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Creative License

by Joe Escobar - Saturday, January 21, 2017, 10:05 PM

This thread is for discussions on the Creative License topic.

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IMPORTANT - SUBJECT LINES

BE SURE to use an informative subject line for your post, something that describes which question(s) you are addressing . Do NOT simply leave it RE: Creative License

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Emotional Connections

by Timothy Lucas - Tuesday, January 24, 2017, 4:38 PM

When it comes to studying an event such as the Civil War, it is necessary to keep an audience engaged. A period that covers roughly 4 years of history is often framed in the bloodiest battles, preservation of the Union and the issue of slavery and States Rights. A passionate letter from a fallen soldier can help create a link to the people of the past that an average person of today might better connect with, rather than just the large issues the war concerns itself with.

However, it is important for these connections to be authentic and to fit the context of the moment. The excerpt that reveals multiple versions of Ballou's letter, and the revelation that the letter was not sent till the end of the war takes away some of the integrity of Burns' presentation, even if he did not intend to deceive or mislead the audience. Major Sullivan Ballou's letter does provide a solemn closing to the end of the first episode, which foreshadows the horror, loss and pain we are about to experience over the rest of the series. If a little creative license keeps the people watching, I would hope what we do learn does not betray the people Burns is representing and will encourage us to understand and learn more of the time and the surrounding events.

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Re: Emotional Connections

by Jared Lake - Friday, January 27, 2017, 9:03 PM

I agree on your point of keeping the audience engaged. Especially while being in the business of entertainment. Trying to keep focus and make sure to get your point across can be difficult though.

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Conscientious or just nitpicking?

by Nicholas Esser - Tuesday, January 24, 2017, 10:43 PM

I'm truly curious about what everyone thinks about this week's forum discussion. Forgive me for being rather blunt, but I don't understand the what the issue is here is. The narrator puts the letter into context as written a week before the battle, the letter is dated, and the narrator doesn't say anything about Sarah receiving the letter. Maybe I am in the minority, but as I watched with military experience of my own, I thought of Major Ballou and how eloquently he wrote contemplating his own death and not seeing his wife and family again. I have a hard time understanding what is misleading about the chronology involving the letter.

We must remember that this is the pilot episode of the series. Burns needs to make sure his audience returns for the next episode, and he uses the letter as a strong form of pathos to leave the audience emotionally charged instead of ending on some other grim reality of the war. I pride myself on my ability to play “devil’s advocate” and debate even topics I strongly disagree with, but I’m finding it difficult to see the other side of this one. I’m excited to see your thoughts on this topic and what you think about how Burns ends his first episode.

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Re: Conscientious or just nitpicking?

by Josh Myhre - Thursday, January 26, 2017, 4:11 PM

I get what you're saying in your second paragraph. The end of a pilot episode is the final chance to hook your audience. You need to go big; you need spectacle. But at the same time, it's important that this series remain a *documentary* and not a dramatic interpretation. The Ballou letter is problematic not because it in of itself is a serious factual violation but because of the precedent it sets. It's not just that the chronology is slightly off, it's that Burns is painting a picture for the viewer such that we imagine Ballou's wife sitting there reading this letter as he's charging into battle and is ultimately killed. This wasn't the case. There's also apparently multiple versions of this letter floating around, which begs the question of whether some of the eloquence of the letter might have been retroactively added.

Burns has a tendency to get some of the facts wrong and obscure the importance of other facts in order to serve his greater narrative purpose (Morrison and May article, p. 40-42). If that's true, then his subtle manipulation of the Ballou letter is a benign example of an interpretive style that could become problematic. I don't think he's doing any of this maliciously or to coerce us into thinking a certain way. He's trying to tell an engaging story that will keep viewers coming back night after night, and there's nothing wrong with that. It's just that he could be a bit more responsible with the way he presents information. I don't think it would have diminished the dramatic qualities of that scene to simply give us all the relevant information about the Ballou letter, but for some reason Burns made the choice to obscure it. If he's willing to "bend" the facts here, however slight it really is, then he's probably going to engage in the same kind of fact-bending later on in the series.

