

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

Home ► My courses ► Winter 2014 ► HST 209 W14 (Escobar 32165) ► January 19 - January 25 ►

Forum 2 ► Creative License and Historical Accuracy



Search forums

Forum 2

Display replies in nested form

Move this discussion to ...

< Previous (Creative License and H...)



Creative License and Historical Accuracy

by Joe Escobar - Sunday, January 19, 2014, 10:42 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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Major Ballou's letter, positive or negative?

by Austin Crook - Monday, January 20, 2014, 4:18 PM

1. This letter that was written by Major Ballou is a very interesting addition to this video for many reasons. Initially, I was only focused on how impressive the Major's writing and use of vocabulary was. His ability to articulate his feelings into such detail, and with the use of extremely visual metaphors and imagery was exciting to listen to. It is disappointing to learn that the wife of Major Ballou was never able to read this inspiring letter. I feel like Burns obviously did not express that the wife never got this letter on purpose. I also understand why he would add this to the first episode of the series even though it is out of chronological order. If Burns is attempting to attract the average American to the rest of his series, then this is a great ending to the first episode. It gives someone a sense of patriotism for our country, as well as a loving feeling for our important people in our lives. It makes us appreciate what those men did for us. Which in return, causes us to want to tune in to the next episode.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Major Ballou's letter, positive or negative?



by Katherine Frank - Friday, January 24, 2014, 1:26 PM

I agree, my questions are still unanswered about the command of language and the beauty of this letter. His wife did get the letter, just not until the war was over. I too believe that this letter was placed at the end of episode one to entice viewers to feel the pain and sadness of the soldiers and to tune into episode two.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Is the Chronology important?



by Austin Crook - Monday, January 20, 2014, 4:22 PM

1. I do not think that this affects my understanding of the war. If anything, this ending to the episode makes me more interested in learning more. Without pieces of sympathy and compassion such as this letter, someone could very easily be bored by the historical facts in the film. But after this kind of hook at the end of episode one, I am interested in learning more because I have more of a personal connection with these men and women in the war. The story about Major Sullivan and his letter is true even though it is out of chronological order. So I don't feel that it affects my accurate understanding just because it is out of chronological order.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: Is the Chronology important?



by Katherine Frank - Friday, January 24, 2014, 1:33 PM

I wonder if this letter was included as a representation of the emotions and fears of the everyday soldier. Letters were written everyday by some soldier to a wife or family. I agree, this letter gave a very human feeling to a film based on battles and representing the human side does get viewers.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Questioning Reliability



by Eryne Grant - Wednesday, January 22, 2014, 11:00 AM

I understand why Burns presented Ballou's letter the way he did. Burns wanted to evoke emotion, sympathy, and a sense of connection between modern day relationships and the ones in the Civil War. But, failing to include critical facts of accuracy, such as the fact that there are multiple versions of the letter, makes the source feel less reliable. I believe that history is based off of reliable facts, not just ideas that sound about right. This situation makes me feel a bit nervous about the other facts Burns could be leaving out when it

comes to similar incidents. Burns couldn't cover absolutely everything in his work, but he had the deciding factor as to what facts go inside of his documentary. Therefore, he could have easily included a note at the end about the letter's true history.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Questioning Reliability



by Austin Crook - Wednesday, January 22, 2014, 6:57 PM

I agree that Burns should have included some note about there being more than one version of the letter. He could have said that this was one version of a letter sent home from Ballou to his wife. This way no one would second-guess Burns's reliability on this topic. It does lead you to think there may be more information that is not exactly accurate but my guess is that this letter is still an accurate version of his letter, it may just be altered a little bit here and there. If that is the case then I would not worry about the validity of the rest of his stories.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: Questioning Reliability



