



HST 209: American History: Civil War W17 (Escobar 31664)

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Meet Ken Burns

by Joe Escobar - Saturday, January 14, 2017, 9:00 PM

Make sure you have read How Forums are Graded. All students must follow those guidelines. After studying the required materials (videos and web linked readings), address and discuss the various questions with your group members throughout the week.

DO NOT attempt to answer every question in a single post. In this class, forums are a place for sharing informed comments and having analytical discussions. (Forums are NOT a place for students to publicly display full essays.)

To make your POSTS, click the reply link in this, MY post. To reply to another student's post, be sure to click the reply link within in THEIR post.

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: Meet Ken Burns. This will help keep the discussion organized.

**Uneasy confidence in film**

by Stanley Cates - Tuesday, January 17, 2017, 6:50 PM

I find my level of confidence in the Civil War series somewhat shaky. On the one hand, it is an attempt, albeit of what degree is debatable, to comprehensively portray the war; a notion attested to by its length. On the other hand, at the end of the day it is a film, and film was born out of the entertainment industry. People watch film primarily to be entertained, and to be informed as an afterthought. Have you ever noticed that people are more likely to watch a political highlight reel on the news to catch the few big moments than they are to watch several hours of c-span? That's because c-span is tedious, and so is representing historical information in a comprehensive way as would be found in a textbook. Robert Toplin stated in the first article: "[The public] has a rather simplistic notion of history."; keep in mind that he said that in 1993, before the added demand on the public's attention from things like Facebook and Twitter. I think this is very telling of the way we as a society absorb information, clearly history is not simple, but it is represented as simple in films because that is what gets people to watch films in the first place; expectations of what a film should be; fast, entertaining, and exciting, do not necessarily coexist with what historical analysis is by nature; slow, thorough, and (unfortunately) tedious.

Sum of ratings:3 (1) [Permalink](#) | [Show parent](#) | [Edit](#) | [Split](#) | [Delete](#) | [Reply](#)**Re: Uneasy confidence in film**

by Spencer Kellar - Thursday, January 19, 2017, 6:39 PM

I understand your point, but I disagree with your assertion that Burns had to decide between entertaining his audience, or giving them the facts. In this case, I think he could have done both. When Michael A. Morrison and Robert E. May deconstruct and critique the episode *The Cause*, it doesn't seem to me that they're advocating he bore audiences to death with dry facts. Omissions excluded, in many cases throughout their essay they simply wish he had got the facts already presented right; such as the incorrect date of Abraham Lincoln's speech to the Young Men's Lyceum or the inaccurate portrayal of John Brown's raid. The biggest problem of all, in my opinion, is how Burns seems to trivialize the whole Civil War period to show audiences a black-and-white morality tale that gives no room for complexity or shades of gray. The Northerners are the good guys, and the Southerners are largely evil. Would it have bored audiences to know that many in the North were just as racist as those in the South? Would viewers rather watch paint dry than be informed that many different factors led to the war, not just slavery? I just don't think that's the case, and I don't think the short attention spans of his viewers are to blame for the faults of Burns' documentary.

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Re: Uneasy confidence in film

by Stanley Cates - Friday, January 20, 2017, 12:13 PM

I think you may have misunderstood me; in fact, I'm fairly certain that you did because you've preemptively echoed some of the things I was going to say in follow up posts. Of course, in this situation, as in nearly every situation, the dichotomy in question is an illusion; that being of strict lines between entertainment and education. While what you say about Morrison and May's wants regarding getting facts right is likely correct, I think they also would have liked for Burns to go a little deeper on context rather than just giving the small interesting bits and then moving on; I know I would have liked that at least. The article states: "It is more important, however, to understand the causes of the war [than simply see it's pathos]. Military technology, campaign strategy, and battlefield tactics though fascinating are far less revelatory than human motivation". I think they're right; going along with your theme of wanting the audience to get a deeper experience I've chosen an example of where Burns got it right, but failed to follow through. In episode one of Burns' series, at time mark 17:18, Shelby Foote, late American historian and novelist, on the cause of the war, states that: "It was because we failed to do the thing we really have a genius for, which is compromise. Americans like to think of themselves as uncompromising. Our true genius is for compromise—Our whole government's founded on it, and it failed." Unfortunately, a quick search using the video's transcript feature tells me that this is the only instance of the word "compromise" in the entire 99 minutes of the film. What Foote said here is arguably correct; but without my having prior knowledge of the proposed compromise of 1861, and the effectiveness of the compromises of 1820 (Missouri) and 1850 at keeping the problem at bay prior, Foote's statement loses what I see as an unacceptable amount of meaning.