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Re: Conscientious or just nitpicking?

by Nicholas Esser - Thursday, January 26, 2017, 8:39 PM

I absolutely agree with your arguments, as I used some of the same for last week's forum. However, this week the question poised: "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?" In response to that I've yet to see what I feel is history being misrepresented. The letter is not the original and it could be a fake, but I don't think that is enough to diminish the historical value of such an eloquent love letter if that cannot be proven. I don't think its fair to label it as being careless with history.

I don't think the letter should be viewed as less accurate that Burns does not let the audience know that the letter was never mailed. That information might have been cut in the final edit of the film for time reasons as often happens in filmmaking. Of course, I'm not necessarily claiming that as my opinion but unless Burns is cited on the record denying that, who can say? Burns also omits several sections involving Ballou's children, perhaps to diminish his image as a loving father? That's a silly idea, but in my eyes those arguments are equally amusing. I welcome input that I have not yet considered to show me otherwise, but at this time, I can't view this letter as equal to the issues we discussed last week.

This is the link to the cite I searched a little deeper into the letter. It has a brief history on Major Ballou in regards to the war, as well as the full draft of his famous letter, fake or otherwise.

<http://www.historynet.com/sullivan-ballou-the-macabre-fate-of-a-american-civil-war-major.htm>

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Re: Conscientious or just nitpicking?

by Jared Lake - Friday, January 27, 2017, 9:06 PM

I hadnt thought about the fact that the letter could possibly have been changed. Thats a very interesting point, yet im not entirely sure why somebody would counterfeit a letter? Although given Ken Burns' reputation, i do not nessicarly doubt he may have used the wrong letter.

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Re: Conscientious or just nitpicking?

by Stanley Cates - Friday, January 27, 2017, 7:20 PM

I'm also a little curious about this. I'm normally a pretty harsh critic of creative license and I don't see here how Burns, whom you'll discover from last week's forum I am also a harsh critic of, has deceived anyone. In fact, the only creative license I see is that the event was taken out of sequence, but that was announced; and it's not Burns' fault if no one paid attention to that. I also get the impression that Burns needs to hammer home the pilot episode with a good display of pathos; the human emotional experience is one of the few things that remains any semblance of constant across cultures and times and I think that's the only path to getting a large nonuniformed audience hooked on a series.

However, I also like to play devil's advocate and after giving it much thought I think I've come up with a few things to chew on; maybe not necessarily arguments supporting the other side, but some things to consider nonetheless. If it's true that students often come to the same mental imagery of Sarah reading the letter, then there must be some element driving them to this conclusion. As was pointed out in the forum materials the accompanying images of couples and the music likely contributed to this; I also think it's a partially empathetical reaction; that we can't help but put ourselves in Sarah's position and the idea of her receiving the letter shortly after it was written is the most ideal circumstance we can fabricate. If that's true, then I think the real issue is that people don't like to alter their beliefs after they've already formed an opinion. The problem enters when they're confronted with information that empirically impedes on that opinion; so, the solution to that problem for some seems to be to blame Burns for making them feel that way, when in reality he didn't explicitly lead them to their conclusion. What do you think?

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Re: Conscientious or just nitpicking?

by Nicholas Esser - Sunday, January 29, 2017, 12:15 PM

I agree and share your opinion on this matter. I love your line "...the solution to that problem for some seems to be to blame Burns for making them feel that way, when in reality he didn't explicitly lead them to their conclusion." Like I have mentioned in a few of my post, I am a military man and have composed similar letters to loved one, (likely without the eloquence Major Ballou possessed) and until reading the information about this week's forum post, my initial empathy went only to the Major in his dilemma. Don't get me wrong, it is an important responsibility that Burns presents history as clearly as possible. However, as you allude to, people can come to any conclusion imaginable and Burns can only do his best to steer the masses into the same conclusion. I think a recurring theme to this class is to watch this documentary

with a grain of salt. No matter how Burns presents his material there will always be, at the very least, one to find fault in it. I'll pick my battles, and for me, Burns get a pass regarding the controversy of this letter.