by Courtney Waterman - Wednesday, January 22, 2014, 10:52 PM

I also think that a note about the letter would have been a good idea. It would have made his work more trustworthy. This reminds me of something that I had a teacher once tell us, "citing multiple sources doesn't make you look stupid, it makes you look reliable." If Burns had included something about there being extra versions of the letter or when Ballou's wife actually read the letter, I wouldn't think any less of him, nor would I be questioning what else he might leave out. I would have been more inclined to trust the rest of the episodes.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Questioning Reliability



by Eryne Grant - Thursday, January 23, 2014, 7:58 AM

I agree with you completely, Courtney! If Burns would have included a final slide showing the extra facts about the letter, I would have been left on a very interested note. Leaving the audience with an interesting fact would have been a great choice for Burns, and it would have been extremely informative to the viewers. If I were watching this video outside of a classroom where we're learning about this information, I probably would have researched the letter on my own.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Re: Questioning Reliability



by Courtney Waterman - Friday, January 24, 2014, 8:59 PM

Exactly! I would have done the same thing if we were watching this out of the classroom. There's a lot of people who would've wanted to know more about Ballou which would've lead them to more information on the Civil War. I don't think Burns meant any harm by leaving it out but it could have been a great opportunity to get people to do some of their own research

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Re: Questioning Reliability



by Austin Crook - Sunday, January 26, 2014, 11:01 AM

I think that is a good point about the letter triggering some curiosity about the civil war. Even though it was out of chronological order, every beginning to a story needs a hook at some point, and this was that emotional hook. Whether Burns did not acknowledge the fact that there were multiple versions of the letter or not, this letter was a great way to hook viewers into watching more.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Re: Creative License and Historical Accuracy



by Kristine Wallace - Wednesday, January 22, 2014, 12:43 PM

The letter written by Major Sullivan Ballou was one that caused me to feel emotionally upset because

I also thought that this letter was received during the war. This is of course was one of many letters

written for a loved one at this place in time. The sadness that it was not received while he was still alive but found later was disheartening.

I also understand that this was not the only of this version of letter found but I believe the overall message and sentimentalism in it reflect what a good number of letters written during that time were about. With that in mind, I can still appreciate the letter for what it is worth. On e written by MANY soldiers who were experiencing and feeling the same sort of sadness and fear as Ballou.

I believe that Ken Burns was trying, through music and images, to get the viewer to also feel this absolute desolation and loss that the soldiers were feeling.

I still do not excuse Mr. Burns's historical facts and chronology facts for being somewhat innacuarate and out of place but again I will take the film for what it is and enjoy it for its entertainment value

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Creative License and Historical Accuracy



by Katherine Frank - Wednesday, January 22, 2014, 2:14 PM

The letter written by Major Ballou was a good ending to part one, and created an emotional draw into part two. I understand Mr. Burns desire to end part one with this letter rather than include it earlier. The letter created a sense of foreboding, a feeling of impending sadness and pain, which is fitting considering the war we were about to embark on. Taking creative license of this sort doesn't bother me as a letter of this type was probably written many times on the eve of many battles to many waiting wives and sweethearts. This letter, I think, was intended to be representative of those letters.

My concern with this letter is the absolute beauty of it in an era when not many had the education nor the mastery of the English language to write such a letter. If the original has been lost, who created the "other versions" and how do we know if this letter has any historical accuracy. The fact that Major Ballous' wife did not get the letter until after the war and that this was not mentioned also does not bother me. Many a wartime letter in many a war have been delivered after the death of the writer.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Creative License and Historical Accuracy question

by Kyle Housley - Wednesday, January 22, 2014, 3:51 PM

Question:

How do you feel about Ken Burns taking this sort of "creative license" in this specific case of Union Major Sullivan Ballou and his letter?

I don't feel that anyone should be able to use creative license in a documentary. By doing this you allows the chance of someone else using this documentary as a basis for theirs, in turn diluting the true facts with "creative license".

What does it do to your accurate understanding of the history of this war?

Well in the perspective of learning from the film, It leaves the question of what else could be exaggerated or taken as opinion withouth knowing what is actually factual.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: Ken Burns use of creative license

by Jacob Hutchins - Wednesday, January 22, 2014, 6:50 PM

I feel conflicted about Ken Burns taking this sort of creative license with his work.

