt like he was only mentioned because he had to be, but I wanted to know more about the election and the events that led the Democratic Party to split over slavery so deeply.

I use Buchanan as an example, as did Morrison and May, but there were plenty of side stories that inspired my curiosity during "The Cause". Harriet Beacher Stow is another small example. Where did her inspiration come from to write Uncle Tom's Cabin? What's the back story that resulted in her beliefs? Or, also mentioned in Morrison and Mays, how did Lincoln win an election with his name being absent from ballots in some Southern states? What was the political response from the South for having so little say in the matter?

I'm not the only person who wants to know more, as both articles make evident. Walkowitz talks in the first article about wanting more focus on the political side of the war. Morrison and May, in the second article, seem to have lots of additions they think are more relevant than what Burns thinks is relevant. The biggest for them being in regards to the variance of slaves in the south, how they were treated, the wide array of jobs they performed, what they meant to the common white Southerner, the racism that Blacks still encountered in the North, and the attitudes of Northern Politicians. Litwack parallels the belief that Burns is lacking information in the first article while complimenting Burns as well stating "superbly produced history of war, not of the social revolution which the Civil War helped to unleash."

Sadly this is how telling history works, every narrator takes a different path and chooses different material to focus on when re-telling history. It doesn't make the history any less factual (although the mistaken dates were troublesome), it just shows a different view or opinion of which there are many in regards to history.

As many other students have already mentioned, time is a huge factor in this issue as well. You can't possibly fit everything in when talking about history, which leads me to my favorite quote out of the two articles, in the first article Robert Toplin said "It can't be wallpaper history; it cannot cover everything." While Toplin said this in reference to film, I honestly

believe it's not possible for any source, book, film, or historian, to cover everything. There are just too many factors and we have to accept that there is share every fact and story in one telling.

It's this that makes me say, I have confidence in learning through Burns series, because I feel that his errors are common in any medium. I like that this class includes the articles written by the critics as well as McPherson's book also. We have multiple narrators and sources instead of the standard history class where we only would look through the eyes of one history book author alone. I believe the more narrators you have, the more you can learn about a specific time or event, especially when they are as passionate about their subject as Burns, the critics, and McPherson.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

[Show parent](#) | [Edit](#) | [Split](#) | [Delete](#) | [Reply](#)



Re: Ken Burn's love for his work

by Tiffani Brizendine Schnetzer - Sunday, January 19, 2014, 2:28 AM

My first post leads me to the behind the scenes video of Ken Burns. His passion is evident in everything he does in his work. Each layer of his art is important to him and you can tell by his eagerness that he wants to learn during the process. He wants to learn more about the topic as well as how to present it. Everything about him in the video shows a man who loves his work. This is the sort of person I want to learn from. I love that he makes the script separate from the images to give himself a broader canvas to work with. He admits it makes editing more complex, but again his passion shows how much he loves his work regardless of the difficulties.

I also found it interesting that they produce much of the music themselves and have it prepared at the same time as the script and images so that they can all be combined together during editing.

It's no wonder it takes so long for these documentaries to be made and released. I would definitely say that I admire Ken Burns, even after reading the critic's reviews. Yes there is a lot missing that I would like to know more about, but again this is how telling history is. There's always something missing, that why it's good to review multiple sources in any study.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

[Show parent](#) | [Edit](#) | [Split](#) | [Delete](#) | [Reply](#)



Article Two

by Lauren Grant - Sunday, January 19, 2014, 5:13 PM

The second article left me with a few more concerns than the first article. The amount of detail regarding historical inaccuracies that Burn's made in the film made me feel a bit uneasy about taking Burn's word as the whole truth. Obviously any historical film will have its flaws, no one film can cover anything but this critique sure had a lot to say about what should have been covered. From talking about the length to specific details, most of the film was seen as having flaws in the author's eyes. However, this didn't leave me as concerned as I thought it would. I can personally accept some of the flaws regarding leaving out some facts or topics but some of the errors made me nervous. One quote made brace myself for

the critiques that followed, "The very brevity of Burns' first episode makes its factual errors all the less tolerable". The author goes on to point out many of the errors that Burns made in dates, voices, and explanations of important events. With so many critiques I found myself doubting some of the key points in the film and nervous for episodes to come but I still believe that for such a vast topic Burns does the best he can to teach as much as possible in a short period of time.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

[Show parent](#) | [Edit](#) | [Split](#) | [Delete](#) | [Reply](#)



High Confidence in Burns



by Lauren Grant - Sunday, January 19, 2014, 5:20 PM

The overall level of confidence in this Civil War Series is not as high as it was before I read these articles but I still believe that it is a trustworthy source. The number of viewings and the praise that the film has received from many historians to me balances out the harsh critiques. With such a broad topic as the Civil War, I think that it would be almost impossible for anyone to put every detail about it into a film and not have a single error. The film has its flaws and that is to be expected. With the audience being the public I think that the film is trustworthy and can be relied on to give an overall view of the war that everyone can enjoy and comprehend.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

[Show parent](#) | [Edit](#) | [Split](#) | [Delete](#) | [Reply](#)



Re: High Confidence in Burns



by Tiffani Brizendine Schnetzer - Sunday, January 19, 2014, 7:38 PM

Exactly. There are many reasons why The Civil War got so many good reviews, and we should take those into consideration as much as we do the critic's reviews.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

[Show parent](#) | [Edit](#) | [Split](#) | [Delete](#) | [Reply](#)

[\(Introducing Ken Burns\) Next >](#)

You are logged in as Joe Escobar (Logout)

Moodle Docs for this page

