

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

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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

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Content Could be Improved, Delivery Stellar

by Heather Saxon - Monday, January 29, 2018, 3:34 PM

I understand Ken Burn's feeling he needed to take creative license of the letter; it greatly affected him personally, as well as those close to him, so I believe he realized what kind of effect the letter would have on people and deemed it a good piece to start off his documentary to get people's attention. I believe, theatrically speaking, he used it well. The letter is truly very touching and poignant, and when the viewer learns that Ballou died a week later it makes it heart wrenching as well. So, it was a fantastic choice theatrically, a good method to

immediately hook members of the audience that would have otherwise not had enough interest in the documentary to keep watching, but it is misleading because he doesn't end it with the best accuracy.

Just saying Ballou died a week later is not coverage enough, as people assume his wife got the letter soon after the battle, not years (or weeks, as the Washington Post article seems to suggest). I think he even missed an opportunity, as Ballou's wife not receiving the letter until years later makes the whole situation even more emotionally taxing. Rephrasing, such as *"Sullivan Boule was killed a week later at the first battle of Bull Run. His wife would not get his letter until the war was over/until four years later after the war was over."* Could have improved both the accuracy and the emotional response from viewers. Overall I think it is a negative effect on my accurate understanding of the war, but not enough that I would change the placement of the letter, but change the facts presented after and/or before it so there is improved accuracy.

On the necessity to infuse more drama into the Civil War, I wouldn't say so. It is a dramatic, tumultuous event like no other in American history. The events within, slave uprisings, the Underground Railroad, battles between the Confederates and the Unionists, political debacles and turmoil among families and soldiers affected by a war with old tactics and new weapons, are *plenty* to make an accurate and compelling documentary. Everything should be recorded in the right chronological order, and I do not agree with Ken Burn's apparent tendency to not aim for total accuracy in chronological order, dates, and presentation of some quotes from historical figures. But I can agree with a lot of his presentation methods; the narration, voiceovers, the well-done shots of historical places and pictures composed together to match the dialogue and make the point stick to the viewer are good and encourage the viewer to keep attention. Essentially, the content of the letter needs improvement to avoid misunderstanding, but the delivery is done well.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

3

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Re: Content Could be Improved, Delivery Stellar

by Sydney Hall - Thursday, February 1, 2018, 2:17 PM

Complete accuracy is something that doesn't seem entirely present in Ken Burns' series, especially regarding the context revolving around the Ballou letter. Why Burns decided to do things not in chronological order is unknown to me but I'll just assume he did that not to provide total inaccuracy but rather trying to find a way to entice the audience. Clearly having the Ballou letter story perceived to the audience that Sarah had received it shortly after his death is straying far from the facts, not to mention that it was not even the original letter. Bits and pieces were left out and things were shuffled around but considering how much happened during the civil war, I think Burns did a great job presenting this knowledge to his audience. With history, there will always be misrepresentation because we do not live in the past. Therefore, there will also be different versions of the truth.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

2

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Ken Burns "creative license"

by Hannah Cartwright - Tuesday, January 30, 2018, 11:40 AM

I remember when I was watching the end of episode 1 of Ken Burns' Civil War series and getting chills as soon as Union Major Sullivan Ballou's letter was being read. I think Ken Burns taking this kind of "creative license" was a great touch to helping us understand all of the kind of heartbreaks that came from the Civil War. Hearing the specific words and feelings from a soldier who is aware of what is to come from battle, considering he is writing his "final words" before the specific battle has started, and is wanting to let his wife know how much he loves her makes the war feel even that much more real, for me. Watching the reenactments of the war and hearing historians talk about stories from the war is one thing, but hearing the true feelings from a soldier from the war helps me come to an even closer understanding of soldiers emotional experiences from the war. Also, hearing Ballou talk about, not only his love for his wife and family, but his love for the country and the government. As Ballou writes how his love for the country "comes over me like a strong wind and bears me irresistibly to the battlefield", it shows the dedication that was put into the Civil War and the dedication for the country, among all of the soldiers. I feel that Ballou's letter speaks for all of the many unspoken soldiers who have fallen, and all of their love for their families and the country, which is why I truly appreciate Burns including this letter in the episode.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: Ken Burns "creative license"