On the one hand, as a film maker in need of a compelling, emotional point to pivot his storytelling around, I understand why he would place the letter where he did. On the other hand, is there ever any real excuse for deliberately manipulating information, in a historical setting, to achieve a purpose outside of what is factually accurate? I think, and i'm just speculating here, that the attitude of the film maker and his crew was "well, it's not a big deal". And I guess it's not a *huge deal*; it's perfectly reasonable to assume that others

letters of this sort where written, and they did reach their spouses shortly after, and it was terribly hard for them. But why this one? Why use something to make a case it does not support when other evidence was available for that same purpose- factually sound, intellectually honest evidence? At the end of the day, this is a historical documentary, and it was the responsibility of Ken burns and his crew to put together a body of work that was as factually sound as possible. I believe they were largely successful- although instances such as this must certainly be addressed, particularly if this is to be used in a classroom setting. That leads me into what Mr. Levin was getting at in his article, but that is the subject of another post to come.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Ken Burns use of creative license



by Austin Crook - Wednesday, January 22, 2014, 7:01 PM

It is interesting to me that Burns would choose this letter if he knew there were other versions of it out there. You would have thought that he would have assumed some people would not appreciate or trust him after finding out there was more than one letter. My guess is that he could have very easily found another letter that was original writing.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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A window into a soldiers mind



by Christopher Plourde - Wednesday, January 22, 2014, 6:54 PM

I think that Burn's purpose was to give a window into the minds of the soldiers before the beginning of the war. In his letter we see him struggle with two emotional "imperatives", the love of his wife, the life he thought was to be his and his feelings of duty to his country. In both cases these are highly idealized and romantic, which is not surprising considering the fact he is contemplating his impending mortality. This "window" is important as it shows why men initially get swept up into a war before the first shot is fired, why they willingly march off into conflict while knowing it may result in their death. War has often, through history, been highly romanticized as a country prepares for war and it is only in the horrific experience of battle that the reality comes crashing in. This is not to say that the noble "halo" that surrounds a cause is invalid but that it is removed from the reality that it contemplates, that even death, at that moment, seems better than to be removed from that higher purpose.

I am not sure why Ken Burns chose to place this at the end of the episode. I think it was to provide a denouement to the segment, a reflective moment through which one may consider what has went before. Perhaps it was simply to keep the human aspect of the conflict into focus so that the events describe did not sweep it from consideration. In that regard I think it was well used. In so far as the letter never having been received by his wife, I don't think it impacts this purpose for it is still a record of the mind set that was probably replicated again and again at the outbreak of this conflict. I would not be surprised if he originally placed it in chronological order at first only to find that it found a "better" home, aesthetically speaking, at the end. Is it good history in a academic sense? Probably not, but often the emotional realities take a back seat to their empirical brethren; Ken Burns

seems insistent in giving them equal treatment here.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: A window into a soldiers mind



by Austin Crook - Thursday, January 23, 2014, 1:12 PM

I think that even though the validity of the letter may be in question for some people, the idea of placing this segment at the end of the episode was very smart. At least it provided an emotional and compelling end that would hook the viewers into watching the next episode. After watching and reading about the methods Burns uses while creating a film, it makes me trust that this letter is as accurate as it can be this many years later.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Re: Creative License and Historical Accuracy



