

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 ...

< Previous (Introducing Ken Burns)



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: -

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Ken Burns: Making History



by Debra Moran - Tuesday, January 14, 2014, 11:38 AM

After watching Ken Burns in Making History I found that I respected his tenacity, the sheer volume of work and the commitment that was involved in the making of the Civil War documentary is extraordinary. It is at least 11 hours long and covers a period in American history that supersedes most others. That alone must be applauded.

According to Burns, his approach to the making of this documentary is one started with ignorance and curiosity which in turn allows for the process of discovery. This is a commendable statement and if he can keep personal bias, whether it is his or that of those that work with him, out of the film, this level of achievement would then deserve a higher level of admiration from me.

Burns stated that every film he has done in the last 15 years has first been broadcast on Public Television. The fact that he has done so many projects with PBS does weigh in with me. PBS is a prominent, not for profit broadcasting service, and one that I trust.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: Ken Burns: Making History

by Jessica Mitchell - Tuesday, January 14, 2014, 8:49 PM

I am not sure that admiration is exactly how I would define what I thought of Ken Burns after having watched the video. I think his description of the process he and his team go through when creating his films incited more intrigue to me than admiration.

The way he describes shooting his images unaware of whether there will be script to go with it and writing scripts without being sure there will be an image, and sometimes having to cut one or the other to ultimately make the film, was an interesting idea to me. To be willing to give yourself room to explore and not hinder oneself with constraints could produce a provocative product.

I did like the idea though, and found that I wanted to see the film more. Not as much because it made me more curious about the era and events it was to cover, but because I was curious to see how this process of his would show up on the screen.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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History on film

by Debra Moran - Tuesday, January 14, 2014, 11:53 PM

The reading of the first article did not change my feelings of respect and appreciation for Burns work, if anything it made me feel sorry for him. To have dedicated that much time, effort and creativity, to now have to defend it to this degree seems slightly irrational. He took four years of the most intense and drastic history of the 19th century, events in history that are still to this day, debated by historians, and he took that history, over 35,000 hours of history, and then condensed it to an eleven hour film.

A film that people watched, and according to the article it was "some 39 million people" watching, to have that many tune in and watch an *eleven* hour documentary series in its initial showing is an astonishing achievement. His critics who consisted of professional historians, teachers and other academia, knowing that the film would not take the place of textbooks and classrooms should feel grateful that this film has sparked an interest in the American public that same public with "a rather simplistic notion of history".

Burns response to the criticisms? "What 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."

He trusted his audience to think for themselves. As he said in his video Ken Burns: Making History, he wasn't bound by requirements but was free to explore and that makes all the difference.

Robert Toplin of the University of North Carolina, states that the film can't wallpaper history, it can't cover everything, this I agree with.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: History on film



by Jessica Mitchell - Wednesday, January 15, 2014, 9:14 PM

After having read the first article I had to question not necessarily the authenticity, but the completeness of the documentary. "*The Civil War* was 'safe, risk-free, upbeat, and reassuring.' Litwick added. It portrayed the 'essential passivity of blacks and women.' 'perpetrated 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.'" (History On Screen)

I can appreciate the efforts and that Burns and his team put into the film, and see that the film has many merits. But, I have to be concerned with the overall realism, if large portions of what happened did not make their way into the film. Authenticity lies in covering the entirety of the happenings of the tie in my opinion. Not to include important aspects may not take away from the work that was put into it, and it may not take away from the enjoyment of watching it, but it does take away from the overall story.

In order for an audience to fully grasp what happened they need to be shown all of what happened. To present less is akin to displaying a partially painted picture. You may see where the image is going, but you don't know why it's going there, or where the journey started.