by Saige Sloan - Thursday, February 1, 2018, 11:19 AM

Ken Burns portrayal of Major Sullivan Ballou's final letter to his wife captivated the pure raw emotion behind the headache of the war. Aware there were losses and obvious upsets, it was hard to take into full account the reality of the war as it is now considerably just a historical moment in time. Burns creative license did in fact assist in a better understanding of the ethos appeal behind the war, especially with the reading of Ballou's letter. I felt as if Ballou's letter stood as an anthem of love and sadness, not only during the Battle of Bull Run, but entirely thought the Civil War time period. In the end of Episode 1, the letter did in fact "[speak] for all of the many unspoken soldiers who have fallen, and all of their love for their families and the country..." Very well done.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: Ken Burns "creative license"

by Heather Saxon - Thursday, February 1, 2018, 4:37 PM

I hadn't really considered the ethos of the letter; I mean, of course, it is there and it's hugely important, but how much it is a representation of the war itself gives further support to Ken Burn's use of it. Though the way he presents it does give a certain romantic twinge to the war that I don't entirely approve of, even if I'll admit to liking some of the romanticised Civil War stories. Had he only mentioned that his wife didn't get it until much later on I think it would have improved both the emotional impact and the factuality of the documentary.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Was the timing correct?



by Rose Thomas - Tuesday, January 30, 2018, 12:57 PM

Burns wanted the viewers to react to a heart wrenching situation. That is why he chose to end the the first episode with the reading of the letter. Typically the more drama a movie has the more a viewer is likely to continue watching it. If he had put the letter in the middle of the episode it would have lost the "pizazz" that it ended up with at the end. I personally believe that it was okay for him to wait and add it at the end. Although it can confuse viewers to find out that the letter was sent long after the war. But if Burns had said that in the film, the letter would not have seemed as important.

After reading the article it shed a whole new light on the letter for me. I still think that Burns pick the right place to put it in the documentary. It would be different if it wa a historical date and he chose to change the order of things. But because it was a personal artifact I think it doesn't matter when you share it.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

1



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Re: Was the timing correct?

by Heather Saxon - Tuesday, January 30, 2018, 9:21 PM

Wait, the letter was at the end? I've been under the impression it was at the beginning - I think I need to rewatch the 1st episode. Might have just made a huuuuge error with my own form post! I agree he was within his bounds to use it as a drama piece, especially since it does keep people not otherwise interested watching, but I don't think it'd be a poor decision to put the letter in the middle because it'd lose "pizzazz", but more because it wouldn't have served the purpose of hooking viewers that would have otherwise not paid the documentary enough attention or changed the channel while viewing-this is going off my (probably mistaken) understanding it was near the beginning of the documentary. Putting it at the end, too, would keep people watching coming back on the impression there's even more romantic, dramatic content like that in the war. The middle would still be emotional but likely wouldn't have either brought in or kept reluctant viewers.

I discussed it in my post, but putting in the added information wouldn't have taken away from the effect-personally. Again, the letter is so emotional on its own, I think the knowledge that his wife didn't get to know he wrote a last declaration of love and affection for her until years later adds to the emotion. She lived four years thinking she'd never hear from him again and then, at long last, there's one final letter-and it's beautiful, heartfelt, and poignant when she realizes his last thoughts were of her, his family, and his country. It ends up meaning so much more in different ways, to both her and her children. But, that's just what I thought when considering the facts presented in the letter. Maybe I'm a little too dramatic, but either way, I'm glad the letter is included at all, considering it was basically lost to history.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

1



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Ending the episode w/ subjectivity

by Desiree Mantey - Wednesday, January 31, 2018, 3:28 PM

The Ballou letter was not put in the video in chronological order. However, in my opinion that doesn't make it inaccurate because at the beginning of the letter it states the date that it was written. The letter appeared to be a good way to bring the episode to a close. The entire episode they focused on objective things, the facts, the battles, troop movements, and the number dead. Finishing the video with subjective material seemed to me to show a different side of the conflict, the emotional side, the effect that the war had on the individual soldiers and their families. I think that ending the episode this way was meant to make a lasting impression on viewers and make them want to continue watching the following episodes. In my opinion this was a very smart move by the director.

