

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

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The Ballou Letter

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The Ballou Letter

by Joe Escobar - Saturday, January 27, 2018, 11:17 PM

This thread is for discussions on the The Ballou Letter topic.

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: The Ballou Letter

Sum of ratings: -

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Facts or Drama?

by Kyle McDaniel - Monday, January 29, 2018, 10:16 AM

At the end of episode one of Ken Burns epic civil war documentary, amidst all the chaos and mayhem of the first year of the civil war, it concludes with a beautiful letter written by Sullivan Ballou to his wife before his death at the battle of Bull Run.

The letter is clearly out of timeline in this chronological series, but it does end the episode with a very huge impact for the viewer; which is what Burns was aiming for. It breaks your heart, yet soothes your heart all at once, hearing a man who loved his wife but was ready to die for his country. It is interesting to read that Ballou never even sent this letter. In-fact, it was found in

his trunk and his wife did not read it until long after the war.

Though it does seem wrong to omit certain facts of this letter; I do agree with what Ken Burns was trying to do. After nearly two hours of fighting and violence, he ended the episode on a sweet, (also very tragic) impactful note. It let us take a glance into the mind of a soldier in 1861; a patriot, a husband, but above all a man who was ready to die fighting for his country. I think the overall message was received even though Burns decided to 'semi-manipulate' this story.

Usually, I would not be okay with facts being altered or omitted just for dramatic effect in a documentary (or anything for that matter) but I just feel that the point (as well as MOST of the facts) was well served about the overall tragedy war makes human beings face without being too dishonest.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

3

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A Special Attachment

by Miles Arnold - Tuesday, January 30, 2018, 9:18 AM

I think that Burns' personal attachment to the letter and the impact it had on him when reading it had a lot to do with the way it was presented.

To explain his wife didn't receive the letter until years later and that his body had been desecrated by the confederates would take away from the romance and impact of the letter.

I believe it was purely an artistic move to capture the hearts of the viewers the same way it captured Burns.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

2

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Re: A Special Attachment

by Kyle McDaniel - Tuesday, January 30, 2018, 11:56 PM

I agree wholeheartedly. It was the perfect ending to the movie and definitely would not have delivered the same punch if all those details were left in.

Burns kept a copy of the letter in his wallet since he read it, so obviously he wanted to share with us viewers the same feelings the letter made him feel.

This omission of facts is definitely okay with me, cause it does nit change the truth really, just lets the letter have more of an impact on the viewer.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

1

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Re: A Special Attachment

by Jackson Peterson - Sunday, February 4, 2018, 1:43 PM

My reaction was the same. Having Burns create his own personal way of reading the letter would be different if the audience knew the back story of his wife not receiving the letter until years after his death. On top of that the mutilation of his body suffered would have

taken away from the romance and love shown in his letter and the audience would only think of the dark details of his story.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

2



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Re: Ken Burns creative liscense

by Brandon Gericke - Wednesday, January 31, 2018, 3:03 PM

After I learned that the Ballou Letter was never even delivered to MAJ. Ballous wife, I was a little annoyed. It seems to me that Ken Burns valued creating a dramatic feeling, rather than a historically accurate one. This along with the possibility of the letter not being accurate, due to loss of the original copy, makes me hesitant to take anything else at face value. However, whether the letter was placed at the beginning of the Battle of Bull run, or after, it does not lessen the seriousness of consequences of the battle. The letter does cause me to lose a little faith in how accurately the battle or sequences of events are portrayed. I definitely do not think it is necessary to infuse more drama into an already dramatic subject. I would rather the videos be accurate, than tug at my heart strings.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

2



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Re: Ken Burns creative liscense

by Hannah Adams - Friday, February 2, 2018, 7:18 PM

I completely agree with your statement. I was annoyed as well when I found out the letter wasn't delivered to his wife; however, I never thought that he was being overly dramatic. Now that you pointed it out though I do agree! He was trying to create more emotions when the movie was already very emotional; he does not need to add more effect including around this subject. It does make me wonder if everything is accurate.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

1



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Re: Ken Burns creative liscense

by Brandon Gericke - Saturday, February 3, 2018, 2:37 AM

Exactly. The concern I have is that Ken Burns might manipulate facts later on in the series in order to achieve a certain dramatic effect, regardless of whether or not his methods are historically accurate. Kind of seems similar to the photographers in the other forum, who manipulated and distorted facts to suit their narratives.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

1



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Love Letter

by Hannah Adams - Wednesday, January 31, 2018, 8:00 PM

I think that Burns could of added in how Ballou's letter got to his way. It wouldn't of taken very long, and it could of added a lot of emotion to the film. However, I understand why he didn't add it because there way so much other information to add that he just decided to leave us

guessing. Which is also interesting because then we can visualize what we want to happen.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

1

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Re: Love Letter

by Kyle McDaniel - Thursday, February 1, 2018, 11:32 PM

I see your point. I find myself torn. I do find it a little frustrating that a historic documentary about truth and facts kind of misled the audience about this letter. Facts were purposefully left out of the film just for an artistic effect, which should not matter much in a documentary style film.