While it is indeed impossible to cover the entire scope of history, it is vital not to leave out the important parts. And After having read this article I have to wonder if some very important parts may not have been included in the final film.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Limitations of Test case



by Debra Moran - Wednesday, January 15, 2014, 1:15 AM

The Civil War has so complex a history that Ken Burns could have made a documentary that was on every night for two years straight and it would still be missing some vital piece of information. I don't believe that it is possible to incorporate that much history into a film. History by its very nature creates debate. North vs. South, Yankee vs. Rebel, Republican vs. Democrat, Abolitionist vs. Slave-owner, and the list could go on and on and each and every one of them would have a different version of what they were fighting for.

Unless there is a document or physical evidence that has been preserved and is indisputable everything is up for debate.

The second article mentions very few actual mistakes in the history portrayed. It is more concerned with what wasn't there or what wasn't emphasized or the brevity of a topic. Yes it

is a lot of history that is not in the film, but again I don't see how it could all be illustrated in a documentary. I understand that there is a lot missing and even more that is just touched on but I am still curious to see the rest of the series.

Understand, that what I like the best about Burns' documentary is it reminds us, and got people talking about a time that hadn't been talked about in the general population for a long time and raised up curiosity about our nation in millions of people. So do I have confidence in this video series? Yes. Why not?

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: Limitations of Test case



by Joyce Gariepy - Thursday, January 16, 2014, 4:02 PM

I do not think it would be possible to include every single piece of information, or every last detail into a film/documentary about the Civil War. There are so many possibilities to consider, different angles to the events that transpired, that I would tend to agree with you that no matter how much time and effort Ken Burns put into this series, it still would not be able to encompass everything.

In my opinion, the fact that he consulted with many historians throughout the process as well as using quotations from original letters, diaries, and speeches of soldiers and civilians really tells me that he was striving to make a film series that would be as accurate as possible with the details that he did include.

In one of the articles it mentions that Robert Toplin, who is a professor of history at the University of North Carolina, stated "Film is not really comprehensive. It can't be wallpaper history; it cannot cover everything."

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Limitations of Test case



by Jacob Nelson - Sunday, January 19, 2014, 12:42 PM

I completely agree that it is nearly impossible to create a documentary film that includes every little piece of information about the Civil War. It would be even more difficult to create a documentary that recognized every scholarly point of view regarding the events that transpired during the Civil War. Like you were saying some people in the academic community have dedicated a life time of research to studying the Civil War, yet they still often never make concrete conclusions on why some events happened the way they did. For this same reason I think that Ken Burns took a little too much heat for his documentary. His films portrayal of the Civil War still seems like an in depth and educational take on the events that took place during this time period. Furthermore, it isn't like Ken Burns went out and claimed that his documentary would answer every question about the Civil War and why it occurred. Rather, his documentary offered the general public with a solid overview and history of the Civil War.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: Limitations of Test case

by Keeler McJunkin - Saturday, January 18, 2014, 1:28 PM

This is a great point. The Civil War is so rich in history, and things that need to be learned it would be almost impossible for Burns to include everything in the film. There are so many different angles you can look at the Civil War from. Whether it's the aspect of why the war happened, to the battles themselves, the slavery problem, the Generals. It's a never ending list of what needs to be learned.

I look at the Civil War as one of the most interesting parts of American history because of this fact. I feel you could study the Civil War for years and still learn new things as you go. We just need to be able to rake everything with a grain of salt. Things said will always be disputed by one person or another. This was a war where we killed each other. Families fighting on different sides at times even. This is what intrigues me so much about the war. There were so many mixed feelings from the entire Country it's fascinating.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Academia versus film-making