by Suzanne LeGro - Wednesday, January 22, 2014, 7:25 PM

In analyzing this scene of The Civil War, entitled Honorable Manhood, I have to say that while it is a very touching and romantic scene, the significance of it seems small to me in the grand scheme of the war. Including this letter at the end of the episode seems to be in an effort to really emphasize the kinds of strong emotions that were really fueling the war. I feel that Burns is seeking to elicit a specific response in the viewer by appealing to our emotional nature. I think that he must feel very deeply about this subject to have made this entire documentary about it, I do not think that he is being inherently nefarious in omitting some of the specific information about the letter, rather I think he is using this letter specifically for the emotion that it creates. It is not mentioned whether or not the letter was sent; just that it was written before the battle. Of course, it is concerning to me that Burns does not provide information about where the letter was found and whether it was rewritten or not because now I am feeling doubts as to the accuracy of this documentary. I think the lesson that I am really learning here is that you cannot trust only one source one hundred percent. As far as the misstep in the chronology, it doesn't seem to be that important to me. I understand that Ballou wrote this letter before the battle of Bull Run and subsequently died a week later. I also grasp that this happened in the summer of 1861 and not the end of 1861 as the chronology of the episode would suggest. While I don't appreciate hopping around chronologically, it's not of enough import to me to bother with much thought about it.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Creative License and Historical Accuracy



by Christopher Plourde - Friday, January 24, 2014, 12:19 PM

I think that when we talk about any conflict of the size and scope of the Civil War such a thing as a soldier's letter home is, from a certain point of view, insignificant relative to

the vast amount of empirical information that one has to contend with. But at the same time what we are seeing is really two different narratives; one which we would typically call "history" that deals with battles, acts of the government, demographic statistics etc... and another of about human hopes and fears and the attempt to make sense of it all, which, in some respect is more enduring. Often this second "story" is often eclipsed or even left out entirely when we read history. I don't think this is a problem. When I have read history it is not what I am looking for. But it is relevant and I think it is what breathes life into Ken Burns' account of the Civil War for most people. It allows people to step into the past and recognize the commonality of the human experience however separated from time and place they are from their own.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Creative License and Historical Accuracy

by Austin Crook - Friday, January 24, 2014, 7:43 PM

I think you make a good point about there being two totally different stories. When you can sit back and acknowledge that there are many different aspects of history such as historical battles, significant people, and then historical stories or speeches that may not be identical to the original. We can understand that even if the letter is not identical to the original that it is still extremely important to learn about in understanding the Civil War era.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Re: Creative License and Historical Accuracy

by Keeler McJunkin - Sunday, January 26, 2014, 7:07 PM

This is exactly how I felt about the scene. Clearly Burns wants us to try and feel some of what it might have been like emotionally to go through something like this. If you look at it just from this point of view it makes a lot of sense. The chronological order could definitely been fixed And would have been nice. Yet, I feel this is not what Burns was trying to portray at the time. He wanted us to try and think what it would be like to go through that situation.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Impact of a letter

by Keeler McJunkin - Wednesday, January 22, 2014, 8:54 PM

I found this part of the video segment to be very powerful and moving. This was before I even knew the circumstances regarding the letter. After realizing that she actually read the letter much later and that the chronological timeline of events was out of order, a couple things came to my mind. I believe Burns decided to do this mainly to get an emotional response from the audience at the end of the episode. It seems he wanted to really draw us in and get us hooked on the rest of the videos by pulling at our emotions. In my opinion this

doesn't really cause me to lose credibility or reliability in Burns. I feel he made this decision as a producer/director and not as a history buff. So I understand that some people may question his credibility due to what he decided to do, Yet I look at it as a simple production decision to try and grab our attention as best as possible. It occurs to me that Burns has the right to use this "creative license" as long as he doesn't continue to have the same issue over and over. As we know, history is a controversial subject with many different aspects and sides to stories that we hear. Some chronological errors are to be expected at times in my opinion. Especially when the person isn't focused on just being historically correct, but also trying to grab our attention and emotions.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Impact of a letter



by Debra Moran - Friday, January 24, 2014, 9:37 PM

And a very good production decision it was. As I said in my earlier post I think that the letter was placed where it was to give some sort of insight into a soldier's mind, and emotions. I don't think it should cause concerns over credibility due to being in an incorrect order of events. It was a personal, and emotional letter to the Major's wife and wasn't about the actual event, I think that even though it is out of order we could use it to analyze the emotions of the soldiers, both the north and the south. I agree that Burns was able to reach out and grab our emotions and certainly got not only mine but a whole lot of viewers as well.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Honorable Manhood