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Re: Conscientious or just nitpicking?

by Stanley Cates - Sunday, January 29, 2017, 2:09 PM

Like you said, it is important that Burns be as clear as possible on historical matters; but as I've said in other posts I don't see this particular instance as a representation of historical fact. I see this section as an attempt to humanize the people stuck in the situation so that we don't view them as inconsequential.

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The civil war is plenty dramatic

by Josh Myhre - Tuesday, January 24, 2017, 11:39 PM

I think Ken Burns' manipulation of the drama in episode 1 of "Civil War" is an irresponsible way of approaching history. Giving a specific interpretation of history (for example that the civil war was about slavery, as presented in episode 1) is one thing, but blatantly obscuring what really happened for the sake of drama is entirely another. The civil war is already such a dramatic part of our history; it really doesn't need much embellishing. Burns cites that in some battles, casualty rates were as high as 30% ("Civil War," ep. 2, sec. 1). This is ludicrously high. In "Battle Cry," Macpherson tells the story of the development of the ironclads (Macpherson, p. 373-378). This sequence of events is the stuff of movies! The fact that the *Monitor* was constructed in 100 days, that both ships were supposed to be on test runs when called into battle, and that they slugged it out for hours with no winner, are all crazy facts rich with drama and emotion. These things don't need dramatic enhancement. I felt like I was reading a novel during that section, not a history book.

So if Burns is willing to "shape" what facts and sequences of events we receive, where does the line get drawn? What kind of fact-bending is acceptable, and what's too far? One could re-write the entire history of the war for the sake of dramatic cohesion, and while it'd make sense to us it still wouldn't really be the truth.

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Re: The civil war is plenty dramatic



by Timothy Lucas - Thursday, January 26, 2017, 2:55 PM

I think what Burns was attempting to do was create a link more on a personal level than just cold numbers and locations of distance and time. Not many people can relate to what it would take to build a ship such as the Monitor in the short amount of time, to say nothing of experiencing 30% casualty rates in battle. However the Ballou letter connects pretty much everyone to a shared sense of loss we might feel for a loved one, even if it is outside of a war setting.

The letter does get pretty heavy in words of duty and his devotion to the Northern government, which after learning that it is slightly out of time from the perspective of the movie, and may not have been the original version of the letter definitely hurts the moment's authenticity and cause one to question the message.

If any good can come from this situation, it is that we are given an opportunity to look deeper into the motives of not only the author, but also those who created the presentation. The details might not matter in the long run if we at least understand that not only the soldiers suffered while they were away, but also those left behind.

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Re: The civil war is plenty dramatic

by Josh Myhre - Thursday, January 26, 2017, 4:27 PM

I get what you're saying about personal connections, but I still feel that the way Burns is doing it is sort of irresponsible, especially given how popular the series has become for use in the classroom. I feel that if Burns had simply added at the very end "this letter never made it to his wife" that that could have made the moment even more impactful! Here's this guy writing these beautiful, passionate words for his most cherished wife - and then he dies before they can be mailed off. That's powerful stuff! The small ways in which he alters the presentation of the information seems to set a precedent for manipulating information for the sake of dramatic intrigue. I think the small details are important. To know the *real* truth of this crazy time in our history is crucial to understanding the conflict as a whole. And again, it's not necessarily that this particular example we're discussing is that bad of a violation. It's just the precedent that it sets for where we're going to draw the line between real historical narrative and dramatic interpretation of that historical narrative.

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Re: The civil war is plenty dramatic



by Jared Lake - Friday, January 27, 2017, 9:07 PM

I am personally on the side of Ken not giving his whole effort for this piece, but I enjoy your input on how he was trying to make a connection instead of just numbers. I do not, however, agree with his methods of missing facts in order to entertain.