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Re: Ending the episode w/ subjectivity

by Hannah Cartwright - Thursday, February 1, 2018, 10:04 AM

That's what I was thinking too, Desiree. The episode was heavy from beginning to end. Though, I appreciated the episode ending on a non brutal ending. There were many details and stories of the brutal battles during the Civil War, which are absolutely necessary while learning about the war, but it is definitely interesting to see the soldiers emotional side. We already knew the war was most definitely emotional for the soldiers, families, and for everyone in the country, though reading a letter from one of the actual soldiers and hearing them out their heart out was very heartbreaking, but interesting to hear. I think putting this letter in the end is a perfect spot because it leaves us thinking about the deep emotions the soldiers and families went through, which in my opinion is very important to think and learn about, rather than just the violence.

Sum of ratings:1 (1) 1

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Completely agree!

by Rose Thomas - Thursday, February 1, 2018, 12:35 PM

Hannah,

I agree with you that ending the episode was a smart move by Burns. He is very good at grabbing the attention of his audience. I have seen this series about 5 times and I still get teary-eyed at that letter. I don't know if you have seen the series before but it is timeless and always keep me interested.

Sum of ratings:1 (1) 1

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Re: Ending the episode w/ subjectivity

by Leah Livesay - Sunday, February 4, 2018, 8:13 PM

Hi Deseree! You made a lot of points that I also made in my response to the letter! I also felt that the placement of the letter was meant to be a good way to close the episode, make the viewer want to come back for the next episodes. I didn't see an issue with the letter being out of order in the video, as i had put it in my response, as long as the accurate information was available and the letter was placed at a point where it fit in and made

sense, I think that is what is important. The whole idea of making a film is to have an audience, and a director tends to know just how to bring in that audience and will place scenes and information as they seem necessary.

Sum of ratings:1 (1) 1

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If I do not return..

by Leah Livesay - Wednesday, January 31, 2018, 3:34 PM

Well, I must say, Sullivan Ballou's letter is heartbreaking. One can only imagine how hard it would be to write a letter like that to your loved ones, knowing you may never see them again. As for Ken Burns and his "creative license", I personally do not have much of an issue with how he placed the event in his video. After all, a video cannot truly be 100% accurate in recreating situations or describing the past. A video series such as this is meant to tell a true story, however that does not mean that every detail will be perfectly placed or described. To me, having the real facts is what is most important, having the important details is important, but I would expect to have to piece together some smaller details in order to see the larger picture. Now this isn't to say that chronology of events is not important, because it generally is, I just feel that as long as a detail or event is placed in or near the actual time frame, that is the important part. To me it feels like Burns placed the letter where he did in the film to really pull you in at the end. You've already watched nearly the entire episode, then he closes it with a heartbreaking letter that really makes you think and connect with this person who wrote it.

Sum of ratings:3 (1) 3

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The Ballou Letter; effect of the music

by Desiree Mantey - Wednesday, January 31, 2018, 3:49 PM

At the beginning of the Ballou letter there are snare drums being played in the background. I think this was a good way to remind the audience that this letter was written in a battle zone although it was written quite beautifully. As the music started I first viewed it as melancholic while he was talking about writing to his wife one last time, "In lest I should not be able to write you again I feel impelled to write a few words that may fall unto your eye when I am no more (Episode 1 1:31:50)." But as the letter wore on I began to view it in a different light. The author didn't appear to be completely saddened but had somewhat accepted the fact that he would probably perish in the coming battle. The music appeared to go along well with the acceptance of his fate for a just cause, "I am willing to lay down all joys in this life to help maintain this government (Episode 1 1:32:37)."