by Timothy Wilson-Haley - Wednesday, January 15, 2014, 9:06 AM

The "Meet Ken Burns" video was about what I expected: A team of film-makers with a decision-maker at the head, digging through materials and sources and consulting various scholars and experts to create a visual experience with a narration. Ken Burns is, first and foremost, a film-maker. As such, I don't think his work can be considered scholarly, no matter how many scholars he interviews. However, that doesn't mean his films aren't educationally informative and useful tools in classrooms. I think the criticisms from scholars are both warranted and unwarranted. Warranted because we do need to be reminded that there is more information not featured in the film than made it in, as well as some disconnect between the information that was presented. Unwarranted because I think they were criticizing it for not being something it never claimed to be: a piece of scholarship or academic curriculum. Instead, I view it as a visual experience that serves as an introduction to complexity. One of the arguments that Morrison and May made, that he "compounded confusion" by presenting multiple people's conclusions of why the war happened, leaving viewers confused and unable to make anything "of this omelet" is just ludicrous (p.43). I don't think it is the job of any documentarian to tell me what their conclusions are, but rather to show me different opinions of various experts, and then let me decide what I think based on scholar's opinions. What was included or left out tells me what he thinks. It seems to me that parts of the criticisms of Ken Burns were for not being a scholar, other parts were for not pretending to be a scholar.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Ken Burns' Civil War

by Joyce Gariepy - Wednesday, January 15, 2014, 1:54 PM

I have to say that I admire Ken Burns and his dedication to producing the Civil War series that we are using for this class. It has to be hard to produce a quality film on a significant piece of American history. Ken Burns states, "We have a kind of joyful relationship to the process of learning something new. That's what I love about this job." He and his crew were enthusiastic and went into the project with a sincere "curiosity" about the events that transpired. It is obvious to me that he had good intentions of producing a film that would be as accurate as possible with the events that were included in the series. It would be nearly impossible to have included every last detail about the Civil War, so the criticism from one of the articles about missing details does not really have that big of an impact on me.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: Ken Burns' Civil War

by Katherine Frank - Friday, January 17, 2014, 9:51 AM

Hi Joyce,

I agree, it must be difficult to produce a film of this magnitude on such a significant historical event, and I admire Ken Burns and his staff. I do, however, worry about the missing details. Not all of "The Civil War" viewers are, or were, in a history class, many are people at home, taking Ken Burns "documentary" as fact.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Re: Ken Burns' Civil War

by Joyce Gariepy - Saturday, January 18, 2014, 3:34 PM

My thoughts on a home viewer would be that some of them may just want to be entertained and not necessarily care that it may not be entirely accurate. Most people are not experts on the war and are not striving to be, so the details of this series may not even stick in their heads. In addition, anyone who wants more information has the option of researching through a variety of methods.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Ken Burns Message

by Katherine Frank - Wednesday, January 15, 2014, 3:28 PM

I definitely found myself admiring and liking Ken Burns and the message he presented in the video. His approaching any new film with "ignorance and curiosity" gave me the

impression that his films would be made with honesty and much research. The fact that he shoots so much footage and then fits it to the script I found somewhat strange and that they do not employ many researchers, preferring to do it themselves. I felt that he made a valid point about "not making a piece of academic paper" but trying to speak to a very large audience and excite them. I wonder if he met for this to be a professionally historical piece because of his statement "I trusted my audience to make much greater leaps and intellectual connections than most documentary films"

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Civil War through Ken Burns

by Keeler McJunkin - Wednesday, January 15, 2014, 5:29 PM

I have seen more than one movie/video done by Ken Burns and I have a high level of respect for the way he produces historical events through the use of film. I remember seeing parts of the Civil War series we will be watching this term and being impressed by the quality. While I understand some of the complaints regarding Burns wanting to express more of the "beauty" in his films and sometimes misses on parts of the tough questions regarding reasons for the war, I feel like he generally doesn't sway too far from the point. Burns does a good job of mixing his films with the "artistry" needed to make a beautiful film and the questions that need to be answered. Meaning people are able to watch and be entertained, while at the same time getting historical information and learning things. I feel that some of the critiques are a bit nit picky and overall he does a great job of getting across the points he wants to make, and also the points that need to be made to keep historical accuracy.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Ken Burns

by Courtney Waterman - Wednesday, January 15, 2014, 8:45 PM

After watching the video clip I liked Ken Burns and his message. He seems to be passionate about his work and it looked like his videos are something that he puts a lot of time into. After reading the first article I felt the same way. There will never be a video made or a book written that receives positive reviews by every single person who watches or reads it. It makes sense then that Burns' video will have people that dislike or have problems with it.