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Re: The civil war is plenty dramatic

by Stanley Cates - Friday, January 27, 2017, 7:53 PM

You call what Burns did an "...Irresponsible way of approaching history". However, I'm not totally sure that it was an approach strictly to history so much as it was an approach to people; after all, he made no claims of fact in the section beyond that a letter of deep emotional significance existed, and that Sarah read it after Sullivan had died. You also made a comment about a section in McPherson's book regarding the ironclads: "I felt like I was reading a novel during that section, not a history book". That exact thing that you have pointed out there might be the problem Burns was trying to solve; or at least I think that's the problem I would be trying to solve if I were in Burns' position. The problem is that people have a hard time connecting emotionally to history; in my own case I actually have to put effort into not putting figures from history on the same shelf as fictional characters. The problem with leaving figures from history equated to emotional characters is that there is no consequence to actions done to or by fictional characters, they do not feel and therefore people don't tend to form emotional connection with them because there is no mutual empathy to be had. What Burns has done here, either intentionally or unintentionally, is create a solid emotional link that forces us to confront the fact that these were real people who felt both pain and bliss to every varying degree that we do, and that we shouldn't view them as fictional or inconsequential; because that, I think, would be and "Irresponsible way of approaching history".

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Re: The civil war is plenty dramatic

by Zachary Embree - Friday, January 27, 2017, 11:41 PM

Your first sentence really brought up one of the problems I have with how some people approach to history. In my opinion anyone who only views history as a set of facts does not truly capture the past. Telling history irresponsibly should only be impossible unless you distort facts. Making every effort to engage the audience with

unaltered source material is more than acceptable. To properly experience history some kind of immersion is necessary or the audience like you said views what happened like it was a fictional story.

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Re: The civil war is plenty dramatic

by Randall Broome - Sunday, January 29, 2017, 6:40 PM

I agree that bending the facts is not a good thing, especially in a documentary. I don't necessarily think that was Burns intention. I think he was more trying to make a connection of human emotion and draw people in. I don't think this is an okay thing to do either because it is supposed to follow the facts and not make the video's into a drama series. I think there is good and bad to this. He did leave out key facts that would change people's imagery of the letter. We don't know how authentic that version of the letter is. But I think making that human connection can open people up to what really happened.

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Creative License; less is more.

by Stanley Cates - Wednesday, January 25, 2017, 12:39 PM

My initial reaction to Burns' use of creative license regarding historical events is a little bit of agitation. As I stated in the previous forum, it seems as though Burns is an entertainer first and a curator second. Some might say that I'm being overly critical of Burns but I think it bears repeating that if you assume the role of a professional then you simultaneously assume the responsibilities of one as well.

That being said, I was in fact a little shocked to learn that Ballou's wife did not receive the letter until after the war. To that affect I will give Burns credit where it is due; it seems as though he was intentionally magnifying the pathos of the setting and once again his skills as a filmmaker shown through and he was brilliantly successful in this. However, although I don't particularly think that the pathos requires magnification the chronological relocation does not bother me, nor do I feel like it effects my personal understanding of the history. After all the film did clearly state that Ballou wrote the letter "A week before the battle of Bull Run..."; Burns did not attempt to hide anything in that regard. I might not have agreed with Burns' statement about his audience making "leaps and intellectual connections" but I can certain understand him expecting them to pay attention to the audio.

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**Re: Creative License; less is more.**

by Jared Lake - Friday, January 27, 2017, 9:11 PM

I agree with your points on Burns. I feel that its nessicary to question history. I think that if somebody doesnt attempt to keep historians in line we will lose resembalance of truth

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by Stanley Cates - Sunday, January 29, 2017, 2:13 PM

Keep historians in line? I think not. If anything the historians need to keep everyone else in line; keep in mind that Ken Burns is not a historian. Sorry if I misinterpret but your post seems to have a definite aura of "that's what they want you to believe" sort of rhetoric.