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Re: Meet Ken Burns-Did I admire Ken Bur

by Jared Lake - Tuesday, January 17, 2017, 6:56 PM

Ken Burns seems to really put his heart into his work. I can tell this by the way he speaks in the video of having to cut out pieces of work when they do not fit. Ken seemed sad to not be able to share those pieces with his viewers. Mr. Burns also impressed me with the technique of fitting the film to the music as opposed to the music to the film. Ken's thoughts on the film "Civil war" shocked me when he spoke of where he originally was going with that work.

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Re: Meet Ken Burns-Did I admire Ken Bur

by Katherine Spriggs - Sunday, January 22, 2017, 8:45 PM

I also believe that Burns has a strong sense of pride and joy with his work, and in order to make this film to his standards it took a lot of editing and re-editing to make it a piece he was excited to share with the world. Although that meant excluding some great and enjoyable moments or stories, it made room for more explanatory and important information that just couldn't be left out. Thinking about it, would you rather hear a "puff piece" or an important story that helped you learn more about America's historical events. Personally I would take the facts.

On the side of music with the movie, it should be stated that although important, the music isn't the story in total. Yes, it helps. Yes, it's meant to be enjoyable. But if you watch the video Burns clearly states "We record ninety percent of our music before we even start editing. And then we go in from the very beginning of editing, start to engage music, so that music becomes not something that you add to amplify emotion, but something that's organic to the original emotion." In this statement I can't find that he was "fitting the film to the music" but rather drawing from the genuine feeling the composers and well as himself felt prior to the editing process. There is still the gathering and studying of information, finding photos, sifting through stories, doing vocal recordings, etc. The music was being made before, during and after all of these things. To say that the music wasn't made to the film isn't exactly accurate.

To me it seems that you have it about half right. The music was, based on the video given, composed and fit to the film prior to the finishing of the editing process. Still, the music was made to fit the organic feeling the film and its content. The film itself was not made to match some music they had found or wrote and seemed to like.

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Re: Meet Ken Burns

by Lillith Ka'at - Tuesday, January 17, 2017, 8:41 PM

Hi, everyone! First of all, boy was the "Meet Ken Burns" video tedious to sit through. I was interested in the essays debating his methods - but seven minutes of a guy very slowly saying "sometimes..... When you're making a film..... You use..... Music..... For the mood....." Please say all of the things you want to say, much quicker than that! Jeez.

Anyway - that first essay was pretty interesting. I went into it with this contrarian instinct to immediately side with the perspective that it can be near-pointless to discuss history without going into the complexities of its context. But then I was just as quickly swayed by

the defense of his film, because anything that spurs interest in a subject that not enough people are educated on seems good - and his film got a lot of viewers, and even a big bump in visits to Civil War battlefields. (The first essay says "Some 39 million people tuned in," which is a lot of hype from people who probably were not all secret history buffs.)

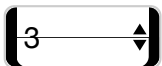
It's hard to determine the value of "sparking interest," though when there are flaws in the teaching material... It's important to know our history, so that we don't repeat it, but context is almost MORE important than the events. That's what we need to, as a culture going forward, actually pay attention to. Cultural context. If we don't analyze and discuss all the complicated angles of why something happened, knowing it has happened before isn't going to do anything useful to stop it from repeating, not really.