The third article had a lot of issues with Burns' video. One issue being that it highlighted slavery as the main issue for causing the Civil War rather than discussing the political and social aspects that led to it. Then it went on to praise McPhersons' Battle Cry of Freedom for using "36% of his total text – to the coming war." I feel like the video and the book will work well together and create a nice balance.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: Ken Burns

by Katherine Frank - Friday, January 17, 2014, 9:59 AM

Hi Courtney,

Your point is well made, never a word spoken that someone will not take issue with. I, too hope the film and the book, taken together, will give us a better view of the history of the Civil War.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Re: Ken Burns

by Joyce Gariepy - Friday, January 17, 2014, 11:01 AM

In my opinion, I do not think it would matter who produced the Civil War series or how much time and effort was spent on making it as accurate as possible. There are always going to be people who are critical and set out to pick it apart. In addition, one person may interpret a film in an entirely different way than another person.

In the first article, Robert Toplin, a history professor at the University of South Carolina wants the public to view "historical interpretation as debate" in order to show that "the study of history is really about making judgments concerning conflicting interpretations of facts...that have a great deal of meaning for the way we see the world today."

In the same article, the historian Daniel Walkowitz, believes that history is a "contested story."

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: Ken Burns

by Keeler McJunkin - Saturday, January 18, 2014, 1:39 PM

I agree with you on this point completely. No matter who the person is that produces a film on something like the Civil War, it will always be met with controversy. The subject matter itself is so controversial and there are so many differing opinions this will always be the case. The Civil War involves so many subjects that are not taken lightly, it will always be critiqued by people. This is just how it is. Almost everything regarding the Civil War is a "debatable" subject. There are so many points of view from so many different people. I don't think we will ever come to a complete consensus about it. Especially when you consider the different points of view from people who are from various parts of the Country. We also have to take different generations into account as well. People of differing ages will usually always disagree on things like this as well.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: Ken Burns



by Bryan Sanders - Saturday, January 18, 2014, 3:33 PM

You mentioned both the book and the movie series we're using in this class. I remember one of the articles said McPherson was one of the consultants for this documentary, so I agree that the two will be complementary.

That said, I'm not entirely certain the book is much better than the documentary. Both toe the party line in when they say the primary force for the civil war was slavery. It's also easy to portray the South in a more negative light than the North mainly because it appeals to people better than the facts, and it sells better.

Ken Burns did go to great lengths to make this documentary, but remember that in cinema, retellings of history are often romanticized. I felt watching the clip of Ken Burns itself was romanticized, not that it was bad.

It shows the best appeal this documentary has is its emotion. The music and voiceovers rank high in this series. I mean did anyone realize who the voice of Frederick Douglass was? Morgan Freeman.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: Ken Burns



by Courtney Waterman - Saturday, January 18, 2014, 8:45 PM

You're right, it does sell better when they focus on something like slavery, and portray the South as "bad guys". Going over all the reviews for the book and documentary have really reminded me that there is so much more than slavery involved, and that the notion of a good and bad side doesn't fit.

I also hadn't thought about it being romanticized but that's an interesting point, and definitely something to keep in mind while watching

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Re: Ken Burns



by Timothy Wilson-Haley - Saturday, January 18, 2014, 9:42 PM

Of course Morrison and May are correct to stress that abolition versus protection of slavery was only one of many issues being fought. No, abolition of slavery is not the reason the North fought the War, nor did poor Southerners fight for the right to personally own slaves. But the claim that Southerners fought for state's rights and Northerners fought for Federal authority also romanticizes history. I didn't get the impression from McPherson or episode one that the war was portrayed in that way. Lincoln, for example, was presented in both cases as a moderate Republican who was first in favor of limiting the expansion of slavery, then quickly changed to simply trying to preserve the Union.

