

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

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Forum 2

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Creative License and Historical Accuracy

by Joe Escobar - Sunday, January 19, 2014, 10:43 PM

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

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

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

Sum of ratings: -

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Re: Creative License and Historical Accuracy

by Andrew Ellsworth - Wednesday, January 22, 2014, 2:53 PM

Andrew Ellsworth

HIST 209 Forum 2

I believe that the way Burns took “creative license” here is more positive than negative. It does not alter the way the civil war is being recounted to omit the fact that the letter was not sent. This is an example of the war to show how relatable some situations were to current viewers. It is a powerful piece of writing, and helps all who listen to understand the emotion of the civil war. These soldiers were all but hopeless about life, and the way that writing helped to release their feelings is inspiring.

There isn't an important piece of history being recounted incorrectly, or even missing here, it is more Ken Burns creatively grasping the viewers attention. It helps for me to understand the war better, by hearing a young man openly confess his thoughts to his wife. The fact that the letter was not received

by his wife does not change how it paints the picture of so many soldiers in the 1860's. Though it may not be exactly accurate to show the events this way, it is much more effective to relate to and learn from.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Creative License and Historical Accuracy

by Lauren Grant - Saturday, January 25, 2014, 9:11 PM

I agree that the information about Ballou's wife not receiving his letter until the end of the war does not change the way that hearing the letter at the end of the film helps the viewer imagine what a soldier was like and went through at the end of 1861. By ending with Ballou's letter Burns is able to capture the audience's attention and keep them wanting to watch the next episode. Personally, I agree that it does not entirely matter that the letter is not recounted correctly because it is not an essential piece of history and it does not change the emotional response that it was meant to produce.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: Creative License and Historical Accuracy

by Jacob Nelson - Sunday, January 26, 2014, 9:23 PM

I think you make an interesting and valid point. I haven't considered that the way Burns used the creative license to be a in a positive light. You could easily make the point that this letter was used with the sole purpose of evoking viewers emotions about what life was like from a personal level during the Civil War. Burns intent may have never been to recount this letter as a key piece of historical evidence, rather it was used in a positive light in an attempt to get us viewers to consider the reality of war.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Initial thoughts

by Benjamin Trautman - Wednesday, January 22, 2014, 3:01 PM

Ken Burns use of this letter was powerful. It grabbed my attention and made me realize the deep emotions that stir inside a soldier. Emotions of leaving their family behind, leaving probably the most important thing in their life to fight for a cause. Sullivan justifies his actions of going to war to his wife by saying he owes his country and government his debt. Paying respect to those have gone in the battlefield before him to make this nation free. The fact that this letter is placed at the end of the episode could be for two reasons in my opinion. One, to show the reader what a soldier was thinking when they wrote to their family and allow the audience to really sympathize with a soldier, ending the episode in dramatic fashion. Another may be that Ken Burns knew this letter was not found and read until after the war, therefor giving him a "creative license" to place it where he seems fit. Ken Burns may have not felt right to place it before he explained the First Manassas because it was

not read till after the war. But then again Ken Burns does not make that fact clear to the audience that the letter was read after the war, resulting in confusion.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Initial thoughts

by Jessica Mitchell - Wednesday, January 22, 2014, 5:52 PM

I think Burns using the letter as he did, without the full context in which it was received by the wife, and out of chronological order, was for the purpose of sowing an emotional seed for the viewer. Finding out the additional information makes me feel as if I was being manipulated at least slightly.

But when I think about it further, I can't help but think that even without the circumstances of how his wife received the letter being accurate; the circumstances of the writer of the letter were accurate. Her story was not the same, but his was. And ultimately he is who I connected with when I was watching the scene.

Ultimately after thinking it through, I am okay with Burns use of the letter. How he went about portraying it in the film gave the viewer a sense of the soldier's state of mind during the time. I think that is an invaluable piece of insight to the understanding of the minds of the men fighting in the war.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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importance of chronological order...

by Kylie Emory - Wednesday, January 22, 2014, 3:17 PM

I believe the letter was used at the end of the episode rather than with the battle of Bull Run material, which would have been in chronological order, to leave the viewers with an emotional, thought provoking, romantic ending. His creative license is being used here to sell, rather than to teach. If this video's sole purpose was to teach about the Civil War, it would not be ok to have it out of chronological order, but as the video was intended for a public audience to entertain as well as inform, it is appropriate. The viewer is given the date of the letter as July 14th, 1861, making it obvious that it was not written in December after the last piece we viewed. When writing, authors use either a summary of events, or some sort of thought provoking anecdote or idea that had been introduced in the written work to conclude their piece. Burns uses this letter to conclude his episode of the beginning of the Civil War to emphasize the hardships of the war on the families of the soldiers. I believe he also had other motives for using this piece. It summarizes the duties men felt to their country, and why they felt they must fight. It makes the Civil War more personable for the viewer, forces them to emphasize with the soldiers and their families on both sides. The images in this section also contrast those with the rest of the episode. We see flashes of different couples and families, and then we are left with a sunset view of the battlefield, grass gently blowing in the breeze. The majority of the episode is filled with gruesome images of a bloody war, so it is pleasant to see beauty in the conclusion.

