

HST 209: History of the Civil War W18 (Escobar 31595)

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Meet Ken Burns

by Joe Escobar - Saturday, January 13, 2018, 10:53 PM

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Ken Burns admirable yet Receives Fair Criticism.

by Brennan Blankenship - Tuesday, January 16, 2018, 12:41 PM

I felt moved by the first video when Ken Burns described how you just go in and shoot. When you have no predetermined ideas you can truly begin to discover the entirety of the topic at hand and become fascinated by this. Much of the criticism Burns receives is just worthy in the fact that the film: "failed to reflect the profound changes in the way history is recorded."- Litwack. *(Ken Burns' fans and critics have their say. Page #2 Par. #6)* However, without the personal knowledge that Burns had about ever making a Civil War film; Burns has done well to

provide an overview of the topic despite the film being a "superbly produced history of war, not of the social revolution which the Civil War helped to unleash,"-Litwack (*Ken Burns' fans and critics have their say. Page #2 Par. #6*)

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Video clip and article 1

by Andrew Smith - Wednesday, January 17, 2018, 4:36 PM

I did like the message that Ken Burns presented in the video clip. It seemed that he put a lot of care and effort into every detail of the Civil War series. He spoke about how long of a process it was to find just the right voice for each character and it appeared as if his overall goal was to create a historical series that presented its information in the most realistic form as to connect you with the history by the use of music, imagery, and narrative voices. My opinion after the video clip was that the series was going to be accurate and pleasing to watch. After reading the first article my opinion changed slightly. I still think the series will be enjoyable to watch with factual information, however after reading the critics by Leon Litwack I think the series might be leaving out some information. Litwack said it was, "superbly produced history of war, not of the social revolution which the Civil War helped to unleash." He spoke about how the series covers information that is "nice" and leaves out the "not so nice" things like the terrorism that plagued African Americans in the South post civil war. I won't know until I watch the series but the critics of it make me wonder how much information may be left out.

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Omitting the not so nice things

by Paul Geu - Wednesday, January 17, 2018, 10:39 PM

I agree with Litwack that the exclusions of the "not so nice" things leave the series lacking in historical context that is needed for the viewer to have a good understanding of the topic. However, I feel that you will enjoy this series as much as I do when I watch it. Ken Burns makes history interesting and there have been times that I have binged watched his programing. In both articles, historians agreed that this film does omit some aspects of the war that is needed, but did state that it was well done and informative. The best thing I can think of to remember is that this is meant to entertain and inform but not to be taken as the absolute fact. That is up to us to research, debate, and learn for ourselves.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Re: Video clip and article 1

by Heather Saxon - Friday, January 19, 2018, 10:02 AM

My concerns are in line greatly with yours, especially with his tendency to keep the "nice" and leave out the "not so nice" things, as Litwack mentions. But being 40 minutes into the film I'm beginning to think Litwack is slightly harsh-but only slightly-because what material that is "not nice" thus far, while still possibly less than the other material, is delivered poignantly enough that the average viewer would likely be left to think, and hopefully do further research. Possibly a bigger issue that I find is his slight fudging of dates that Litwack

mentions early on in the second page of his review. Hopefully things like that aren't abundant, but I think we can certainly say while Ken Burns is passionate and dedicated and does know his history, he aims to tell a story more than recount with *complete* accuracy the events of the war. And, as it's mentioned in the first review, film can only do so much.

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What do I think of Ken Burns?

by Rose Thomas - Wednesday, January 17, 2018, 6:46 PM

I grew up watching Ken Burns with my dad on PBS. I always loved the Lewis and Clark documentary because it was about Oregon. I remember one time I got grounded in middle school so my dad had me watch the Civil War documentary and take tests over spring break. Ken Burns is an amazing story teller. He is always extremely accurate and puts a ton of detail into his work. Most of the facts and stories I remember about history are from his films. In the video he talks about how many takes or strips of film he used every time he made a film. I didn't realize that it was such a process to make them. I am really excited that I have another excuse to watch the Civil War documentary again!

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Feelings of trepidation towards Mr.Burns

by Kishahn Fellows - Wednesday, January 17, 2018, 7:58 PM

I truly appreciate the passion visible in Ken Burns in the first video, as well as his adventurous way of tackling his projects. Burns is obviously a man who loves to learn and to share that knowledge with the world, and i truly admire that, as i can relate.