Sum of ratings:2 (1) 2

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Re: The Ballou Letter; effect of the music

by Rose Thomas - Friday, February 2, 2018, 11:51 AM

If there is one thing Ken Burns does really well in his films it is the music. He always knows what to use and where. Music is super helpful to the audience as guidance. When I say "Harry Potter", "Star Wars", or "Jaws", we all can immediately sing the main melody in our

heads. As an audience we expect to hear music in almost everything we watch. We feel uneasy without it. Imagine how less powerful "The Shawshank Redemption" would be without the heart-breaking strings.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Accuracy in History

by Sydney Hall - Wednesday, January 31, 2018, 4:49 PM

When it comes to writing and creating a product, there are always limitations and restrictions. In Ken Burns's case, he chose not to tell the audience that Sarah had never received the letter until after the war ended. Keeping that in mind, it is also up to the audience to take initiative to reach out and find more information if they were curious in knowing in more.

With that said, Burns instead painted a picture for the audience showing that Sarah had received it shortly after Sullivan's death. It seems nearly impossible to be able to know everything that has happened in the past with complete accuracy. An easy way to see this in our own present time is by recalling family stories. Along the way, they are told differently with new variations as they're passed down.

Overall, it seems like Burns wanted to create a powerful moment with his audience at the end of episode one. The letter, although not the original copy, is regarded heavily due to the emotional context. The Washington Post article quotes a man by the name of Andrew Carroll who says, "It's the hardest letter ... for any service member to write. ... They're putting all of their heart and emotion into what they know will be their final words." In my opinion, just because Sarah didn't receive the letter immediately doesn't mean that Sullivan's letter had any less of an impact on her, the family, and the rest of the world. The question running in my mind after reading the articles: was the letter altered to have more of an emotional impact?

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An Overwhelming Letter

by Brennan Blankenship - Wednesday, January 31, 2018, 6:00 PM

As to why Burns placed this scene out of sequence I do not know. The letter from Major Sullivan Ballou creates a patriotic feeling in which the Union is regarded with heroism. This is often the case when referring to honorable soldiers that died for a noble cause. They are remembered not in death but in life and will continue to live on in memory. The letter also shows the remorse of the Major in regards to the war and the blood that has been shed on the battlefield. As for creative licensing it was an overwhelming amount of emotion that was given to reinforce the horrors that came from the battlefields of Civil War.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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A Letter on Behalf of Ballou's Honorable Manhood

by Saige Sloan - Wednesday, January 31, 2018, 10:30 PM

At the end of Episode One "1861- The Cause" under the Chapter 1.13 *Honorable Manhood*, Ken Burns had read allowed Major Sullivan Ballou's final letter to his wife before enduring the Battle of Bull Run. Though not screened historically in chronological order, Burns' used

Ballou's letter to represent an anthem of heartache beginning in the Civil War. As the letter was read around, I did not even find the urge to take notes. I rather listened clearly, and imagined Major Sullivan Ballou writing with greatest hopes to his wife at home. My stomach turned when the narrator announced that Ballou was killed two days later at Bull Run, and even more so when I read "that the letter was discovered inside Ballou's personal trunk and was never sent to his wife until well after the end of the war". Though his death not necessarily surprising, Ballou's letter just made the wartime experience more heartfelt and realistic. I regularly imagine these soldiers as just soldiers, simply doing that was documented in our history books. I oftentimes forget that they were in fact someones son, a child's father, a siblings brother, a wife's husbands, and simply just whole-hearted men trying to do what was right to them at that time. Burns' portrayal of these battles has so far been beautifully tragic. With a mixture of different voices-overs and a soft-toned instrumental orchestra played in the background, he has allowed me to create a definition of how I imagined these scenarios screened during that time period with the gracious use of creative license.