I disagree with Morrison and May and the assertion that slavery wasn't a main

issue in the war. We know that all points in the heated spectrum of slavery arguments --from the range of abolition, to restriction, to limiting slavery, versus the range of protecting to expanding slavery-- had been present for many decades. The 3/5's clause in the Constitution is evidence of this. Non-slave owners didn't want slave owners to have greater political power. Slave-owners thought they should have more representation than non-slave-owners. That is an argument over slavery. State's rights versus Federal authority had been another long-standing argument. However, states did not secede en masse because of new tariffs. Nor did Southerners argue in favor of state's rights when the subject of debate was federal enforcement of runaway slave laws, as Morrison and May also noted. Rather, they insisted the Federal Government exercise authority. When a shift in political power left them in fear of slavery not being protected indefinitely, resolve to secede quickly solidified. Slavery and states' rights arguments became fused. For anyone to say the war was about one issue but not the other, is to deny the power that logically twisted political rhetoric has to shape contradictory opinions in the masses who know little of power structures or their position in greater events.

Despite the lack of moral objections that Morrison and May note, there was still a power struggle between supporters of slavery and non-supporters of slavery. Just because that argument had very few voices raising *moral* objections doesn't mean the argument wasn't over slavery. May and Morrison even present an example of this when they note "Lincoln and his party accordingly claimed that a 'slave-power conspiracy' [. . .] threatened the freedom of white Americans" and that "some Republicans sincerely believed that the Dred Scott decision [. . .] was an early sign that eventually slavery would be legalized in the North. Party members considered the 1860 election as a second American Revolution that pitted Republicans struggling for freedom against despotic Southerners intent on enslaving the North" (p.46-47). So, even though the argument was less about the *morality* of slavery as it existed, slavery in a broad sense, particularly its future, was a central point of division. One side feared the expansion of slavery, the other side feared the abolition of slavery. It matters not that the abolitionists were an extreme minority. Long-standing arguments over slavery and states' rights had become inseparably fused.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Ken Burns



by Bryan Sanders - Saturday, January 18, 2014, 10:44 PM

I agree that there were multiple reasons the civil war happened, beyond slavery, state's rights, and tariffs. From what we've read and watched up to this point, it was as you noted a power struggle between two opposing forces. Both sides felt their self interests were not being met, and that one side was looking to usurp the other.

I don't disagree with your assessment. The whole state's rights v. federal authority has often been used by people promoting the 'lost cause of the

South,' just as people have used the slave debate to paint every Northerner as a righteous civil rights activist.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Burns Video & First Article

by Jacob Nelson - Wednesday, January 15, 2014, 9:58 PM

After watching the video I admired Ken Burns passion for making quality documentaries. It looks like he is very meticulous when it comes to choosing the narrators voice, the music, and the information that goes into his projects. For that very same reason I believe he produces quality documentaries. However, I also think this video was a bit of a promotion for the work he does. The only real message he seemed to put forth was that he puts a lot of time and diligence into his documentaries to create a quality educational film.

My opinion regarding Ken Burns didn't necessarily change after reading the first article provided. I am personally under the impression that Ken Burns never intentionally dismissing some of the tougher political questions regarding the history of the civil war. Rather, I believe that Burns created this documentary in order to give a basic background of what happened during the civil war to spark public interest in the subject matter. I also believe that Walkowitz provided the most specific critique towards Burns documentary series because he regarded the production as rather dull in the sense that it didn't address the more complex questions regarding the civil war. Walkowitz viewed Burns work as an aesthetic pleasure that lacked depth.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Ken Burns' video/Confidence in series

by Benjamin Trautman - Wednesday, January 15, 2014, 10:40 PM

I did admire Ken Burns approach on how to learn or explain history. That we must see history as a "process of discovery." Not entering historical text with a closed mind but rather an open mind with little ignorance. I feel as if that little ignorance would spark one to imagine more and question the facts. Coming up with new ideas on how someone may have reacted in a situation, their motives and eventually what action they may have took. Not believing everything you read but putting belief in the things you don't read.