After reading the second article my opinion of Ken Burns shifted, I feel as if he might be somewhat limited in the scope of his vision, focusing more on the military exploits and almost entirely avoiding the social and societal impacts the war had. Although, in my opinion credit where credit is due, he did make an entertaining series that got people interested in the era, so if presenting an abridged version of the era that focuses primarily on the war itself opens up more conversations, i would argue that, that is a positive, as long as the information that does make it into the final product is factual and accurate.

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Feeling Similar

by Brennan Blankenship - Wednesday, January 17, 2018, 9:31 PM

I feel similar. I am very interested and find myself enjoying the film so far. One of the problems that I could see with Burns "limited scope" is the trouble he possibly could be struggling with trying to make the film entertaining for viewers. It seems that most people do not want to focus on negative impact and would not even entertain the thought of watching such negative treatment of people throughout history. However, importance should be stressed on such topics that shaped our nation and that of which we still see is relevant today.

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Re: Meet Ken Burns

by Zach Haxby - Wednesday, January 17, 2018, 8:26 PM

When I watched the film I found myself liking Ken Burns for the most part as I thought the message he was looking to show was important in showing history. He used both intelligent historians and precise film making to to make learning about history both entertaining as well as educating. It seems Burns is quite passionate about his audience and is very driven by the goal of distributing this knowledge of history to the public.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

1

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Admiration For The Passion of Ken Burns

by Dakota Brotherton - Wednesday, January 17, 2018, 8:54 PM

After viewing the first source depicting Ken Burns relationship with PBS along with a break down of his teams process when it comes to making their films, I can definitely say I admire Burns and his passion for history and story telling. You can clearly see that he is passionate about what he does and that he puts a lot of work and stress into his projects in order to produce the best films possible and this includes digging deep into the history of particular people, places and events, finding artifacts that help convey his story to an audience and then finding the perfect voices to tell those stories. It seems he does this to change the way in which history films are made in order to broaden an audience, making things more dramatic and interesting in order to grab the viewers attention. This can be seen as a good thing in the sense that it can help certain people learn a bit more about subjects they were previously clueless to and it can turn on a new generation of historians to the subject or perhaps inspire a new wave of documentary film makers who will in turn educate countless people about their interests.

However, one issue about Ken Burns style did bother me and it really occurred to me when he was describing the openness with which he went about filming within the first minute of the video. He mentioned how he approaches a sight without a set direction and this allows him to incorporate parts of stories that may not have been initially planned or to link certain things together in a way that makes sense and sometimes they won't know exactly how it all works until they're finished and have all their materials. While this can make for good story telling, after reading the third source for this weeks forum posting I can certainly see how this can lead to a questionable form of educating a mass population on a particular subject.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

3

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Re: Admiration For The Passion of Ken Burns

by Heather Saxon - Friday, January 19, 2018, 10:07 AM

Until reading this I hadn't thought about the ramifications of his filming style. I'm wondering if he came up with more of an outline before filming, a loose one to more fit his filming style, he might not have as many issues with accuracy in term of dates and would get less criticism from the historian community. I'd also say he could use a mixture of modern

and 19th century historians rather than leaning more one way or the other, if for no other reason than to provide some different perspective. But he does have noted historians speaking during the documentary, so maybe it would be just a matter of shifting his filming style a little bit.

Sum of ratings: 1 (1)

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Ken Burns: Civil War meant to be a tool not the final say

by Paul Geu - Wednesday, January 17, 2018, 9:28 PM

When one thinks of a documentary on PBS the first name that comes to mind is that of Ken Burns, whether you are watching this series on baseball to his most recent series on the Vietnam war, Ken Burns has been admired by most as a great story teller and filmmaker. When watching the short video on his process I admired him especially when he stated that he comes into to each project with an open mind. He also stated that the doesn't truly follow the script that he set for his project and allows the material to be more organic and let the story tell itself.

After reading the first article my opinion did not really change on how I felt about Ken Burns and especially his work on the Civil War. This will not be the first time that I have watched the series and certainly will not be the last time either. When I first watched the series in high school history, my mind was opened to a topic that I previously had a passing familiarity to being inspired to researching the subject more deeply. I have always felt that documentaries should be viewed as a small picture of history and give the viewer a spark to expand their knowledge on the subject through reading, research, and debate.