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Sum of ratings:3 (1)



Re: importance of chronological order...

by Jessica Mitchell - Wednesday, January 22, 2014, 6:43 PM

I don't think this changes my accurate understanding of the war as Burn's used it. The purpose of the letter doesn't appear to be to represent any chronological events; rather it appears to be being used to represent the feelings and emotional state of the men who were going into these battles. It gave insight to morale and motives of the soldiers.

It's placement within the film isn't as important as what it is conveying about the people the war was affecting most; the soldiers that faced battles and undesirable conditions away from home and family. It represents so much more than just the one man writing what he believes will be his last letter to his beloved. It gives a sense of what many of those men must have been feeling. Be it their sense of duty or their longing for loved ones and home. It helps us feel and relate to them.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: importance of chronological order...

by Joyce Gariepy - Thursday, January 23, 2014, 3:34 PM

I don't think the chronological events of the war was affected at all by the placement of the Union Major's letter at the end of Episode 1, so I would tend to agree with you. It seems to me to have been placed there to showcase the struggle of the soldiers, and the Union Major in particular. Their love of country versus their love of their family. This man was far away from home and his family and facing the possibility of his death, yet he firmly believed that he was where he should be. This version of the letter was eloquent and heartbreaking at the same time.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: importance of chronological order...

by Benjamin Trautman - Friday, January 24, 2014, 2:21 PM

I completely agree with your idea that this series sole purpose is not to teach but also to entertain. Ken Burn's wants to leave the audience with an attracting ending in his first episode so viewers would watch the 2nd. The fact that this series is on PBS (public broadcasting services) gives Burns the right to skew the chronological order just a little bit. Making a PBS documentary I think gives the film maker more freedom to practice his "creative license." I think we should expect this from a PBS series and not become agitated or create a kind of negative bias towards Burns. One argument I have though, is if Burns was trying to have the audience sympathize with both sides,

then why not read a letter from a Confederate soldier as well? Was Burns trying to make evident his favor towards the North in only including a letter from a Union General? Anyways I really enjoyed your ideas, especially that the last picture of the episode is a peaceful one, leaving the audience again in a pleasing fashion.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: importance of chronological order...

by Timothy Wilson-Haley - Sunday, January 26, 2014, 6:18 PM

I think it is very important to distinguish between entertainment and artistically presented information. Just because a documentary is on T.V. and has little resemblance to a college textbook does not make it equal to pure entertainment intent on making a profit. One of the issues that Burns had to deal with is a largely uninformed and apathetic American public. Often-times, heart-strings need to be tugged in order to get anybody to pay attention, especially when it comes to historical events that seem to have little relevance for today. This problem was even noted by Morrison and May, who blamed Burns for catering to the problem. I think this is unfair. In my opinion, Burns responded to this problem by making the events as relevant as possible. One of the ways he did this was by making it as personal as possible. However, in addressing the largely historically unaware public, he limited the film's usefulness outside of this context and offends the sensibilities many historians.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Fair and balanced

by Bryan Sanders - Sunday, January 26, 2014, 10:00 PM

You make a good point. There was no letter from a Confederate soldier in the episode, though it's possible we'll see one in a future episode. It would have been more balanced to have both sides represented here with letters, but since it is still early in the episodes we'll just wait and see.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Union Major Ballou's letter

by Joyce Garipey - Wednesday, January 22, 2014, 3:24 PM

I do not feel overly concerned with the placement of the Union Major Sullivan Ballou and his letter that he wrote to his wife, Sarah. He wrote this letter about a week before the Battle of Bull Run. I think that Ken Burns may have placed it in this part of the film series to show that even though this man was far from home and in the middle of a war, he was still fully willing to be involved in the war. The Union Major says in the letter, "I have no misgivings about or lack of confidence

in the cause in which I am engaged. And my courage does not halt or falter.” He also says, “My love of country comes over me like a strong wind and bares me irresistibly with all those chains to the battlefield.” He tells Sarah how much he loves her and their family, but that he “is willing to lay down all joys in this life to help maintain this government and pay that debt.”