I have a great confidence that this video will introduce new ideas about the war that our text may not. I am concerned about the truth of those ideas but I know I should enter with an open mind. If 39 million people stayed with the series for 5 days straight I am sure there are plenty things it will teach us.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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The two articles

by Benjamin Trautman - Wednesday, January 15, 2014, 10:55 PM

After the first article I felt the same need to have an open mind when it comes to history. Walkowitz said history is like a, "contested story." A story that will always be questioned no matter how many experts agree with something. There are way too many variables for me to see history as a pile of documents of first-account witnesses. Emotion governs the way we think and act, emotion could have easily affected some one to state things that may have not happened but wanted them to. It is hard to know of the emotions people had hundreds of years ago if you weren't personally with them. I found some concern after reading the 2nd article that Burns may have hypnotized the audience with pictures and the comforts of celebrity voices. The criticizing this article has is alerting. Criticizing that many military and political details were left out and that stereotypes may have interfered with the truth.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Ken Burns by Jessie Williams



by Jessie Williams - Wednesday, January 15, 2014, 11:16 PM

Did you find yourself "admiring" Ken Burns and "liking" the message he presented in the video clip? Did you feel the same way after reading the first article? What concerns, if any, did you have after reading the second article, which was the most specific, articulate, and critical of Ken Burns and his "historical work"? What level of confidence do you have in this Civil War Series, our main video source of historical information about the War Between The States?

The Process in which we discover history as Ken Burns put it was very interesting. That we need to have an open mind and not be so closed minded about what has happened and what can happen because of it. He obviously is very much into his work but with that said I didn't feel like he really answered the question, why do we have war?

After reading the articles, it was even more clear how much time and effort he placed into making such a short film, but it didn't way my thoughts on how he didn't answer the question for me.

I wanted to know more and continue watching the film so that makes me feel stronger about the resource from these films.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Danger of Presentism



by Bryan Sanders - Thursday, January 16, 2014, 2:43 AM

Ken Burns appears to be a good man, and the effort he put into this project is remarkable. The fact he has been able to spark this debate with the series is good, since it gives an opportunity for people to flush out the fact and fiction of the civil war.

That said, we move on to what is perhaps the biggest problem with the documentary. In the second article we read, the last paragraph stated that presentism is 'the most serious objection to Burns' series.' The writers of the article pointed out the danger presentism creates, when we analyze past events through a modern view rather than put them in a 19th century context. This robs us of our ability to figure out exactly why the war happened and what shaped the political and social environments of that time. To say for example that the civil war was fought for the same reasons the civil rights movement was organized for, to give equality to African Americans, would be an instance of presentism. With this in mind, we need to be mindful of future content that is viewed in this series.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: Danger of Presentism



by Timothy Wilson-Haley - Friday, January 17, 2014, 8:29 PM

I agree that the fallacy of presentism must be avoided. As Morrison and May argued, events in history must be taken in the context of the circumstances, dominant systems, and ideologies of the era. Words from prominent political leaders cannot be separated from the situation at the time and what they were trying to accomplish.

However, I disagree that avoiding presentism enables *exact* analysis of the events. On the contrary, I think that the people involved at the time didn't even know *exactly* what was happening and why. Examples of this include the latest war in Iraq, or the Vietnam war. Ask the question then, today, and a century from now "what was the exact cause of that war" and in all three cases you will find as many different answers as the number of people who were asked. Many would carry some level of merit, even the ones that contradict each other. As Morrison and May demonstrated by compiling a reading list of multiple books, each addressing different aspects of the events in question, one of them being our textbook, additional information and insight is always available and should be continually sought out.

I think May and Morrison commit a similar fallacy to presentism: they take Ken Burns and PBS out of context and apply their expectations to it. They identify problems of severe lack of historical knowledge or understanding among the general American public and blame media for the present lack of awareness. They fail to take Ken Burns and PBS in the context of mass media. There seems to be no recognition that the works of Ken Burns and PBS are a response to mass media culture rather than perpetrators of it. Their problem is with American culture of ignorance and consumption of useless television, not Ken Burns and PBS. If Morrison and May don't like it, they can go through the trouble of finding funding for their own film and a network that thinks its sexy enough to broadcast.