In the second article, historians debated how difficult it was for filmmakers to accurately show history with the medium and whether the Burns documentary should be viewed with more skepticism than most are willing to allow. One of the professors, Robert Toblin, said, "Film is not really comprehensive," but also stated that "filmmakers must reach a public that "has a rather simplistic notion of history."" (Bedford 3-4). The same professor also gave praise to the series by saying that after the release of the documentary helped people become excited about history, and want to explore the subject further just has it did for myself. When discussing how the subject matter was limited on many aspects of this complex topic Professor Toblin stated that film "...can't be wallpaper history; it cannot cover everything." (Bedford 3).

Regarding the third article, I felt that the criticism was harsher than required to get to the point across. While it is important to be historically accurate when producing a documentary of this stature, I felt that this article was a bit harsh in its review of the piece. One point that the authors stated time and time again was how the film has been used as the main teaching tool in high schools and colleges but "has severe limitations as a teaching device." (Morrison and May 39). This is mainly because the piece leaves out many aspects of how the war started and the political aspects of the time. I agree with the article that the Burns documentary does leave much to desire when regards to the reasons for the war starting and that some of the inaccuracies that are presented in the film can give the viewer a picture that is not right. In the conclusion of the article, it stated that the films "analysis of the Civil war's causation is, most apparently, a reminder of the limits of popular media." (Morrison and May 48). What this critique of the first episode does miss

is what Ken Burns said of the entire documentary "[W]hat 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." (Bedford 3).

This opinion by the filmmaker himself is how I view his work. Not as the final word on the subject but one that is to inspire us to research deeper and find the truth for ourselves. With that mindset, I feel very confident that in addition of the textbook, "Battle Cry of Freedom," the use of Ken Burns: Civil War as our main video source will allow us to get an understanding of the Civil War but also inspire us to further debate and understanding of this complete but interesting topic.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Meet Ken Burns

by Heather Saxon - Wednesday, January 17, 2018, 9:54 PM

At first, I found Ken Burns quite admirable. I thought the 5 years he spent making the video series appropriate and reassuring, though knowing that he largely ignored the political side of things irked me because it was the politics that lead to the war in the first place – to my knowledge. But still, I rather enjoyed the video and his take on filmmaking, but his approach is more of that of a filmmaker, rather than a historian; he's out to tell a history, with some historical accuracy as the cost. Still, it's understandable because he needed to keep an audience to make back what it took to make the film. But during the 1st review I began to really doubt him, and because of the 2nd review I'm a little concerned that this lack of political thoroughness, coupled with a reliance on "late 19th century historians" as mentioned in both reviews (which, while not all bad, likely possess a certain bias and lack of new information a modern source might) and his need for drama in place of historical accuracy-I'll site the example about James Buchanan in the first paragraph of page 2 of article 2. Mostly because of that, I'm a little concerned how much of the information presented in the film will be truly accurate, and how much of it will skew the years things happened. I'm at least confident it won't lose my interest since the reviews generally present it as a good story.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: Meet Ken Burns

by Jackson Peterson - Wednesday, January 17, 2018, 11:52 PM

I think that Ken Burns, was able to create an accurate representation of the civil war by providing a well filmed and accurate content that he did in his lengthy PBS segment. Although reviews may say his content was graphic. His representation of the war from his point of view, which as lengthy and publicized as a segment it was, Is easy to see how there are many criticism's and opinions regarding his work. Ken didn't think the film would make such an impact and I respect that because he gave his true options and feelings about what happened and wasn't thinking about other peoples criticisms regarding his work. He received many positive reviews about the film which I believe he deserved... but like anything in this world he also review criticism for his work. In the end, I believe as much work that went into this film, and for it to get the attention and publicity that it did, truly shows Kens hard work and devotion to share a valuable piece of history with the rest of America.

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Sum of ratings:2 (1)

2



Using the series to appeal to the masses.

by Josh Balthrop - Thursday, January 18, 2018, 7:59 PM

While watching the quick 7 minute video about Ken Burns and his relationship with PBS I discovered a genuine appreciation for him and all the work he puts into his films. Anyone that is willing to dedicate themselves and their life's work towards telling the stories of our past is someone that I admire. At one point in the clip, Ken says that there are times you may not have the pictures or film to go along with the story that you're trying to tell, but the story still needs to be told. The story is the most important part.