by Debra Moran - Wednesday, January 22, 2014, 8:56 PM

"Honorable Manhood". The title of this chapter of the film explains what it is about. Yes it is not chronological but it leaves you with the feeling that it could have been written at any point in the war. He does say that Major Ballou died during the Battle of Bull Run. If the viewer was paying attention they would know that the film had transitioned from 1861, when the first Battle of Bull Run was fought, into 1862. From a producer's point of view the letter was a perfect ending to the first episode of the film. It was poignant, without romanticizing war, and it made sure people would tune in for the next episode. It was a personal touch to a scholarly documentary and it brought emotion to a film that is made up of mainly still pictures.

Burn's use of the photographs of the other couples speaks of this showing that soldiers from both sides were men, with fears and doubts, and they loved their wives and families. Even though the letter wasn't received by his wife until after the war, it was written, and I think that matters. Soldiers have written death letters to family since the written word was conceived. I know that the accuracy of chronological events is essential to history, but I feel the personal touches such as letters written by Major Ballou, and other artifacts lend themselves to understanding the cultural landscapes of the times through the language of the letter, the music playing in the background, and the pictures of the other couples.

The Music is also not of the Civil War era it was written in 1982 but fits in beautifully with the film because it is a waltz, and that is the style of music is of the era. I feel that even though it may be out of sequence this letter is important to the film even if it does nothing more than to get people focused and talking about an important piece of American history.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Honorable Manhood



by Austin Crook - Thursday, January 23, 2014, 9:37 PM

You bring up a good point about the title/theme of this section being "honorable manhood". Even though sometimes stories may not be given to us in chronological sequence, it does not mean that it will not have just as strong of an impact on its viewers. The title itself starts to connect with people emotionally and causes them to feel a personal connection with the letter.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Theater Movies & Documentaries



by Courtney Waterman - Wednesday, January 22, 2014, 10:20 PM

When I'm watching a movie that's "based on a true story" I expect the writers and director to take creative license and change things in order to make their audience feel a certain way. After reading the critiques of Burns' work last week, I'm not surprised that it happened in his documentary, but I also hold documentaries, especially historical ones, to a higher standard than movies. I see theater movies as being made to entertain people, and documentaries as being made to teach people, and let them process the information in their own ways.

Burns was going for an emotional pull by placing the letter at the end of the episode, he wanted to hook people into watching the second episode, and he wanted us to feel sympathy and sadness. By doing this he is pushing his audience in the direction that he wants them to go rather than letting his audience decide what they want to do with the information presented.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Theater Movies & Documentaries



by Suzanne LeGro - Sunday, January 26, 2014, 6:03 PM

Obviously, I totally agree that Burns used this letter to elicit an emotional response at the end of this episode; however, I think that it shows more about how deeply Burns cares about this subject rather than being a purely manipulative move to entice viewers. To me, by sharing this letter, he is showing that there is more to war than just conflict. There are a whole slew of feelings that soldiers heading off into battle experience that I cannot even possibly begin to comprehend. I think that Burns is trying to bridge that gap of civilian and soldier by including this letter. I also agree with

you that documentaries, most especially teaching documentaries should be held to a higher standard than your average flick. There is one thing; however, that I am reminded of when thinking about the liberties Burns is taking. I am reminded of our first assignment for this class, in which we were investigating the ways that historical facts can be presented with many biases, and I think that this is a great example of how biases and personal interpretations can skew our understandings of history.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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An Accurate Understanding



by Courtney Waterman - Wednesday, January 22, 2014, 10:40 PM

Since the letter was a love letter, and didn't contain information regarding battle tactics, laws, or important political figures, I don't think there is ultimately too much harm done in Burns allowing his audience to believe that Ballou's wife read the letter soon after his death. My main frustration with it is that if Burns' is willing to withhold information once for emotional sway, how many more times is he willing to do it? And is the line drawn with letters between family members or does it go further than that? This particular discrepancy doesn't mess too much with an accurate understanding but if this continues and it gets worse, then an accurate understanding will be harder to obtain.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: An Accurate Understanding