However, I do see what Burns was trying to do. From an artistic standpoint, it ends the episode wonderfully. A tragic, yet hopeful letter seemingly delivered to his wife just before battle, saying goodbye to her for he was ready to die for his country.

The letter was not given to her until long after the war, but that fact would have convoluted the ending Burns was aiming for. He wanted those words to resonate with the viewer (I will admit they struck me pretty hard) and did not want to get bogged down with the details surrounding it.

So in the end, I am torn. A good move from an artistic movie standpoint, but this historic documentary film should be based solely on facts, and not leave out key details. Tough one.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

2

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Letter brings out an emotional response

by Paul Geu - Wednesday, January 31, 2018, 9:17 PM

When I was watching the ending of the first episode of Ken Burns documentary I was hoping that Major Ballou would survive the war and be with his loving wife. History has shown us that was not the case. was able to be with his wife. I was fine with the use of creative license by Burns because by using the letter he was able to bring an emotional response in myself as the viewer. By doing so, Burns was able to show a more human side of the conflict and not just stating the facts of the battlefields and the political aspects that we see more in with our textbook the Battle Cry of Freedom. His use of multiple couples, shows that the letter could have been from any of them, rebel and union.

I do not believe that the use of the letter in this fashion distorts my accurate understanding of the history of the war mainly because it paints the emotional and human cost of the conflict. Knowing the chronology of the events beforehand, I feel by using the letter in the order that he does, Burns is presenting us with a human story, one of a man involved in an event truly larger than life. However, to those that do not have a good background of the events, the use of the letter can paint a more distorted view of the events and lead the viewer to make conclusions that are necessarily correct.

When telling a story so enormous as the civil war it is useful to paint a smaller picture to bring about the response that the story teller is trying to bring about. Humans love drama, just look at what the average person consumes daily with television and other forms of media. By using this letter, the music, and the pictures of all the other couples, Burns paints

a picture that brings an emotional response to show the human cost of the war. It certainly brought out that response in me and I feel that it gave me a personal story that I can apply to every aspect of this great historical event.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Letter brings out an emotional response

by Kyle McDaniel - Wednesday, January 31, 2018, 11:46 PM

I could not agree more.

A simple couple of facts were not mentioned in the film, but the overall understanding of the war is not distorted in any way.

The letter was a beautiful way to end the film. It had us all rooting for this man to reunite with his wife and it was so tragic to hear he died soon after writing it.

A simple omission of the fact that his wife did not receive the letter until years after the war does not change anything in my mind and does not make me question the film's historical accuracy.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Do we need to know everything?

by Paul Geu - Thursday, February 1, 2018, 11:50 PM

I felt that if Ken Burns told us all the facts it would ruin the response that I certainly had at the end of the episode. While it is nice to have complete accuracy when it comes to a historical event such as the 1st battle of Bull Run but also the letter itself, we must also not forget that this documentary is primarily for entertainment.

In the last forum we talked at length about the omissions that Ken Burns put in for the sake of artistic license, and this is truly one instance that he had in the first episode alone. However, putting in every minute detail about one man in one battle against the background of the entire civil war would make me not really care. By leaving me small details I can fill in the blanks and I guess that allows us as the viewer to apply his story to all the stories of the men and women who experienced this war.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Re: Do we need to know everything?

by Miles Arnold - Friday, February 2, 2018, 9:52 AM

I feel the same way. I think a lot of people have trouble deciphering what is entertainment and straight ahead dry history.

Although, it does seem like most history presented in film always has a little bit of entertainment value, whether it's a documentary or a feature film. It seems books are usually better researched and don't need to omit or shift facts around for time restraints or entertainment.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

1



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Books vs film

by Paul Geu - Saturday, February 3, 2018, 12:10 AM

I agree that books are usually better researched and are not limited to time restraints like film is. But it is interesting thought that our text book has many critics arguing that it is too short and that a multiple volume set is needed to truly get a full grasp of this complex topic.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

1



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Re: Letter brings out an emotional response

by Jackson Peterson - Sunday, February 4, 2018, 2:24 PM

I felt that the true meaning what happened to him it like something out of a Hollywood movie but was actual real life. It gives drama, beauty and love to the story and then the tragic end is heartbreaking. At lease his wife got the letter eventually and was able to understand his love for her. She will always get to remember him and know how honorable her husband.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

1



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Ken Burns Creative License

by Zach Haxby - Saturday, February 3, 2018, 9:08 PM

I felt annoyed when reading and listening about Ken Burns manipulation. It just does not seem right for someone who has created a series about an extremely important piece of history that many people value as well as educate from to be twisted. Especially when it seems to not be the only case in this series that the truth has been bent slightly.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