In the Washington Post article published 20 years after Burns' released his Civil War series, author Micheal E. Ruane brought back to life the importance and value of Burns' work when publishing Major Sullivan Ballou's letter to his wife. Ruane describes the letter as "largely forgotten before Burns helped resurrect it, Ballou's case was a sensation during the war..." Still in favorable support of Burns use of creative license throughout his documentary productions of historical wartime events, the "Civil War soldier's heartbreaking farewell letter was written before death at Bull Run" article just more so brings Ballou's letter to life. Going a little more in-depth about the actor, Paul Roebling, who read Ballou's letter in Burns' series simply enhanced the heartfelt emotion behind the narration. Now more than ever I credit director Ken Burns' on his carefully sought out films, emotional appeal, and use of creative licenses.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

3



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Sadness comes of itself and doesn't need help.

by Nicholas Bates - Wednesday, January 31, 2018, 11:23 PM

I think that adding more drama effect to an already sad story is typically not the way to go. However, I feel that what Burns does is simply to place it so that the effect of the sadness brought from it is at a place and time of his own choosing. When people twist things or add to them a lot can be lost of the original thing that we were supposed to feel, whether that be sad or happy feelings is regardless. What I feel has been done here though is simply timing it for the right effect which I don't think is wrong at all.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

1



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Re: Sadness comes of itself and doesn't need help.

by Leah Livesay - Sunday, February 4, 2018, 9:01 PM

Hi Nicholas!

I don't particularly agree with you in the adding more drama to an already sad story. I don't feel that Burn's was trying to make the story more sad, I think he was simply adding another piece of the story. A letter from a soldier at war to his wife at home is raw truth and feeling, I think that was what Burn's wanted to capture. War in general is a sad story, there's no getting away from that. We don't always get to see the side of war from the

soldiers eye, we generally get a more broadened view. I think that including the letter was important, as it gives the viewers a real idea of what effect the war had on a man on the inside. I do agree with you that Burn's placed the letter where he did in the episode to create the correct effect on the viewers and I think he did that well.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: The Ballou Letter

by Dakota Brotherton - Saturday, February 3, 2018, 4:07 PM

I feel as if Ken Burns decision to use the Sullivan Ballou letter in the way that he did ties in to something I mentioned in week 2's forum post about Burns and his directing style. I feel as if it all ties in to his ability to get more people interested and emotionally involved in a piece of American History that often gets overlooked during years of schooling or is taught at a time when young minds aren't fully aware of the importance that the civil war played other than the fact that it ended slavery. As for the accuracy of my historical understanding of this war, I certainly don't feel that it has been compromised due to the way the letter was presented however it is evident he made an attempt to infuse more drama into the scenario. With that being said, I feel as if this is something that historically happens more so than ever during times of war or when talking about the subject of a war. For example, after reading this weeks topic, I almost immediately thought of yellow journalism and it's use of dramatized stories and accounts as well as attention grabbing headlines and details in order to gain the interest of the audience. In a sense, what Ken Burn did to parts of his documentary is similar.

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The Ballou Letter; lost and found

by Desiree Mantey - Sunday, February 4, 2018, 5:46 PM

I was not completely surprised by the fact that the original Ballou letter had been lost and found and even recreated multiple times. I feel as if I have heard about this happening pretty regularly with historical artifacts. People sometimes make fakes of artifacts in order to make money or just simply for the glory that can go along with discovering a historical artifact. When it comes to Burn's not telling the audience about what happened with the letter; why would he? This was supposed to be a documentary based on facts, so why would he include information that could possibly make viewers second guess those facts? Telling the truth about the letter would have most likely changed the effect it had on those watching.

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The Ballou Letter; in photographs

by Desiree Mantey - Sunday, February 4, 2018, 6:15 PM

In the forum questions and materials it said that all of the pictures shown were of different families. However, after looking over it many times it appears to me that these photos were all of Ballou's family. But I will consider it in both ways. If the pictures were all of Ballou's family it appeared to have a powerful impact on me because in a way, showing the same family on different days with different clothes and different expressions shows just how long they have

been together. In those days family pictures weren't something that were taken very often so having many of them means they were most likely taken over numerous years. In my opinion this reinforces the emotional quality of the letter because it shows just how much Ballou will be missing when/if he is to perish on the battle field. On the other hand, if the photos are all of other couples it is still pretty powerful. It would then be showing that this is only one such letter of many that had been written by men fighting during the civil war. That in my mind appears to boost the passion and emotion behind the letter because its most likely one of thousands like it.

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2



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