Sum of ratings:1 (1) [Permalink](#) | [Show parent](#) | [Edit](#) | [Split](#) | [Delete](#) | [Reply](#)**Emotional Appeal**

by Zachary Embree - Wednesday, January 25, 2017, 3:19 PM

Whenever anyone takes creative license my feelings are determined by what is actually changed. In this episode none of the facts were outright changed, the letter was read out verbatim and followed by the date of the writers death. The first episode attempts to appeal to the emotions of the audience, but to me that was to enhance the immersion of the listener into this turbulent time period. The fact that the listeners might have pictured the soldiers widow is not because false information was presented. I would have preferred that the series included the facts that the letter was found in a trunk and the original lost. Still this use of creative license does not make me think poorly on the series, it merely used existing facts to get an emotional response in the audience.

Furthermore even if the audience did picture the widow reading the letter it serves bring the faceless masses lost in this conflict to a personnel level, not change the narrative of the conflict. If they had indicated that the letter reached the soldiers wife soon after the battle then I would have an issue. That would be altering the facts to make an emotional impact more potent which is not something I approve of in any documentary.

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Re: Emotional Appeal

by Nicholas Esser - Thursday, January 26, 2017, 9:07 PM

I have the exact same feelings in regards to the letter, creative license and of the "widow reading the letter issue." At this time, I am unable to make any connections with how Burns handled the letter to being irresponsible with history. I continually fail to see how not mentioning the letter after the battle has any impact on the history of the Civil War and how I view it.

After all that agreement, I cannot reply to your post without pointing out that the letter was not read "verbatim" but only because a few sections were left out, mostly including his children. Though I admit the documentary isn't without faults, this information specifically, and even its placement into chronology, must be on the absolute bottom of the list for me personally.

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Re: Emotional Appeal

by Jared Lake - Sunday, January 29, 2017, 7:18 PM

I feel that in a historical themed script, creative liscence is important to fill in the blanks. I like that you touched on that.

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Creative License

by Jacob Micheli - Wednesday, January 25, 2017, 3:56 PM

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 feel like an amateur script supervisor. Any sincere message Burns hoped to convey is overshadowed by continuity errors. One could spend twice as long theorizing Ballou's letter mystery than Burns Novella style ending. While he is guilty of misleading the viewer he did accomplish his intention. Using powerful imagery, story telling and music for an emotional cascade of lost love. Unfortunately that vision is a back stepping tear jerker with a marginal invitation to episode 2.

Burns use of the letter brings up three important questions. First, considering the loss of the original letter and its resurrection. Was this at all a credible or honest source for him to use? Second, How much if any was the letter subject to interpretation? Lastly, how many other authors have written material on the same incident?

Had Burns been forthcoming about the letter this confusing climax probably wouldn't exit. sequences might not have been switched. Withholding of information wouldn't be a revelation to some. Most importantly, his work might not be treated like quick sand. With every step your forced to analyze whats historic fact and fiction. Maybe this is Burns true intention. Forcing his viewers to challenge information via his own work.

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Re: Creative License

by Stanley Cates - Friday, January 27, 2017, 8:16 PM

In regards to your questions.

#1 Given that Burns did not attempt to use the letter to shore up any claim of fact or create a metaphor in reference to strict facts I don't see an issue in using the letter as a source.

#2 Clearly any document is open to some interpretation, that's just the nature of non-verbal communication. However, if what you mean is to differentiate between how much is explicit and how much is implicit then I'd have to say that the majority of the emotional value of the letter is explicit. That being said, there is plenty of precedent for documents of mostly emotional value used academically; most anything written by Edgar Allen Poe for example.

#3 I don't know, nor do I have any idea on how to begin to figure it out; but it seemed rude to not even acknowledge your third question.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: Creative License

by Jared Lake - Friday, January 27, 2017, 9:11 PM

I agree that its hard to look at somebodys work and judge it

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Re: Creative License

by Stanley Cates - Saturday, January 28, 2017, 12:26 AM

I'm afraid I have to wholeheartedly but without malice disagree, I don't think it's hard to judge someone else's work at all as long as you have reasonable criteria to judge it on. Everyone's work is subject to judgment and withholding judgement for the sake of someones feelings or to further the notion that "everyone is entitled to an opinion" just causes stagnation, or worse yet that someone can get away with anything they want.