by Christopher Plourde - Friday, January 24, 2014, 12:00 PM

I don't know if I would call it withholding information on Ken Burn's part. Knowing the information does not change its relevancy in any meaningful way. I would even go so far as to suggest that, given his purpose and the medium (film) that he is using, such information is almost supercilious. Now if this error was made in the "Battle Cry for Freedom" then it would be more appropriate to censor it. I think having different expectations for these treatments of history are valid. I would not expect to get the full picture or a full and complete accounting of the Civil War from Ken Burns' miniseries, where I think "the sum being greater than its parts" applies. McPherson, however, considering who he is and what he is trying to accomplish has a much higher bar to achieve.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: An Accurate Understanding



by Courtney Waterman - Friday, January 24, 2014, 9:15 PM

You're right, withholding was not the right word choice there. There is a point where throwing too much information at an audience can become counteractive and cause them to checkout and stop listening. Maybe Burns felt that he was getting to that point and that not including more information about the love letter

would have been somewhat frivolous. He could have supplemented that though and taken a moment before the credits to reveal a place where the audience could find out more regarding the letter or anything else in the episode. All in all the information about the letter isn't that big of a deal, but I still wonder what else might be left out

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: An Accurate Understanding



by Austin Crook - Sunday, January 26, 2014, 11:11 AM

I agree that Burns could have easily added a short comment about there being multiple versions of the letter and it would not have taken away from the emotional connection people get from it. I do not think it should cause people to worry about his credibility but this all could have been easily avoided if he would've added a quick comment about the originality of the letter.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Re: An Accurate Understanding



by Keeler McJunkin - Sunday, January 26, 2014, 7:13 PM

I'm not sure it was his thinking to be withholding information. Although it was clearly done to persuade our emotion into the subject as you said. I look at it more as the creativeness of a director. It just depends on whether you are looking at it from a movie sense or from a historical perspective. It's hard at times to do both of those well without cutting into one or the other. You have to be able to have some sort of ability to ad-lib as the maker of the movie. If not, you are looking at a documentary directly. So I tend to give a little leeway in both directions of this subject. The subject matter is just too much to not do so.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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This Doesn't Affect My Understanding of the War



by Eryne Grant - Friday, January 24, 2014, 2:48 PM

The actions Burns took towards Ballou's letter doesn't affect my accurate understanding of the war because it is impossible to cover everything related to history inside of one film documentary. Although it is impossible to do so, Burns could have easily included an extra slide (what I said in my previous post). I do feel a bit confused as to why Burns didn't present the dates in chronological order, but to me it didn't affect my understanding of the time period at all while watching the documentary. Would it have been much harder to include them in order? Whenever I question something as major as this idea, I wonder if Burns had an issue while creating the film that prevented him from putting the dates in more of a chronological order. Or, maybe Burns just disregarded the idea. Either way, there

is more to the story than we can see, which definitely relates back to the Ballou letter. I think every viewer and reader of history needs to keep in mind that we cannot know or understand everything that occurred at that time period, no matter how accurate we believe we are. Unless we were at the historical moment in time, we will never know all of the exact, factual information.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: This Doesn't Affect My Understanding of the War

by Suzanne LeGro - Sunday, January 26, 2014, 6:11 PM

Yes! I also don't really understand why Burns wouldn't have just used chronological order in the first place, so it was all clear and simple. But maybe that's really the thing, like life, history is in no way clear and simple, there are as many ways to interpret the past as there are stars in the sky. You are also totally right that we cannot fully comprehend events of the past because we will never be able to experience that time. This makes me really think of how important it is to document as much as possible so that when we look back on our pasts we have lots of information available to aid us in our understanding of the past.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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shortened letter