In the second essay, it seems at first like a lot of work went into his films, from quotes like "Burns tracked down 16,000 photographs from 150 archives to produce his series," but when you get to the parts pointing out his mistakes, many of which seem to be pretty well-known dates, you start to question it...

After the first essay, I was on the my usual stance: something that sparks interest is valuable, even if imperfect, but if we were to 'fix' something about it, the best thing to be done would be to make it more of an ongoing conversation or a dialogue about the events rather than an attempt at just summarizing and explaining them. The second essay touched on this quite a bit, in the segments stating that they don't advocate for his film's removal from the classroom - just that teachers use it as a springboard for conversation, and urge their students to view it critically. So we were totally seeing eye to eye...!

I think the biggest reason we can't just say "this is wrong in too many ways, so it's unacceptable to use for teaching," is because that's basically the norm for history. American public schooling leaves a lot to be desired. From my memory, history classes up through the end of high school was just a lot of "let's talk about how great white people were," and then growing up and finding out on the internet and in college that most things you learned were either severely flawed or complete lies. So without condemning the entire status quo of history teaching in the US, it's tough to condemn one particular video for similar mistakes.

My confidence in Ken Burns is pretty shot. I'm sure there will be plenty of good information, and in a format that's much more accessible to people who have little interest in the subject - but knowing that he frequently makes mistakes, it's sort of nerve-wracking. I watch all things critically, but I'm not educated in history by a long-shot, so the idea of having to fact-check what I learn from him by studying it all over again from a different source seems redundant. It benefits the most important element of explaining history, which is multiple perspectives, but in this case it sounds like it's going to extend from "failing to discuss multiple complexities and perspectives" and go straight into "literally getting dates wrong" territory, and that's... Weird.

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Re: Meet Ken Burns

by Stanley Cates - Wednesday, January 18, 2017, 6:26 PM

Regarding your statement of: "I think the biggest reason we can't just say "this is wrong in too many ways, so it's unacceptable to use for teaching," is because that's basically the norm for history." In principle I understand what you mean; but that's sort of self defeating isn't it? That sort of logic that we've been wrong this long so we might as well keep being wrong doesn't seem to hold much water once you put a little pressure on it. Doesn't condoning misinformation at any level undermine the integrity at every level?

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Re: Meet Ken Burns

by Lillith Ka'at - Thursday, January 19, 2017, 6:59 AM

I mean it as more of a general criticism of how we're taught, growing up, rather than a black and white statement of what we should or shouldn't do. I think I wrote pretty extensively about my perspective on the importance of conversation and viewing things critically. I also think it's impossible to only use perfect flawless 100% accurate material, since there's rarely going to be such a thing. Since it's impossible to have a flawless source, it becomes a matter of where the line is drawn, which is literally always going to be subjective.

It doesn't hold much water if you interpret me saying "it's a nuanced subject, where its use has a wide spectrum of what it could look like, so I wouldn't leap to the extreme of *never* using this material," as meaning "we should give up on accuracy from everything, forever, and have no standards at all." I think it's better to be pragmatic about the material we have and students' ability to hold interest in different types of media when it comes to subjects they may or may not hold any interest in. I don't agree that it's "defeatist" to say that flawed material could still be useful, no. I don't think condoning misinformation "at any level" undermines integrity "at every level," no.

For example, I don't actually have that much interest in history, and while I enjoy reading recreationally, reading history books is difficult for me. I'll have a much easier time watching a video. So in this sense, watching a video with some false info, but being advised that it has mistakes and being taught about them, is inherently going to be more beneficial to me. In general, I enjoy criticizing things, especially media, so it brings a whole new appeal to the study that just reading accurate facts from the book lacks - for me - so it's essentially *helping* to hold my interest, in an admittedly weirdo way. I can say pretty assuredly that I'll learn way more with this level of interaction than I would reading a book with my eyes glazed over within three pages. I don't think this is any sort of risk to integrity. The only risk to integrity would be a teacher who does not ask us to question things. Which... No matter the subject, would be a terrible teacher.