I do not believe that this takes away from the accuracy of the film. Ken Burns did not attempt to make us believe that it was written at any other point in history as he did include the date that it was written, July 14, 1861.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Danger of creative license

by Bryan Sanders - Wednesday, January 22, 2014, 3:43 PM

When I first heard this letter, I'll admit I assumed that at some point his wife got it. It added a huge emotional effect that enabled me to empathize with the intended reader, the wife, and the sender, Sullivan Ballou. It was also interesting to hear Ballou dies a week later at the first battle of Bull Run, likely told to add emotional interest. I would say this is a well done piece, until I read that this letter didn't reach his wife until after the war. Plus, it may not even be the original letter we hear being recited.

For authenticity and accuracy, it's dangerous to say this is what was said word for word. Taken together, this creative license Burns uses makes for a good story like National Treasure, which also takes some creative license. For the purpose of truly understanding history as it happened, it doesn't fully serve that purpose. Though it may give us hints as to the thoughts of the sender, we still see omission of information. This can be just as bad as reinterpreting information, like what happens with presentism.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Danger of creative license

by Lauren Grant - Saturday, January 25, 2014, 8:49 PM

I will agree that the authenticity of Burn's film can be jeopardized with inaccuracies and omissions such as Ballou's letter. The fact that the letter that is read in the film might not actually be the letter that was originally written did shock me. I assumed that the letter was accurate, which is a dangerous thing. Although it is historically inaccurate I believe that it does achieve the goal of creating an emotional response from the viewer. I can accept the omission of when the letter was sent to his wife but the fact that we are not told that the letter may not be the correct one is harder for me to accept. I absolutely agree that omission of information can be as bad as reinterpreting information, especially in a documentary film.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: Danger of creative license

by Jacob Nelson - Sunday, January 26, 2014, 1:19 PM

I think you make a great point that the letter showcased in this episode may not have been one hundred percent accurate. Thus, this does in some sort of way jeopardize Ken Burns credibility in this PBS documentary series. The liberties taken in the presentation of this letter is an accurate display of the dangers of a creative license. While I don't believe that Burns is necessarily taking advantage of his creative license to the point where he is trying to present false information to his viewers, I still believe it is within our best interest as students to double check the information that Burns shows in the documentary.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: Danger of creative license

by Timothy Wilson-Haley - Sunday, January 26, 2014, 7:00 PM

I think you are dead-on to note the potential risks of the level of creative license that Ken Burns takes with such an important subject. However, to compare *The Civil War* with *National Treasure* is a false equivalency. The Hollywood movie was made for the single intent of entertaining and making a large profit. A multi-million dollar movie with fabricated scripts and sets is nowhere near what Burns and PBS did with genuine photos, locations, and communications. Yes, both productions used actors. The difference is that in *The Civil War* the actors read real writings. Morgan Freeman brought to life the passion that Frederick Douglass most likely felt. Sam Waterson communicated the stress that Lincoln most likely felt. The Major's letter communicated the fear, regret, and anxiety that soldiers most likely felt. In *National Treasure*, Nicholas Cage chased after a treasure that was completely fabricated. Historical figures were placed into a story created story. To compare the two films is to say the source of a problem and a proposed solution are one-and-the-same. Movies like *National Treasure* are arguably part of the reason that so many Americans know so little about history. Films like Ken Burns' *Civil War*, while flawed and imperfect, are a response to the state of American ignorance. They are attempts to compete with movies like *National Treasure*. The difference between *National Treasure* and *The Civil War* is much greater than the difference between *The Civil War* and a piece of academic scholarship.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Multiple Letter Versions?!

by Melinda Parks - Wednesday, January 22, 2014, 5:30 PM

I can see why Burns decided to put this letter at the end of the episode. It serves to evoke an emotional response from the listener and provides a powerful, thought-provoking end to the episode. It provides a memorable ending and causes the listener to sympathize with soldiers and with their families left at home. Though it does initially seem out of place, even though the episode mentions when it was written, it's not hard to understand why Burns

chose to place the letter where he did.

I did not assume that the letter was sent to his wife directly after the battle, so I was not surprised that the letter was sent to her quite a while after the end of the war. However, I can see how some viewers might imagine her reading it after the battle, and I think that Burns could have and should have included that bit of information. I was rather surprised to learn that there is more than one version of the letter, but I'm not surprised that Burns didn't include that fact. It would have completely ruined the effect he was trying to create!

Although this particular letter is poignant and beautiful, I think that a different letter should have been used for accuracy's sake. So I don't have a big problem with Burns putting this letter where he did in the episode, but I am annoyed to learn that the version of the letter presented may not be the true one.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Multiple Letter Versions?!



by Jessica Mitchell - Wednesday, January 22, 2014, 8:10 PM

I am curious about the multiple versions of the letter. How drastically do they vary? I have to believe that Burns chose the version of the letter most likely to elicit the response he was looking for from the viewer.