1



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Ferewell Letter

by Jackson Peterson - Sunday, February 4, 2018, 12:23 PM

I think that the letter is used to help viewers understand the emotional side of the war between couples, and families. It gives a more personal message then just hearing about the mass loss of life as a whole but becomes an intimate message that may people can relate too. I think Ken's use of the letter is creative and gives viewers a sense of their own feelings about being in a gruesome war or having a loved one at war. I think the use of the letter and changing the order do add to the emotional aspect of the overall war but gives viewers an insight to the intimate feelings between a man at war fighting and his wife worried and heartbroken at home. Even though the letter was never given to his wife, it doesn't change the love or emotion found in the writing of the letter. So there's no surprise that other wanted to have copies of the beautifully written letter.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

1

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20 years later

by Jackson Peterson - Sunday, February 4, 2018, 12:24 PM

After reading of that of what become of Ballou is heartbreaking. He sounds like an honorable man and his remains did not deserve such a gruesome, violent, and disgusting act that is barbaric. It made me infuriated that people can disrespect the dead like that whether they are fighting for the same reason or not.

Sum of ratings:0 (1)

0

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No one really deserved this fate

by Paul Geu - Sunday, February 4, 2018, 10:43 PM

No one in this war deserved this kind of fate and unfortunately that is what happens in war. I wonder how many couples had this exact same thing happen to them. The postal service must have been hated so much for being the bearers of bad news. I also wonder if there was any heartbreak for the widows especially that of Ballou since the letter came so many years later. Sometimes we forget the true human cost when studying history while we focus on facts such as dates and the larger events.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

1

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Burns " Creative license"

by Andrew Smith - Sunday, February 4, 2018, 3:41 PM

I am a little surprised to hear the reality behind the letter that was read at the end of the episode. The context in which it was presented with the music playing behind the reader created a powerful feeling. Nevertheless, I think Ken Burns was right to use it in this way. The fact that the wife didn't read the letter for years doesn't change anything. We as viewers like to think that she read it soon after it was written because that is a nice thought. However that still doesn't change the message and emotion Burns was trying to create. It seemed that Burns was trying to create an image of hardship and sorrow for the people of this time which was a historical reality for the families affected by the war. The letter, completely authentic or not still conveyed the reality of that time. When it was actually written doesn't seem to relate to its historical impact overall. In this specific case, Burns doesn't hinder the accurate understanding of the war. Having said that, the more inaccuracy or lack of information causes me to lose confidence in whether or not we as viewers are receiving all the information. With this particular series, it's becoming repetitive for Burn to dramatize certain events while leaving out certain details of what he is presenting.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

2

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Washington Post Information

by Andrew Smith - Sunday, February 4, 2018, 4:00 PM

After reading the article from the Washington Post, I still feel the same about Burns use of creative license. Unless false information is used to create a message or image, there doesn't seem to be anything wrong with the use of creative license. Burns was able to paint a more realistic picture of the times of sorrow and hardship for his viewers. That emotion he created was far more educational and powerful for students than some dry and boring information just simply being read. I do agree that the civil war doesn't need any added drama considering all that happened back then, but I do think the way Burns created his series was done well and the use of creative license made it much more interesting to watch. I wish he had included more information about the things he presented. Like I said, unless he presents false information, lack of a few small details doesn't change the overall historical point.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

2



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Re: Washington Post Information

by Kyle McDaniel - Sunday, February 4, 2018, 6:49 PM

I was having trouble finding the right words to put a point to this. You said it exactly how I was failing to find the words to say it. He took a creative freedom, yes, but he did not present false information. For the life of me, I was trying to find a way to say what I agree with what Ken Burns did but could not. False information is very important, especially in a film like this.

He took a little liberty with the letter in order to make the audience feel a certain way; but he did not bend or break the truth. He simply omitted a few facts that one might argue would make the story even more tragic. Knowing he wrote such a loving letter that his wife did not see for years; and that his body was desecrated after his untimely death. I think those facts make the story even more tragic, but Ken Burns did not put these into his movie, for his point did not need to be bogged down in these details.

As you said, no false information was presented so I am more than okay with this creative freedom Burns took with his film. He presented the key information with a few minor omissions just for a cinematic effect; which one could argue is wrong, but to me it was a perfect way to end the first episode of the civil war series.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

2



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dishonest and disrespectful

by Kishahn Fellows - Sunday, February 4, 2018, 11:36 PM

I think Ken Burns tactics are incredibly dishonest and disrespectful, not only to the truth but also to individuals trying to learn accurate information about these events. This behavior leads me to believe Mr. Burns does not actually care about historical accuracy and rather just wants to make a award winning and profitable film series. This move by burns only confuses my understanding of these events and frustrates me greatly, there is already plenty of drama to be had in war, especially the civil war, this additional emotional baggage is confusing, inaccurate, and unneeded.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

2



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