If there are more accurate videos, obviously, I condone using those instead. If there are videos that have *no* value, as opposed to these ones which even the more critical of the two essays encourages continuing to use, then I wouldn't want to watch those. But, again, judging something as having zero value is always going to be very subjective, so. No. I don't agree that making use of misinformation undermines the integrity at every level.

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Re: Meet Ken Burns

by Jared Lake - Thursday, January 19, 2017, 8:12 PM

Your points on the accuracy of the film interest me because I find it easier to forgive his mistakes knowing how hard he works. Yet, simple mistakes such as getting dates wrong do seem unforgivable in a historic document. My thoughts on the film so far are also...iffy. But knowing our instructor based an entire course on the faith of this film I have to believe it gets better.

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Re: Meet Ken Burns

by Lillith Ka'at - Thursday, January 19, 2017, 8:49 PM

That's basically where I'm at. My requirement to justify using it is "watch it critically and discuss it," and I figure that our teacher *opening* with two essays about its flaws and mistakes shows pretty well that that's how he intends to do things.

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Re: Meet Ken Burns

by Stanley Cates - Friday, January 20, 2017, 5:23 PM

If I had to venture a guess as far as Joe's faith in this film I don't know that I would "believe it gets better" so much as I would wonder if he chose it specifically to ingrain in our heads that all sources should be viewed critically at all times; which is of course a valid lesson.

That being said, I'm intrigued by your statement: "I find it easier to forgive his mistakes knowing how hard he works." I'm just not sure that I'm convinced that giving something lots of effort and forgiving shortcoming aren't mutually exclusive ideas. Could you may expand on your reasoning a little bit? I guess what I mean is that a person can work very hard and still be just plain wrong; not that I'd go so far as to oversimplify Bruns' work as plain wrong.

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Re: Meet Ken Burns

by Katherine Spriggs - Sunday, January 22, 2017, 3:28 PM

Hey Lillith,

Although I see your point of view, I do believe Burn's work will be fairly reliable for what we're using it for. I say this because I have watched The Civil War film for previous classes as well as personal enjoyment. Yes, at times his work may be cheese flawed, but it's important that we use this film to get a sort of "context" like you spoke of. I realize that it's impossible to get a complete story with all of the minute details and facts. But least we will be able to get an idea as to why some of these things took place and how these events impacted the people in and around them.

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Feelings on Video & First Article

by Holly Olson - Wednesday, January 18, 2017, 11:49 AM

After watching the presented video clip of Ken Burns, I did find myself taking a "liking" to his process on his projects. I immediately admired how he described their process of letting the stories unfold themselves when he said, "We approach our projects with ignorance and curiosity. This allows us to have a process of discovery." (Video at 00:35 minute mark) And again later when he said, "I'm not bound from a requirement of what to film but am free to explore." (Video at 3:15 minute marker) I like his openness to let the stories take his project in any direction.

That being said, I don't feel that a documentary on a historical event(s) is necessarily a project that should be approached like this. Obviously, I think there should be some creative freedom. Nobody wants to watch the same story over and over again, as told by someone else.

I do admire though, in the second article, his defense of the series saying, "One thing that we haven't really said is how much history has been murdered by people who are professionally employed as historians. What we were trying to produce is not a piece of

academic paper. We were trying to speak to a very large audience ... and excite them and not be the last word or the first word." (p. 3)

I'm a little torn on how I feel about his approach on this specific project. I like the creative flow and effort to excite people about it. However, there are certain topics that I don't feel should be, "approached with ignorance and curiosity." Be curious but also mindful of all the facts.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Feelings on Video & First Article

by Jared Lake - Thursday, January 19, 2017, 8:15 PM

My favorite history quote is "History is written by the victor". I think that plays well into the points of how much history has been butchered by historians. I liked some of the creative freedom made by the films but its also very important to remember that it is a history film and we can only "create" so much