by Christopher Plourde - Friday, January 24, 2014, 9:52 PM

From what I have read it seems that Ken Burn's deliberately used a shortened version of the letter that left out some of the personal details the Ballou included. This reinforces the idea, in my mind, that he intended it to present a over all picture of the mindset of soldiers at the *outset of hostilities*. I think it is important to remember that this letter was written prior to the first major battle (Bull Run) and it must be seen in that context. Also Sullivan Ballou was not a "common soldier", so to speak. He was a distinguished lawyer in Rhode Island and was elected to the Rhode Island House of Representatives where he eventually served as Speaker of the House. He was a staunch Republican and a supporter of Abraham Lincoln and willingly volunteered at the start of the war. (from Wiki). It is likely that he had strong abolitionist tendencies (though I do not know that for sure) and that for him this war had a strong moral "subtext" (which you can see in the letter) that may have not been shared by many of his fellow soldiers. Still there is much that still can be accounted as a shared experience, such as writing home to loved ones on the eve of battle, wondering if they will ever see them again.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: shortened letter

by Eryne Grant - Saturday, January 25, 2014, 7:28 PM

I think the background information that you brought up in your response was interesting and tied into the idea that he wasn't a common soldier. I also enjoyed the mentioning that this letter was shortened. I think Burns used bits of the letter for emotional appeal, not necessarily historical accuracy or factual information. Using the letter to evoke emotion from the viewer was a great strategy of film making for Burns to use.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Re: shortened letter



by Christopher Plourde - Saturday, January 25, 2014, 9:05 PM

I'm not so sure that "strategy" is the right word. Nor I am certain that making the film "more appealing" was his motive. The motive to create art is not necessarily the same as appealing to the audience. I honestly think he was trying to present a sort of overall picture of the "noble" intentions that may have been present in the minds of soldiers on the outset of the war. I think, however, that one may get the idea from the film that this mindset was universally shared, which I am not sure is entirely accurate which is why I brought up Ballou's background. The way he used it was very effective in its appeal but I think we may get astray if we start presuming his motives for doing so....You would have to ask him to know for sure.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: shortened letter



by Eryne Grant - Sunday, January 26, 2014, 3:41 PM

Christopher, you're definitely right that we would have to ask Burns about his motives for creating the film. But, as the audience, artists assume and understand that their work is going to be critiqued and analyzed in ways that they never presumed. After all, everyone has a different thought process. The way I see it, the letter was put in the film as an emotional hook to the audience, like I previously stated. Lastly, if Burns wanted his series to be talked about, he has obviously achieved his goal. If the letter wasn't attention grabbing, none of us would be talking about it. But, that's just the way I see it!

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: shortened letter



by Courtney Waterman - Sunday, January 26, 2014, 1:42 AM

Eryne- I agree that this was an interesting insight for Christopher to point out. I also agree with you that going for emotional appeal was a smart idea on Burns' part. History is a huge onion with layers upon layers of information to peel back, so Burns had to find a way to make his documentary appeal to an audience

without it being too dense. If it wasn't appealing, and it didn't reach out to viewers I doubt it would have been aired. Tapping into emotion and using that was a great way to get people to watch, and pay attention so that they could learn something. In week one, during the Meet Ken Burns video, Burns says, "At the end of the day our attention is all that we have." He applies that within his relationship with PBS and by extension he applies that to his documentary, which would include an intended audience.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: shortened letter



by Keeler McJunkin - Sunday, January 26, 2014, 7:18 PM

You make some great points here. Especially about it being at the start of the war and bull run. It does seem Burns wants us to see what it was like for a soldier at the beginning of the war. Possibly so we can see how emotions and mind sets change as we move farther and farther into the war. It wouldn't surprise me if we see something similar done by Burns as we move along. It all comes down to getting a good mixture of creativity in making a video and also keeping historical accuracy.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Re: Accuracy as it Applies to the Classroom



by Jacob Hutchins - Sunday, January 26, 2014, 3:48 PM

Looking over the forum, I get the sense that most don't feel that the issue of accuracy surrounding the use of the letter is that big of a deal. In all honesty, I really don't, either. I think Burns used it for a purpose that can be easily discerned and, being familiar with the setting and the subject, I can avoid making erroneous judgments based on it. However, there truly is a larger issue at stake here.