As Burns stated, he tried to make his film relevant to a large swath of people. For those who don't have the opportunity to take college history courses, the film serves as an introduction to key issues and important people at the center of them. For us, in a college class, I think the value in the film lies in the powerful visual experience of the many images presented, as well as tastes of various individual experiences of the era. As mentioned in other posts, it has value in our "classroom" as an artistic accompaniment to historical analysis. Outside of the classroom, I think it stands on its own as an artistic introductory documentary.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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History on the Screen

by Katherine Frank - Thursday, January 16, 2014, 6:24 PM

The first article "History on the Screen, who speaks for the past?" creates some concerns for me about funding, past histories of the editors and writers. According to the first article a Professor of history in North Carolina states "The Civil War" made a "tremendous positive impact" causing exploration, and debate of the issues. But others offer criticisms for failure to address difficult historical questions raised by the Civil War. Maybe that is the best feature of this film, to cause exploration, interest and debate. If 39 million viewers saw this film in 1990 and one million videos have been sold, the question I have is will there be debate or will this film be taken as the definition of the history of the war itself. That question was posed in the first article. The substantial divergence between historians and the press "raise questions for all of us about who is to speak for the past"

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Limitations of Classroom Media

by Katherine Frank - Thursday, January 16, 2014, 6:27 PM

After reading the second article I feel a need to , once again ask " what really happened ?" There seems to be a determined attitude to portray the North as good and the South as bad. The North, as noble men resisting war and loving the "Negro", and the South as war mongering slave owners. When we read the second article we are given many differing accounts, factual errors and omissions regarding the political conditions in both the North and the South. In fact, so many differing accounts, that for me, cast doubts as to the historical correctness of all of the information in Ken Burns video "The Civil War". As I have stated, I hope this video will cause there to be debate but if the facts are not equally represented in this video and our book how is debate possible without further input from other sources?

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Re: Limitations of Classroom Media

by Jessica Mitchell - Friday, January 17, 2014, 5:37 PM

I agree with you, Katherine, I think that the second article was more critical then the first in that, it covered more ground, and looked more closely at the issues. After having read it I am again left with the feeling that while this film will be enlightening and offer a lot of knowledge, it will be in a sense incomplete. If it fails to convey the real motivations and machinations of both sides in the Civil War, it can only be considered to be an idea or notion of what the Civil War really was.

Maybe Burns wasn't as able to locate, while researching, enough for are more thorough portrayal of what happened as we would like, but by failing to finish the

complete picture, as the article states, “Film productions, unable to explain why individuals act as they do, opt for a reflected rather than refracted sense of reality. That which cannot be explained—racist white Northerners and repressed nonslaveholding Southerners fighting a war over the morality of human bondage for example—is ignored or botched.”

I am interested to see how it all plays out in comparison to the text.

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My Level of Confidence



by Katherine Frank - Thursday, January 16, 2014, 6:29 PM

As far as my level of confidence in the Civil War series, I have confidence in the portrayal of the battles, in the participants in the battles and the outcomes of those battles and the war. The politics of the beginning of the war, the people involved and the “climate” of the times I am skeptical of. My hope is that our book “Battle Cry of Freedom” and the video “The Civil War” will each bring a separate view of the issues surrounding the war and that as all good historical narratives should do, they will spark interest, exploration and debate.

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Re: Confidence in Ken Burns



by Jacob Nelson - Friday, January 17, 2014, 6:13 PM

I personally believe that Burns Civil War Series will provide us with the necessary historical information in order to succeed in this class. Learning through watching a documentary is a helpful way of retaining knowledge. While I am confident that this video series will provide accurate historical information about the civil war I think it is still important to recognize the importance of reading and using other outside sources. It is always important to use more than one educational source while learning because then you can hear different accounts of history that you can then dissect to formulate your own personal view on what actually happened.