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History and Media

by Alexandra Zakett - Wednesday, January 18, 2017, 3:32 PM

The *Civil War* by Ken Burns is the first documentary by the director/creator that I have seen. After watching episode one and the PBS video introduction I am enchanted by Ken Burns. I found the documentary to be captivating especially with the use of images and the role of the voiceovers. I found myself supporting his view in how he presented history. I really enjoyed his creative ability to successfully combine film and history as an art form. After reading the first article from the media outlet, I found myself still being enchanted. I understand that the article presented historical shortcomings of the film but overall I think that this article served as a reminder that history and film can be accessible to everyone. This article mentions multiple times the importance of the average person getting excited about history. "'I trusted my audience to make much greater leaps and intellectual connections than most documentary films," Burns said. "I'm not hitting them over the head with the superficial demand for balance--which says, 'Well, there was slavery, and then there was states' rights,' There are arguments later on by people who felt slavery was fine." This was a quote from the first article that showed the responsibility Ken Burns entrusted into his audience. The second article is much more specific and critiques the documentary at a deep historical level. The second article brings light to the idea that certain historical events like the Emancipation Proclamation were set in a confusing timeline. The author believes that Ken Burns romanticized the Northerners as liberals and did not take into the

perspective of the time. Overall I believe the *Civil War* will be an excellent source of historical information for the class. Combined with the readings and the textbook, the *Civil War* is an intriguing addition to the historical information provided.

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Re: History and Media

by Jared Lake - Thursday, January 19, 2017, 8:19 PM

Your positive take to Ken is very...well, almost shocking to me. Nearly every post that I have read has been fairly negative. I'm interested in what was so enchanting to you about these films. I'm also intrigued by the fact that you have such confidence in the films seeing as how most of the basic facts can be questioned.

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Re: History and Media

by Alexandra Zakett - Saturday, January 21, 2017, 12:38 PM

I found his passion to retell history through film enchanting. I admired his process and his ability to make history accessible to everyone. I understand there are historical shortcomings but like you said in a previous response I found myself being able to forgive Mr. Burns due to "how hard he works."

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Re: History and Media

by Stanley Cates - Friday, January 20, 2017, 6:42 PM

I also find your positive take a little shocking, though intriguing nonetheless. To a degree I understand the enchantment that you mention, setting everything else aside there's no doubt that Burns' cinematography is nothing short of fantastic; he definitely grabs a person by the heart strings and draws them in. However, I think that's why I find the statement from Burns that you used: "I trusted my audience to make much greater leaps and intellectual connections than most documentary films.", a little irresponsible on his part. On what precedent did he trust them to do that? I understand that this college level course and its creator would trust us to make such leaps and intellectual connections, but as was pointed out in the first article by Robert Toplin, the public has a simple view of history; a view that, despite his gift for emotionally gripping cinematography, Burns

does little to challenge. As a professional presentation of historical events aired on public national television surely Burns should have known that the public was going to take his word for it.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: History and Media

by Alexandra Zakett - Saturday, January 21, 2017, 12:46 PM

Yes, the film is captivating and I find myself admiring Ken Burns the artist, not the historian. Filmmakers often trust their audience to connect the dots and explore beyond the film. I agree with you that he should have considered his audience on a more comprehensive level.

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Re: History and Media

by Stanley Cates - Saturday, January 21, 2017, 7:17 PM

I'm using this post to respond to this specific thread of discussion rather than each individual post in it as I feel that responding individually would be tedious and confusing.

I don't understand this notion about equating how hard Burns works to the ability to forgive his shortcomings. Could either of you explain this to me in a more detailed manner. Despite how it may sound I don't mean to be flippant, I actually don't get it, and I actually would like to understand it better. I just can't help but compare the idea to other forms of presentation. Take a college term paper for example; if you wrote a term paper, your professor would hold you accountable, I pray, for its inaccuracies with absolutely no regard for a subjective determination of how "hard" you worked. I'm under no false notion that a documentary should be, or even could be, an absolutely objective reflection of reality, and that informed subjectivity is a good thing and not a bad thing. However, I don't think it's a far stretch to say that professionals should be held to at least the same standards as amateurs. If Burns is so sure of his audience's ability to make "leaps and intellectual connections" then why does he not present to them the necessary material to consider those intellectual connections? Surely you would never present information to your professor under the pretense that you trust s/he will make "leaps and intellectual connections". From the look of things, it almost sounds as if Burns were trying to save face after the fact for, if you'll forgive the expression, "dumbing down" history. I don't think I could speak of the level of

intellectual shortcomings better than Morrison and May did by stating that Burns is guilty of "...mistaking consequences for causes...", and [of media], "...it's tendency to reinforce rather than dispel cultural mythology."