I agree divulging the information that there are multiple versions of the letter would have easily detracted from the effect Burns was going for. However, the fact that it was never sent but was instead found in his possessions would likely, in my opinion, have added an even greater emotional reaction to the scene. The fact that Ballou never even got the chance to send it only makes the fact that these soldiers lived in such upheaval and turmoil more apparent.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Multiple Letter Versions?!



by Joyce Garipey - Thursday, January 23, 2014, 3:40 PM

I did find myself sympathizing with the Union Major as well as with his wife and family. I am like you and didn't make any assumption as to when the letter actually reached his wife, but I did feel that after it was mentioned that he died a week later at the 1st Battle of Bull Run, it should also have been mentioned that Sarah didn't receive the letter until much later.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Re: Multiple Letter Versions?!



by Jessica Mitchell - Thursday, January 23, 2014, 9:47 PM

I agree it should have been mentioned. I think including that information would only have helped elicit the emotional response. It would also have helped to

convey they kinds of hardships the soldiers and families dealt with during the war. At least I would think that communications weren't always very easy to get to and from each other, especially during that time.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Creative License



by Lauren Grant - Wednesday, January 22, 2014, 6:59 PM

Personally, I am not terribly concerned with Ken Burns taking this sort of “creative license” with Union Major Sullivan Ballou and his letter. I think that leaving out the information of when the letter was sent is irrelevant to what he was trying to do which I see as trying to get an emotional response from the viewer. The information would have made the placement of the letter in the film inaccurate since he would have had to place it at the end of the war which I can see why some would have trouble with the chronology of the letter. By placing Ballou’s letter at the end of the first episode it leaves the audience wanting more. The letter and the music grab the viewers’ attention and evoke the emotions that these soldiers went through at the time. The sense of fear of leaving everything that they knew behind, the love that they had for their families, and the patriotism each soldier felt for their country. I think that by including this letter in the way that Burns did helps to give insight into the mind of a soldier at the end of 1861.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Creative License



by Tiffani Brizendine Schnetzer - Saturday, January 25, 2014, 2:01 AM

I completely agree. While it’s nice to know the facts behind the letter, and I think it’s always good to double check someone’s facts because of things like this, I don’t think that the letter’s placement hurts the viewer’s comprehension of the war, chronologically or in any other way. The letter simply enhances the understanding of what soldiers and their loved ones were going through during that time period while drawing the viewers in, making them excited for the next episode.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Creative License...with consideration



by Bryan Sanders - Saturday, January 25, 2014, 11:22 PM

It may have been inaccurate to place the letter reading during the war rather than after, but it still needs to be understood with all facts. We know it was written by Sullivan Ballou during the war, and perhaps Ken Burns' reason was indeed to convey Ballou's feelings during the war rather than his wife's. Still in the documentary itself it may not be clear to every viewer that Ballou's letter never got to his wife. Nor would they know that it may not even be Sullivan's actual letter.

This version was chosen above the others to convey a message of love for country

and others that captures the mind and heart. It certainly captured my attention for a moment when I heard it. I would continue to caution against calling the letter presented as proven truth.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: Creative License...with consideration

by Timothy Wilson-Haley - Sunday, January 26, 2014, 5:21 PM

I absolutely agree that the letter does not represent historical truth and that its usefulness is limited and should be used with caution. I also agree that Burns might have crossed the line from creative license to manufactured story by not informing the audience that the letter might not be completely authentic. However, I don't think that the issue of when the letter was received by his wife makes any difference at all. Even if she had never received it, the words were still written. They still represent an individual's thoughts and experiences. They still serve to illustrate the burdens and suffering of the war. There is also an odd similarity between this letter, and many others from different wars in different eras. I wonder why this letter specifically was used, instead of one of, I'm sure, countless others that relate similar sentiments. Perhaps this one best worked for the story? If so, then I think this documentary's usefulness in a classroom is even more limited that I previously argued

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Letter placement.

by Robert Richardson - Wednesday, January 22, 2014, 9:05 PM

To me the letter's placement was spot on, a great way to end on emotional level and get me ready for the next episode. When I read that this may not have been the original letter, I was shocked. I took the documentary at face value and never thought I'd been mislead, this certainly makes a case for doing your own research.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: Letter placement.

by Kylie Emory - Thursday, January 23, 2014, 7:40 AM

I also felt very mislead after learning that there could be other versions of the letter. I wonder why he chose this particular letter, when, quite honestly, I'm sure there were many others that could invoke the same response? I also wonder why are there other versions of this letter? When were they created? Shortly following the battle, or in more recent years? I can certainly see why he did not include that information in the film. It would draw away from the emotional response he wished for, and leave the viewer with too many questions.