After reading some of the reviews I couldn't help but feel a little irritated. There are some reviews that are signing Ken Burns praises regarding "The Civil War", but some that decide to pick it apart. Hence the job of any true critic. But there's a Ken Burns quote about halfway through the article saying, "One thing that we haven't really said is how much history has been murdered by people who are professionally employed as historians," responded Ken Burns. "[W]hat 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." When it come's to something as paramount as the American Civil War, there will never be a perfect way to tell the story. There will always be conflicting arguments and opinions. I think we should applaud Ken Burns and his team for doing just what they managed to accomplish. "Speak to a very large audience." and tell the stories as accurate as they can.

I have the utmost confidence in using the historical series The Civil War as a video reference for the course. For someone like myself that may struggle more, or get less from burying my nose in a book, I look forward to the information that i will obtain from the series.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

2



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Meet Ken Burns; boring

by Desiree Mantey - Thursday, January 18, 2018, 8:35 PM

I found the video, Ken Burns: Making History relatively boring and lack luster. However, I have never really thought about all of the things that go into making a documentary. The video showed the amount of effort and little things that must be thought through when making any type of documentary. The music, the voice portrayals, research conducted throughout, and the attention to personal biases never even crossed my mind. Although somewhat boring I did find it to be thought provoking.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

1



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History on the Screen: Who Speak for the Past

by Desiree Mantey - Thursday, January 18, 2018, 9:10 PM

After reading the article, History on the Screen: Who Speaks for the Past, I found myself on the side of Ken Burns. In my opinion the majority of those who spoke poorly of Ken's film had expectations that were too high for a film and more appropriate for a scholarly article. For example Daniel Walkowitz and Leon Litwack criticized the film for failing to address/convey

difficult historical questions raised by the civil war and failing to reflect the profound changes in the way history is recorded (Who Speaks for the Past pg 3). That raises another question, who decides what the goal of a film is? A film can only do so much as other scholars pointed out. For example, Robert Toplin said, "film is not really comprehensive...it can't be wallpaper history, it cannot cover everything (Who Speaks for the Past pg 3)." There also were many other professors and experts that disagreed with Walkowitz and Litwack's negative comments. Robert Toplin said, "The film made a tremendous impact- what we're trying to do is reach the public, get them excited about history and make them want to explore and debate the issues" (Who Speaks for the Past, pg 2) Getting people excited about history and learning in my opinion should be the main goal of documentaries such as this. 39 million people tuned in when this film debuted on PBS and even home video sales topped one million (Who Speaks for the Past pg 2) . In my eyes, that makes this a successful production.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Article 1

by Zach Haxby - Sunday, January 21, 2018, 8:30 AM

After reading article one my opinion of Ken Burns and his series had changed slightly. Once I had finished reading the good reviews and the critics, one seemed to catch my eye the most. It was written by Leon Litwack and he discussed how the series seemed accurate when talking about the history of the war itself, but seemed to lack in the social change. Litwack said, "celebrated the reconciliation of North and South while ignoring the brutal and violent racial repression on which that reconciliation rested" (Who Speaks for the Past pg 3). This is going to make me look deeper as we watch the Civil War series and see if I can spot this left out topic myself.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Article 2 and Civil War Series

by Zach Haxby - Sunday, January 21, 2018, 8:43 AM

After reading the second article my faith in Ken Burns from the slavery point of view of the Civil War has been changed dramatically. The authors of this article, Michael Morrison and Robert May critic Burns very heavily on his video series from the perspective of the slaves. It seems as though he just gives the audience enough to not as questions, "We need to remember that the Emancipation Proclamation came midway through the war, not as it's inception, and that many Union soldiers marched off to battle assuming their mission was to restore the Union rather than free the slaves" (Morrison and May 47). Reading this article has more than just slightly changed my viewpoint of Ken Burns because now I am concerned that we the audience will not get the full truth as well as be mislead about the history of the Civil War from Mr. Ken Burns.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: Article 2 and Civil War Series

by Desiree Mantey - Sunday, January 21, 2018, 6:28 PM

Although the Emancipation Proclamation was signed in the middle of the war it didn't matter because the Confederate States of America didn't believe that the president of the union's laws pertained to them. After the southern states seceded they elected their own vice president and president and made their own laws and their own constitution. Even still, keeping slavery may not have been the only reason for their secession and the preceding war, but the reasons were caused by the existence of slavery. For example, our textbook talks about the southerners being upset about the north trying to take away their property and how they had the right to revolution which was written in the constitution. However, in my opinion these issues wouldn't have arisen if it weren't for the existence of slavery. So even if it was indirectly, the institution of slavery caused other issues to be arise and those issues led to the break out of the Civil War. Slavery was a catalyst for war.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Article two