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Re: Confidence in Ken Burns



by Jessica Mitchell - Friday, January 17, 2014, 8:10 PM

From the critiques I have read I am relatively confident that the film will be rich in history and will provide a colorful and compelling view of the happenings of the Civil War. What I think it will lack is a comprehensive telling of both sides of the conflict. I expect it will sell the North as the “good” guys and the South as the “bad guys. And while ultimately in today’s environment it may seem as simple as that, during those times it was not only not that simple, but it was an extremely complex set of issues being dealt with. People of that time had a completely different set of beliefs that they structured their lives around.

Additionally, there was not a line that ran between the sides leaving a clear white side and a clear black side. There were far more that fit into the grey side. And if the film doesn't express all that complexity, it isn't complete.

I do think it will have value though, so long as that is remembered by the viewer. And the viewer utilizes other resources to fill out the missing information.

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1

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Re: Confidence in Ken Burns



by Courtney Waterman - Saturday, January 18, 2014, 9:02 PM

I agree that it's important to use other sources as well. You get a little extra studying in that way and it certainly never hurts to double check the information just to be safe! In the second article Burns supported looking into extra resources when he stated, "We were trying to speak to a very large audience...and excite them and not be the last word or the first word."

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

1

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2nd article



by Benjamin Trautman - Friday, January 17, 2014, 7:06 PM

After reading the 2nd article for a 2nd time I high lighted a few points I found helpful in the argument for Ken Burns.

-One it took 5 years to produce this series with help of many well-known civil war experts.

-"Risks involved every time we surrender our classrooms to the screen." (pg. 40) This quote illuminates the bias this writer has toward films and learning from them. This bias helps fuel his scrutiny of Burn's video series. Though some of his criticizing may be spot on, it only proves that there will always be a side and bias towards the retelling of history.

-One more is the criticizing that Burns left out many political details that were key to igniting the war is important, but maybe not to everyone. I'm finding it hard to read this 2nd article because I believe retelling history should happen with an open mind as Burns states. Retelling history the best way you think is possible, trying not to confuse the audience or reader with facts that will go in one ear and out the other. Maybe retelling history is all about the DEMOGRAPHIC that will be listening. For the average American family, winding down after a days work maybe does not want to hear about the causes(politics) but rather the results(the battles). For those reading required text for a college course may prefer the causes over the results.

Just some thoughts.

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2

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**Re: 2nd article**

by Joyce Gariepy - Saturday, January 18, 2014, 3:29 PM

I think that the fact that Ken Burns took his time to make this film series about the Civil War is a testament to his commitment to making a film that would be as accurate as he could make it with the details of the events that he chose to incorporate in it. I don't believe that he ever portrayed himself as an expert on the subject, so he went into the project with an open mind. I think I would have to agree with you, many viewers do not want to know about the politics of the War. They want to know what happened in the battles during the war and many want to know about specific people who were involved.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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**Re: 2nd article**

by Jacob Nelson - Saturday, January 18, 2014, 5:25 PM

Hi Benjamin,

I really think you listed out some good points regarding the second article we had to read for homework. I totally agree that this writer had some bias against learning from documentary films. After reading this article I came away with the notion that the author would prefer learning from historical texts versus that of educational film. However, I think the quote you provided in your notes is an accurate depiction of how history can be dumbed down when presented through film. While this quote is indeed an example of the authors bias, I still believe that there is harsher language towards historical films in the rest of the article. Thank You for your insight!

Jake

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**Re: 2nd article**

by Courtney Waterman - Saturday, January 18, 2014, 9:25 PM

These are good points! I 100 percent agree with your last one. It's good to remember that Burns wasn't making this specifically for a classroom. He was making this for multiple age groups to watch at one time. If the documentary was made for the classroom he may have found it better to focus more on the politics and other causes rather than the battles. He also had to leave things out. There's no way he could have put all the information regarding the war into one film without it being insanely long. One thing I liked about the first article was that Toplin said, "It can't be wallpaper history; It cannot cover everything."

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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