Doing your own research on every subject is a must these days with the vast amount

of "information" available on the internet these days.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

2

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Re: Letter placement.



by Jessica Mitchell - Saturday, January 25, 2014, 6:14 PM

While doing your own research is always a good idea, it's also important to be careful with that information. I have found a couple times that my own research led me to conflicting information with the class materials. And in a couple cases that information has shown up on the tests.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

1

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Re: Letter placement.



by Lauren Grant - Saturday, January 25, 2014, 8:31 PM

I agree that it was right for Burns not to add the information to the film since it would have detracted from the emotional response he was going for and would leave too many loose ends for the viewers. However, I do not completely agree that researching everything is the right way to go about things because some information that can be researched on the internet is misleading and can be often incorrect. I do think that Burns had the choice to add a different letter so my question now is why did Burns choose this letter? Since it made the cut for the film he must have had a specific purpose for choosing this particular letter.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

1

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Re: Letter placement.



by Tiffani Brizendine Schnetzer - Saturday, January 25, 2014, 1:51 AM

I agree that doing your own research is important and I like that this class is teaching us the importance of doing so by teaching us through multiple sources. I didn't think the letter being revealed in "The Cause" was extremely misleading, but it was definitely enough to make me wonder what else may be out of order or exaggerated to cause the right response in viewers.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

1

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Re: Letter placement.



by Melinda Parks - Sunday, January 26, 2014, 8:42 PM

I think that many viewers of the film would be shocked, as you were, to learn that the letter read in the film may not have been the actual letter that his wife got. While I think that in this case the concern of historical "inaccuracy" is minor, it makes me wonder

what other pieces of information in the film are incorrect. You said that you "never thought I'd been misled," and I think that would be most people's response to this new information about the letter....which means that they would generally take everything in the film to be true. That could be dangerous, especially if you were really serious about studying Civil War history, and I agree that viewers should consider further study.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Burns Evoking Emotional Response

by Jacob Nelson - Wednesday, January 22, 2014, 11:10 PM

Even though Ken Burns does indeed take some sort of creative license in the case of Major Sullivan Ballou and his letter I believe it didn't sacrifice the integrity of the historical information being presented. While the chronology of events is inaccurately portrayed it still didn't confuse me as a viewer and reader. I personally believe Burns presented this letter to his viewers in a manner that would guarantee some sort of emotional response or thought process. By providing the letter in the way he did it forced the viewer to think of the Civil War from a different perspective. In this particular case it forced us all to consider what it would have been like to be fighting a war within your own country, but far away from your family and home. While this example can sometimes make our understanding of the war more complex I still believe the letter was worthy of being shown in the manner that it was.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Burns Evoking Emotional Response

by Lauren Grant - Saturday, January 25, 2014, 9:13 PM

I also think that although the chronology of events is inaccurately portrayed that it did not confuse me while I was viewing the end of the film. I didn't think about that Burns could have included the letter to force the audience to think about the Civil War in a new perspective, through the eyes of a soldier. After watching the end of the film again I can now see how as a viewer I can imagine what it must have been like to be fighting against my own people and being scared and afraid being away from the ones I love. The emotions that the letter bring out definitely make our understanding of the war more complex and I agree that it was worthy of being included.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Re: Burns Evoking Emotional Response

by Jacob Nelson - Sunday, January 26, 2014, 12:25 PM

Thanks for the input Lauren. I completely agree that including the letter into the documentary made us think of what fighting in the Civil War would have been like. The presentation of the letter also makes us try to relate to some of the emotions and feelings that this particular soldier was going through during the

war.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

1

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Relating



by Tiffani Brizendine Schnetzer - Wednesday, January 22, 2014, 11:39 PM

In a way, I almost think it was necessary to introduce the letter so soon in the documentary. Most of "The Cause" (though not all), is focused on the bigger picture of the battles and politics leading up to and during 1961. Intellectually, we the viewers are interested in the film by the end, but maybe not quite as interested on an emotional level. Burns needed something simple yet powerful to quickly spark a "If I lived back then, that could have been me," moment in the viewer to build an emotional connection. In comes Ballou's letter, providing us with that final push needed to fully realize, the people who were affected by this war, were still people on the most basic level. People who loved and were loved. People who passionately fought for what they believed in. People who feared what was to come. People who were people just like me, the viewer.