by Desiree Mantey - Sunday, January 21, 2018, 5:20 PM

Morrison and May started off their article, Limitations of Classroom Media: Ken Burns' Civil War Series as a Test Case, by talking about the popularity of the series. "For one week Ken Burns' held court as master history teacher to a nation. In his nation-wide classroom, it was a rare student who squirmed restlessly or stole furtive glances at the clock (Limitations of Classroom Media pg 39)". This quote hit home for me. As a kid with undiagnosed ADHD I could hardly ever sit through documentaries in middle or high school. I found myself constantly staring at the clock or doodling during the days we had to watch educational materials in class. This fact alone is a big deal not only for me but most likely for other kids who are plagued with attention deficit disorders.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Article 2; opinions

by Desiree Mantey - Sunday, January 21, 2018, 6:15 PM

The authors of Limitations of Classroom Media: Ken Burns' Civil War Series as a Test Case, Morrison and May criticize Ken Burns' documentary because he, "...constructs an interpretive framework that by mistaking consequences for causes, is more problematic than illuminating (Limitations of Classroom Media pg 40)." But after reading our textbook and these articles it appears to me that each person had their own unique reasoning for picking a side to support or fight for in the Civil War. Morrison and May discount the reason behind the war being slavery but in my opinion if slavery didn't exist, the civil war may not have happened in the first place. "Burns' understanding of the most critical event in the nation's history is parented...by the interpretations of late-nineteenth century historians who contended that the North and South, were alienated by irreconcilable differences over slavery, and found themselves in an intractable disagreement over the existence of the institution (Limitations of Classroom Media, pg 30)." Although, Morrison and May criticize the 19th century interpretation and reject this reasoning for the war, many others believe that it is accurate. Professor Simon Schama defended the 19th century interpretation claiming that, "Quite good history was written in the 19th century (History on the Screen: Who Speaks for the Past, pg 3)." However, we can't travel back in time and change history so honestly we will never truly know the exact reasons behind the start of war. Ken Burns' and the other historical experts who consulted on this

documentary believed they picked the most pervasive reasons for the break out of the Civil War. There is limited time in a documentary unlike written works so difficult decisions have to be made about what should be included and not every single detail can be. There is always going to be someone who disagrees with the way that things are done. But look at all of the people from both articles such as the Harvard professor Simon Schama in, History on Screen Who Speaks for the Past?, who spoke highly of the film for a variety of different reasons.

Excuse my language, but in the end it just comes down to human nature and opinions are like assholes, everybody's got one.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Thoughts on Ken Burns-post episode 1

by Andrew Smith - Sunday, January 21, 2018, 9:37 PM

It was pointed out in the series that Ken Burns doesn't explore the "not so nice" parts surrounding the civil war by leaving out social implications and other dark issues surrounding real facts from the period. After watching the first episode it seems the critics may not have been entirely right as the episode does showcase the harshness of slavery through brutal images. The entire first part of the episode surrounds the issue of slavery and explores the attitudes of the Northern and Southern people. It does explore social issues of the time period when it talks about how slavery affected abolitionist and Northerners and highlights how their disapproval made them targets for pro slavery aggressors. The series also seemed to be made to for a more family friendly audience. From the viewpoint of a student in 2018, I respect the series and the information it gives but it could have been far more interesting and informative if it explored deeper into the dark realities regarding slavery and the war. I find that uncensored facts to be the most informative.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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lessening opinions of Burns

by Kishahn Fellows - Sunday, January 21, 2018, 11:17 PM

After reading the second article I have to admit that i now have some doubts about the validity of Ken Burns civil war series, and the dubious nature of the information within his series leaves somewhat of a sour taste in my mouth, as it makes it feel as if his priority is the success and popularity of the series and not so much the validity of the information presented within the project. I find this practice to be dishonest and somewhat morally repugnant. I also find it disheartening that Burns would skirt by so much history and then not provide entirely accurate information for the parts he did choose to display. The amount of misinformation and omission that was exposed within the second article, like on page 3 of said article where the authors Mr. Morrison and Mr. May point out the errors Burns documentary portrays about John Browns raid, siting that the narrator remarks that Brown brought a wagon full of guns, while Browns own biographer Stephen B. Oates recorded that Brown had brought a wagon of tools and pikes. This along with Burns avoidance of the deeper, more difficult topics of the era, such as slavery and the societal impacts of the war, have lessened my confidence in this series significantly

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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