We have the benefit, being in a college level history class, of approaching this documentary with an eye toward discussion of both the successes and failures it presents. In other words, we are analyzing everything. The inclusion of this letter did not hamper our accurate understanding of the war because it was pointed out to us by our instructor. I can freely admit that, having seen this documentary at least 8 times, I had no idea that the letter in question was in question at all. If I had not taken this class, it is likely that I would have gone on my way carrying a false (albeit not terribly harmful) assumption based on how information was presented to me.

Kevin Levin, in his analysis of how this documentary can/should be utilized as an educational tool, summed it up very well in the first paragraph of his lecture:

"All too often the film is used as a launching pad to other classroom activities or simply shown with little student preparation; such an approach renders students as passive observers rather than engaging them in trying to better understand the choices that went into the film's script along with how the various elements come together to tell a coherent story. More importantly, students fail to see the film itself as a product of long-standing assumptions about the war that are embedded in our popular imagination and often

guarded as sacred."

What Levin is saying here, I believe, is that this documentary is often used as an educational tool all by itself, without the type of analysis needed to address those inaccuracies it possesses. It is a great documentary, no doubt, but just cannot be a stand alone tool. As such, its use in the average classroom setting is fundamentally hampered.

Sum of ratings: 3 (1)

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Accuracy as it Applies to the Classroom (cont.)

by Jacob Hutchins - Sunday, January 26, 2014, 4:07 PM

Proceeding through his lecture, Professor Levin continues to explain areas of the documentary that (instead of simply calling them "wrong" and getting agitated with Burns) he feels are excellent examples of how common interpretations of events and people during this time can be examined in other ways.

He speaks on how Lee, as portrayed in Ken Burns film, is depicted as the classic "reluctant warrior", and uses this moment in the film to demonstrate that A) this is a commonly held notion and B) it may not actually be accurate, or at the very least is open to interpretation. This same type of analysis is what Levin is suggesting we do with regards to the letter; instead of lambasting Burns for trying to deceive (which he really wasn't doing), Levin takes advantage of a learning opportunity.

A sections near the end of his lecture summed it up very well, I thought:

"While some historians have faulted Burns's approach in this film as too consensus-oriented and biographical, as a classroom source it is ideal in that it introduces themes that are deeply engrained in our collective imagination as in the case of Lee's decision to resign from the U.S. military and Lincoln's role in emancipation. Understanding the various elements that make up a Ken Burns film, supplemented with various primary and secondary sources places students in a position where they can better appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of documentary history as well as the challenges involved in interpreting the past."

I really agree with the intellectual sentiment and teaching philosophy represented in this quote, and I think Professor Levin does a great job of explaining how the weaknesses in a learning tool are simply more opportunity to teach.

Sum of ratings: 2 (1)

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A Final Thought on the Levin Article

by Jacob Hutchins - Sunday, January 26, 2014, 4:31 PM

Heading toward the end of his lecture, Professor Levin discusses the emancipation of the slaves and how this can be used to examine the general idea that Lincoln was "the prime mover in the process of emancipation.". The very next sentence stands out to me quite boldly:

"Once again, I use the film in a comparative fashion to remind my students that historians disagree over how to explain the central events of the Civil War and that this is essential to historical studies."

I believe this speaks volumes to the way (in my opinion) history, and in particular the American Civil War, should be approached. I don't think it too much of a stretch to say that every Civil War book I have ever read differs from slightly to greatly on their explanations of the war. The one thing Civil War historians seem to all have in common is that they all disagree about it! Heck, we could have an entire class just debating the various arguments about the *cause* of the war, let alone the whole thing.

This type of honest analysis from Professor Levin lends, I believe, strong credibility to his lecture and I found it to be quite useful in discussing the forum topic.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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