In my opinion, reveling the letter outside of chronological order doesn't hurt our understanding of the war's history. As I mentioned briefly before, there are two sides of our brain being fed by Burn's film, the intellectual side and the emotional side. Burns does sort of a balancing act between the two, yet keeps them separate as well. When he brings the letter into the episode, it's clear by the music, the timing, and the images, that he is feeding our emotional side. By doing so, even after reading the article about the letter's history, it's easy to disassociate the letter from the war's timeline and instead to use it as a tool to engulf oneself in its meaning as a representation of a relatable soldier during the Civil War era.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

3

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Re: Relating



by Melinda Parks - Sunday, January 26, 2014, 9:05 PM

I, too, enjoyed the placement of the letter. I think that it served to pull people in and could have perhaps influenced the hesitant viewer to watch the next episode. I have really enjoyed all of the quotes throughout the past two episodes, and I think they really play an important part in keeping the viewer interested and also remind the viewer that, yes, this really did happen. History isn't just "dry" facts, if you know what I mean, it's also individual stories and human emotions. I think that including the quotes helps the audience connect that much more.

However, while the letter certainly is beautiful and may indeed be a good tool to foster emotional connection, I think that perhaps another letter could have been used, one that wouldn't risk sacrificing historical accuracy.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

2

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Research on the letter P S

by Joyce Gariepy - Friday, January 24, 2014, 1:16 PM

Throughout the course of this week I found myself wondering more and more about the different versions of the letter. How different are they? So, I spent some time doing a little research on Major Sullivan Ballou. I found several websites that are using Ken Burns's version, at least one of them claims that the letter is the original. <http://www.aboutfamouspeople.com/article1026.html>

I found many other websites and have included several of them in this post.

The history.net website says that 5 copies of the letter are known to exist, but none of those 5 match Ballou's handwriting. <http://www.historynet.com/sullivan-ballou-the-macabre-fate-of-a-american-civil-war-major.htm>

One website talks about the version that Ken Burns's included at the end of episode one, but makes the claim that it was an excerpted version with word modification. This site has what they call the unedited text of the letter. They make no mention of it not being the original.

<http://www.civilwardads.com/CivilWarArchives/SullivanBallou.htm>

Another website apparently interviewed Ken Burns and he talks about the letter. Ken Burns says the letter is "All about love. First and foremost is love of country...it's about love of government...It's a love of cause...it's love of family." This article goes on to talk about what happened after Ballou's death. According to the article, his body was dug up, beheaded and burned by Confederates. It seems to me that Ken Burns should have included this information in the film as well.

http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/civil-war-soldiers-heartbreaking-farewell-letter-was-written-before-death-at-bull-run/2011/07/11/gIOAF3MOI_story.html

In each version that I read, many of the same sentences and phrases are included. However, some versions are longer than others. Ken Burns didn't make any mention that the version of the letter that he included may have been an excerpt of a longer letter and I wonder about the word modification that one website makes the claim of. It is apparent that Ken Burns did use a "creative license" when he included this letter, but as many of the class has made mention of, I think it was placed in the film to evoke an emotional response from the viewers. According to the article that talks about an interview with Ken Burns, the letter was given to him by a scholar and Burns believed it to be the "most beautiful letter I've ever read in my life." So, it seems that the letter had an emotional effect on him as well.

In the end, I think I have more questions now about the letter and any alternate versions than I did before.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Research on the letter



by Kylie Emory - Saturday, January 25, 2014, 8:16 AM

It certainly does raise up more questions! What great research you have accomplished here though. It is so odd that there are so many other versions. Why copy it?

I love the way that Ken Burns describes the letter. That was the way I perceived it as well. It is a nice touch to add a piece with so much love into a documentary that is about war. It seems out of place, yet right at the same time, since love is the reason so many men decided to fight.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Re: Research on the letter



by Benjamin Trautman - Saturday, January 25, 2014, 5:13 PM

Thank you for the research and I enjoyed muddling through these articles. I have been seeming to try and balance my unbalanced emotions towards Ken Burns. I know if I watched the series without this class, and the discussions that entail, I would not question Ken Burns' validity in providing the audience with truth. The placement of this letter, or possibly words left out or added to this letter does not effect his historical chronology much. But if Ken Burns feels the right to alter the letter for dramatic effect, then what else has he or may he alter in the ensuing episodes. Like I said the letter is not a huge issue, but it could create a domino effect, for me at least, of thinking that his "creative license" should be revoked or the idea of a "creative license" should be banished from any historical author/film-maker's mind. I can't count the times I have contradicted myself in these discussions, do I trust Ken Burns or do I not? Either way his documentary has been enjoyable and helpful in some ways, but maybe we should be alarmed just a little by the way he ended this first episode.