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Re: Creative License

by Xin Sun - Wednesday, January 25, 2017, 10:49 PM

When i watched this period of video for the United States after the civil war has been updated understanding of the civil war is not only a unified national war, but also the liberation of blacks. When I saw a black person said he was free, really appreciate the greatness of this war and its important significance.

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There's a time and place for "Creative License"

by Holly Olson - Wednesday, January 25, 2017, 11:19 PM

This segment did not deter me from any accurate understanding of the history of the war. I can see, however, how someone else watching might be confused. I thought the letter was moving. The pictures that were shown with it definitely made you think about, not only Ballou, but other families that were probably receiving similar letters and also, his passion for wanting to fight for what he believed in. I don't really see this as infusing any more drama into it, since it is something that happened. Was it necessary? No. I see this as one of those things Burns might have stumbled upon in the process and wanted to inject into the film. However, why show it out of sequence? And why not explain that his wife never got the letter till well after the war? This is where I DO have an issue with his "creative license." It was discussed last week in his approach to the entire project. I appreciate his vision and wanting to let a story unfold itself to him but also, this is history. I don't think it's a place to pick and choose what to tell and not tell. And to just throw things in out of place and possibly mislead anyone watching who may not have an accurate understanding of the history of the war.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: There's a time and place for "Creative License"

by Josh Myhre - Thursday, January 26, 2017, 4:51 PM

Exactly this. Are these examples really *that* problematic? No. Is any of Burns' "infusion of drama" necessary? Also no. I appreciate the vision and passion Burns is bringing to the Civil War, but this isn't an area where we should be picking and choosing what to include for the sake of drama. The war is plenty engaging and dramatic, so why not just tell it how it is? This style could become really problematic if Burns were to start to abuse it more frequently. Hopefully that's not the case as the series progresses.

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Re: Creative License-Emotional coverage

by Jared Lake - Wednesday, January 25, 2017, 11:40 PM

Let me begin by plainly stating that the inaccuracy of the timelines, as well as dates, and even a few facts strongly worries me. I have always enjoyed history and have found it to be interesting. Yet, when presented with two different sources of information, it makes me question altogether the idea, and point of providing false information. Although, I suppose that is the point, to make us dig deeper. To learn to question what we are told and to unearth even more questions, and even a few answers. I would like to talk about the emotional coverage in this film. Or rather the lack of. I feel that all of the information is provided so plainly that most people cannot feel what was going through the soldiers, or their wives' minds. I find it hard to connect with these people who seem so far away. As opposed to other documentaries I have watched, and enjoyed, that touched my heart. Feeling a connection to our history is so important in my opinion because it helps to relate us to the men and women of those times. I cannot imagine what was going through their minds, and how they felt. But I do not feel like I was given enough opportunity to connect closely with these people.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Creative License

by Randall Broome - Sunday, January 29, 2017, 4:53 PM

I think Burns using some creative license can be both positive and negative. I think it was positive in that it brings into perspective the lives of the soldiers and the wives back home. It brings a more human element in to hear the letter of a fallen soldier. It is also a very heartfelt letter so bringing back the memory of the fallen soldier, Sullivan Ballou, is really great too. I got the impression that Burns was using the letter as a way to draw people in more and to create more of a connection with people. In a historical documentary, I don't think this is very appropriate. Letter's can be great tools to highlight more of what is going on, but this one seemed oddly placed and more of a show tool.

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Drama or Storytelling

by Zachary Embree - Sunday, January 29, 2017, 7:38 PM

While the reading of the letter was definitely an emotionally compelling segment I would not call its inclusion an attempt to drum up drama. It came off to me as a tasteful underscore to the overview of a tragic moment in history. As the first episode something in this segment has to hook the audience and get people interested, which in this case was showing the people behind the history.

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