Also, I had a hard time looking for concrete examples that would illustrate objectively that as you (Alexandra) said: "Filmmakers often trust their audience to connect the dots and explore beyond the film." Do you have any examples of filmmakers other than Burns making such a claim?

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My Opinion On Ken Burns So Far

by Katherine Spriggs - Wednesday, January 18, 2017, 10:03 PM

In the video "Meet Ken Burns" I enjoyed learning about Burns' passion for telling stories, and found it interesting that he steps into these projects with "ignorance and curiosity" in order to "discover" things and make for a enjoyable learning experience. (*Meet Ken Burns*, 0:37) The video also taught me that there is more work to creating movies than just filming. I find it noteworthy that Ken Burns and his team completed months worth of research to complete this large project. Ken and his team sifted through countless photos, files, and person documents in order to make this series historically accurate as well as entertaining.

After watching this video I read "History on the screen: who speaks for the past?" This article was about what others have said about Burns' work. I knew he attempted to make this series of films historically accurate and entertaining. However, I did not know that historians had also found his work to be pleasing in both senses as well. Although mostly good responses, some chose to take a more critical standpoint. One said "Film is not really comprehensive... It can't be wallpaper history; it cannot cover everything." (Toplin, 3) This is a valid point in total. It would be nearly impossible to completely encompass the entire story of The Civil War in a film. On the other hand is is an attainable quest to cover the large majority of The Civil War in order to convey an idea of what happened. Overall, I do admire Burns' work, and I look forward to learning more from his films.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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My thoughts on Ken Burns after the video, and how that changed after reading the Current.org article.

by Spencer Kellar - Wednesday, January 18, 2017, 10:20 PM

At least Ken Burns is honest. That was my primary takeaway from my initial viewing of the short introduction to the director from PBS. The quote that stood out most to me was the first one he offered. While illustrating his method of undertaking a documentary, Burns explains that he's constantly learning while he works, saying, "We approach our projects with ignorance and curiosity. This allows us to have a process of discovery. We don't know until it's over. We have certain biases and sympathies that we try and expose to ourselves, and we allow the consultants, mostly academic historians, to help us root them out. At the same time, we have a kind of joyful relationship to the process of learning something new" (Meet Ken Burns at 0:35). Certainly, you would hope that Burns would be interested in the material he is covering. But I found his enthusiasm to be relatable and admirable to a certain extent, as I find similar excitement in learning something new; especially when it relates to history.

The first article from Current.org, however, gave me a different perspective on the PBS video and Burns' style in general. As Robert Toplin points out in the article, *The Civil War* was an incredible hit that got viewers more interested in the subject and made a "tremendous positive impact" (Bedford p.2).

But Leon Litwack and Daniel Walkowitz, two of Burns' harshest critics in the piece, say that many historians find the documentary to be inaccurate and a shallow representation of a complex period of history. Both men questioned why Burns did not tackle the "difficult questions," instead accusing the director of making the documentary "safe, risk-free, upbeat and reassuring" (Bedford p.2)