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Ballou's death



by Kylie Emory - Saturday, January 25, 2014, 8:43 AM

It is interesting that Burns did not mention that the letter had never been mailed to his wife, but it wasn't really necessary either. The letter makes it sound like he didn't intend to mail it, but rather for her to receive it along with his other things, which is what happened. Although

I am sure by the time she received it following the war she already knew her husband was gone. When I first listened to the letter I did not imagine her reading it following his death, I actually imagined Ballou writing it. Sitting in a hot, miserable camp, filled so full of all of these emotions, knowing he would probably never see his wife again. That image brings up more emotion to me than of his wife reading it.

I am the spouse of a deployed service member currently, and while my husband is not in serious danger, these are things that we have talked of and thought about. Having to set your affairs in order in case he never comes home really makes you consider and ponder things like this. It makes me so much sadder to imagine him feeling like he may never see his family again, than it does to imagine myself receiving the news that I will never see him again.

Maybe these are the reasons I consider Ballou and his emotions more than his wife's. I know what my feelings would be, so I automatically placed those on his wife, and worried about him, the way I worry more about my husbands feelings and emotions more than my own.

*Not looking for sympathy, we are fine, this is our life. Just wanted to explain where my thoughts came from.

Sum of ratings: 3 (1)

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Re: Ballou's death



by Joyce Garipey - Saturday, January 25, 2014, 11:38 AM

I have 2 sons who were deployed to Iraq for a year in 2009-2010, so I totally understand what you are saying. One of my boys was mostly safe as he was the Supply Clerk on the base. However, the other one went out on missions frequently. I can totally see an image of a soldier sitting in the hot sun writing a letter home. It is an image that evokes a lot of emotion.

Sum of ratings: 1 (1)

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Re: Ballou's death



by Lauren Grant - Saturday, January 25, 2014, 8:38 PM

While listening to the letter I also imagined Ballou writing the letter instead of his wife reading it. I think that this is the reason that the placement isn't a problem for me, since I imagined him writing it at the end of 1861 before Bull Run. The thought of him writing this letter is what I think Burns was trying to create with the voiceover and the photos of soldiers during that time. I like how you tied your personal story into how you personally interpreted the letter. It really shows that everyone will interpret the letter in their own way.

Sum of ratings: 1 (1)

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Re: Ballou's death



by Timothy Wilson-Haley - Sunday, January 26, 2014, 8:09 PM

Leaving things open to interpretation is an incredibly useful tool for visual media. It was probably Burns' intention for viewers to think of Ballou himself when the letter was read, as many of us did, and not his wife. The risk lies in the potential for others to come to a very different interpretation. This is where I think Burns deviates the most from academia. In making these events as relevant and relatable as possible, he must leave certain things open to interpretation. Telling people what to think about something usually makes it less relatable. Leaving something open to interpretation allows viewers to make it meaningful to them. However, it allows others to come to completely incorrect interpretations as noted by Levin. Because Burns didn't specify the reality of this letter, some viewers could, and probably did, conclude that the words of the letter exist exactly as they were read in the film. Leaving things open to interpretation is important, but the work of an academic involves preventing students from reaching false conclusions. Burns, in my opinion, failed to do this. For this reason, I think the way the letter was used in the film should be criticized. I agree that it was a powerful scene that worked well as a finish to the introductory episode. But I also think the specifics of the letter could have been included, perhaps even in a later episode.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Ballou's death



by Melinda Parks - Sunday, January 26, 2014, 9:13 PM

I, too, imagined Ballou writing it, rather than his wife reading it. Consequently, I wasn't very shocked when I read that she received the letter after the war. I wasn't surprised at all, actually. What was more surprising to me was the fact that there are multiple versions of the letter! It made me question Burn's choice to use this particular letter and makes me wonder what other liberties he's taken.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Re: Ballou's death



by Jacob Nelson - Sunday, January 26, 2014, 11:16 PM

I think most of us imagined the letter being written by Ballou on the battlefield. The image of a man writing home to his wife and family seems to evoke the most emotion towards the viewers which is probably why Burns included this content in the documentary. However, it finally makes sense to me that Burns presented this letter out of chronological order because I think he wanted us to hear it from his wife's point of view since she did ultimately receive the letter long after its conception.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Letter Placement and Historical Accuracy



by Lauren Grant - Sunday, January 26, 2014, 4:23 PM

The letter placement does not terribly affect my understanding of the history of the war. Ballou's letter was written at the end of 1861, which is the end of the episode so if we are looking at the historical accuracy of when the letter was written then it would be correct. However, since Burns did not mention that the letter was never sent until the end of the war, I feel slightly deceived. A slide or a few words after the letter informing the audience that the letter was never sent to his wife until after the war was over would have let Burns keep the placement of the letter and keep most of the historical accuracy intact.