The critiques from Litwack and Walkowitz, as well as other historians in the Current article, make me reconsider my position on the quote from the PBS video. If *The Civil War* is not an accurate series, then its popularity might be damaging. At the very, it seems as though viewers are seeing a distorted view of history. While Burns does say he has historians on staff that make sure the record is correct, it might be a bit concerning that someone who has admitted ignorance to a subject is the one authoring a definitive documentary on said subject. After reading the Current article, I went back and watched the video again. Around the midway point, while Burns continues to speak to his creative process, I discovered another quote I found to be problematic. Burns, like many (most?) directors, is a bit of a control freak when it comes to research. He mentions that only his inner circle is trusted to pick photographs for the documentary and it's that inner circle that does the research, saying, "Research goes on from day one and ends after we finish the film. Research isn't a period, and we don't have legions of researchers. We do the heavy lifting." (Meet Ken Burns 2:42). Perhaps Burns has changed since this video was created, but I would go out on a limb and point to Burns' insistence on near-complete control of his projects as one of the primary reasons why his documentaries are flawed and why certain narratives, inaccurate as they may be, are found throughout *The Civil War*.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: My thoughts on Ken Burns after the video, and how that changed after reading the Current.org article.

by Jared Lake - Thursday, January 19, 2017, 8:22 PM

Learning is huge in any line of work, especially history. Ken seemed to really enjoy what he does, which is what sparked my interest. He seems to find new ways to love his work every day. I feel that he definitely wants to learn and enjoys to grow.

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Re: My thoughts on Ken Burns after the video, and how that changed after reading the Current.org article.

by Spencer Kellar - Saturday, January 21, 2017, 6:42 PM

Like I said, I find Ken Burns' thirst for knowledge, if I can use that cheesy line, to be an admirable quality and one I can relate to. I simply think that he should be held to a higher standard than the level he holds himself to. Obviously, he doesn't claim to be an authority figure on the Civil War, and explains that his documentary is not an "academic paper," but an effort to "speak to a very large audience ... and excite them and not be the last word or the first word" (Bedford p.3)

In some ways, I find that argument to be similar to the argument Jon Stewart made many times when questioned about his responsibility to report the news with accuracy. He claimed that because he was a comedian, citing the fact that his show would air right after a puppet comedy hour, that he should never be taken completely seriously. Burns, to me, is saying that his documentary should not be looked at with the same critical gaze you might use on a piece published by a professional historian. That's fine in theory, but when your series achieves the level of popularity *The Civil War* has, I think you have an obligation to, at the very least, get the facts right. That he doesn't is a pretty large error and his interest in learning should not be an excuse.

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Re: My thoughts on Ken Burns after the video, and how that changed after reading the Current.org article.

by Katherine Spriggs - Sunday, January 22, 2017, 4:17 PM

I believe you're right in saying this, he does seem to have a genuine interest in this topic. Having already seen this film, I know that his enthusiasm led to a more enjoyable and entertaining experience.

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Re: My thoughts on Ken Burns after the video, and how that changed after reading the Current.org article.

by Katherine Spriggs - Sunday, January 22, 2017, 4:12 PM

I agree with your thoughts on Burn's work before and after the reading. The quote "We approach our project with ignorance and curiosity. This allows is to have a process of discovery. We don't know until it's over..." (Meet Ken Burns, 0:35) had also caught my attention. I believe this line was intelligently used in order to make himself more relatable as well as inform us of their type of research.

On another note, I believe that although Robert Toplin was appreciative of the level of enjoyment people got from *The Civil War*, that did not change the fact that he felt it was not as informative as it should have been. He said "It can't be wallpaper history; it cannot cover everything." (Robert Toplin, 3) This means that in the course of this film it was impossible to cover the entirety of the war. Knowing this, it was possible to cover other pieces that made it more satisfying in this aspect.

Lastly I would like to say, I have so much respect for Ken Burns and his team. They spent hours working hard to make this film complete with the best historical accuracy they could manage. Although at times they made mistakes, it is easy to see that they didn't do this in order to sway our opinions and beliefs in any way. Yes, with more help from people outside the filmmaking process, they might have been able to make more accurate history available for us to hear. However, all things considered, I'm willing to give him and his film the benefit of the doubt.

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Re: My thoughts on Ken Burns after the video, and how that changed after reading the Current.org article.

by Spencer Kellar - Sunday, January 22, 2017, 11:26 PM

You're right. There is no doubt Ken Burns & co. worked tirelessly on this project. If anything, Burns' insistence on being hands-on with the documentary meant more work for him, but he seems to enjoy it. I may have been a bit too harsh on Burns throughout the week in this forum; at the very least, I think he has his pros and his cons. While I find the documentaries narrative slant to be concerning after what we read, Michael A. Morrison and Robert E. May themselves posit that history is up to interpretation, saying, "After all, the most important contribution of the historian is to interpret the meaning of past events, not merely to chronicle them" (Morrison & May p.42).

Then again, they say that to further critique Burns, attacking The Civil War for “asserting all interpretations.” At the heart of this particular issue is that they feel Burns is giving a milquetoast assessment of the Civil War, and that he “relieves the audience of the need to address, much less come to grips with, the complexity of their political culture and the ambiguity of their historical mythology” (Morrison & May p.43).

I go back and forth. In their own way, Morrison and May themselves have biases. Even though they spend a great deal poking convincing holes in The Civil War with evidence to back it up, their interpretations are arguably just as subjective as Burns'. I suspect that's another facet to this assignment, in that we should consider multiple sources while not taking any singular source as gospel. By doing that, we get a much clearer and more complete picture.

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Re: Meet Ken Burns

by Jacob Micheli - Wednesday, January 18, 2017, 11:54 PM

I didn't find myself admiring Ken Burns the historian. However, I was inspired by Ken Burns the innovator, the artist, and the advocate of unbiased history. Instead of following the beaten path Ken prefers to let the story tell itself. With his small but dedicated crew he meticulously creates and destroys. Ken's directional style is similar to the path of least resistance.

Ken sincerely states "We approach every project with ignorance and curiosity." He also claimed he is open to projects leading him in new directions. I appreciate the organic nature of Ken's direction but it's not absolute. Take for instance Ken's use of music. It's subtle, descriptive, and emotional. It's also the first product nearly complete in his projects. Ninety percent of it is finished before film editing even starts. It's hard not to believe the music would not dictate the course of post production.

The same argument applies to his voice over choices. Actors who are not perfect for one role usually audition for several roles. The possibility of the right actor in the wrong role raises concerns. Would the script be manipulated to fit the voice actor? What impact does an A-list actor have on editing compared to a B-list actor. How much of the film's course is impacted by the actor?

Karen Everhart Bedford raised similar questions in her article. She quotes Ken Burns saying "One thing that we haven't really said is how much history has been murdered by people who are professionally employed as historians." This statement moved me. I had always considered historians as guardians of the past. Their only golden rule being never rewrite history. But this concept is key to understanding Ken Burns' vision and his association with PBS.

I believe Ken Burns has the viewer in mind. The Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) is probably the most accessible station on television. With a large variety of its audience being children. PBS easily has the power to reach millions of uninformed people. Ken confessed that he felt PBS chose him and not the other way around. In that respect I do admire him. His conviction to factual history for the public is completely respectable. In Bedfords article she states that 39 million people tuned in to watch Kens PBS debut of " The Civil War". With ratings this substantial the threat of misinformation could become a potential nightmare.

Overall I liked Ken Burns message. His sincerity and passion was refreshing. After I read Bedford article I found more admiration for him than inspiration. Bedfords article was a balanced review of his critics and fans.

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Re: Meet Ken Burns

by Jared Lake - Thursday, January 19, 2017, 8:24 PM

Your argument on Ken Burns the author vs Ken Burns the innovator was similar to mine. I also enjoyed him as an artist, innovator and self worker. But the way he..speaks is so dry and without makes his points very hard to follow

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Re: Meet Ken Burns

by Katherine Spriggs - Sunday, January 22, 2017, 8:04 PM

I hadn't really thought that much into to voice acting, but now that you mention it I can see how and why the largely determine the mood of the piece being spoken or explained. The wrong voice actor can change the image you hold in your mind and possible sway your opinion on the given information. However, a good voice actor that is well fit to the part can enhance the listeners interest and understanding. A voice like Morgan Freeman"s as Frederick Douglass for example, can give you a model for similar speech pattern or voice type you might have previously imagined in your head.

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