I see the letter as being placed in the film to create an emotional response in viewers instead of being there to be a vital piece of history. The letter does not entirely teach us anything new about the war, but instead helps us to place ourselves into the mindset of a soldier during that time in the Civil War. Ballou's letter helps spark an interest in what was going on and helps grasp the audience's attention so knowing that the letter was sent at a different time does not affect my understanding of the history of the war. I believe that the letter serves its purpose and was properly placed in the film.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Limited analysis, but still valuable



by Timothy Wilson-Haley - Sunday, January 26, 2014, 5:55 PM

I agree with many of the stated opinions that Burns doesn't tell an untruth when including the letter, but rather includes a very important aspect of the personal experience of war. So often, war histories focus on battle tactics and political arguments that the personal and individual aspects, the suffering, gets overlooked. I think Ken Burns was right to include such emotionally compelling aspects to his film. I also have no problem with the chronological liberties Burns takes. Many historians follow their own threads throughout history when writing in order to make a point, jumping back and forth in chronology. I don't think Burns did anything different. He began Episode One with a personal reflection long after the war. It ended with a personal reflection during the war. Personal experiences seem to be the major theme of this series as illustrated with Mary Chestnut's, Sam Watkins', and Elijah Hunt Rhodes' diaries, conversations between Grant and Sherman, the death of one of Lincoln's children, and so forth. When Mrs. Ballou received the letter is of little importance. However, Burns comes very close to creating a story, which is not history. He should have informed the audience that the authenticity of the letter is not certain. I think filmmakers are free to use creative license to make a point or make the material more relatable, but not to create meaning where none exists.

This scene was powerful. It conveys the truth of the suffering and horrors of war. I don't think it was necessarily dishonest, but it could potentially cause some false impressions. Therefore, this creative license limits the film's usefulness in a classroom. However, as a documentary geared for the masses who know little of history, I think it does no harm.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Limited analysis, but still valuable

by Jacob Nelson - Sunday, January 26, 2014, 7:28 PM

Great response Timothy. I think you make a valid argument that the creative license used by Burns does indeed limit it's usefulness in a classroom setting. While the documentary thus far has succeeded in providing a general history of the Civil War, I am still curious if it was Burns intent for his film to be used in an academic setting. In my opinion this documentary is still a great learning tool despite the creative liberties Burns has taken.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Re: Limited analysis, but still valuable

by Timothy Wilson-Haley - Sunday, January 26, 2014, 9:03 PM

Yes, it is a great learning tool but with serious limitations that we need to be aware of, which is why this is such an excellent exercise. Identifying its strengths and limitations furthers our own understanding of historiography and the nature of scholarship. As a learning and teaching tool, I think this film has value only as an accompaniment to academic materials and thoughtful analysis. Hearing Major Ballou's letter read aloud brought the subject to life. Being aware of the letter's context and ambiguous authenticity enables us to take its compelling emotional value separately from indisputable yet impersonal facts. But others who only view the film and don't research other sources could be left with an incorrect impression.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Re: Limited analysis, but still valuable

by Melinda Parks - Sunday, January 26, 2014, 9:31 PM

I agree that this film would not necessarily be ideal for use in the classroom because of Burns' use of creative license. A classroom is (ideally) used for learning the truth and the facts, and this letter may not necessarily be the actual letter that was sent.

The film, though, I don't think was intended for use in a classroom. It was intended to reach a huge audience, and some emotional stimulus is required to keep people interested. People want to be entertained, they want to connect, and this letter was placed exactly in the right place to produce the intended effect. I certainly give Burns props for knowing how to appeal to a large audience.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Re: Limited analysis, but still valuable



by Timothy Wilson-Haley - Sunday, January 26, 2014, 10:02 PM

I think it is useful in our class, just not as an official source for factual information. Burns' film accomplishes something that I think textbooks never will: the events and persons are brought to life and presented in a relatable way. This documentary is less cerebral and more empathic. This is why I think it has limited use in a college course. I don't think it has no use. For us, listening to actors read the letters and journals of soldiers, generals, politicians and so forth helps us experience the events and issues we're reading about. The immersive visual experience further places our minds in the time and events. For viewers not taking a class, I think the emotional experiences open them up to learn certain aspects that Burns and his crew thought were most important for average Americans to be aware of. I don't think he should be criticized for exercising creative license, but I think we should be mindful of the inaccuracies and potential misinterpretations that exist in the film.

I think Burns' appeal to a large audience is brilliant in it's mediocrity. Not everyone cares enough to read a book, or take a community college course, but many will take the time to watch at least a few episodes. Burns takes advantage of this and captures people's attention as much as possible. Again, for us there is value only if we identify its faults in order to utilize its merits.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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