

KEN BURNS: FILM AS HISTORY, HISTORY AS NARRATIVE?

HELEN STEELE

In his 1995 interview with Thomas Cripps for the *American Historical Review*, filmmaker and self-professed “amateur popular historian” Ken Burns vigorously defends his work, especially *The Civil War*, from the perceived slights and criticisms leveled at it by the historical establishment. Accusing historians of betraying history itself, Burns makes an argument for both film as history and also for history as emotional narrative. He emphasizes the importance of facts as well as analysis, claiming that academic historians have ignored the former in their work. In doing so, he rejects many modern historical theories in favor of a more consensual, story-based approach. This approach, he argues, enables him to reach a wider audience and impart to them the importance of history to their present. Clearly, in this, he is successful and he should continue to play a part in the dissemination of history. Yet, by castigating academic scholars for their rejection of his vision of history, skirting around the inherent constraints of filmmaking and ignoring academic standards for analysis, he ensures continuing disquiet from academia.¹

To begin to understand Burns’ films, it is vital to recognize Burns’ perception of history and its purpose. For Burns, good history should include not only the *causa bella* but also the actual details of events and life during the period covered. However, unlike Annalists such as Fernand Braudel, who use data to reach conclusions about the larger causes of historical phenomena, Burns uses his data to create narrative, clearly believing that the most critical function of history is to provide a narrative about the past.² The historians that he most approves of, like Shelby Foote, are those who tell the best stories.³

Burns argues that other historians miss the narrative context to focus too much upon the causes and effects, leading, he suggests, to years of pointless arguments. For example, he asserts that each generation has a “gospel” about the cause and effects of the Battle of Antietam that changes with the passing years. However, the *facts* won’t change.⁴ He seems to be trying to imply that the facts are more important because they are indisputable. He further attacks the implied disinterest of historians in the facts with a straw man argument. Because modern historians are not focused upon the *number* of dead in the Civil War but upon why so many went to war in the first place, he accuses them of not caring about the dead.⁵ This is a rather crude distortion. It is neither the first nor the last attack on historians or their techniques within this interview.

By emphasizing narrative, Burns rejects some of the most recent theory about historical discourse. He does this both explicitly and implicitly within the interview. Asked by Cripps whether he belongs to a school of history, Burns dismisses any such “narrow points of view.” He also rejects the idea that his own technique is resolutely “old school,” a claim he accuses scholars of making about his work.⁶ Instead, he maintains to want to synthesize “the best of the old [...] and the new histories”.⁷ Creating *The Civil War*, for example, he used both a top-down and a bottom-up approach, mixing battles with daily life, tales of slaves with those of politicians.⁸ He defends the “top down” approach and the focus on details, while also noting that only forty percent of the film concerned actual battles.⁹ He appears to be laying claim to a more modern method in at least the part of his work in which the focus is moved from

¹ Thomas Cripps, “Historical Truth: An Interview with Ken Burns,” *American Historical Review* 100.3 (June 1995), 741–64.

² Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) and Cripps, 745

³ Cripps 761

⁴ *Ibid.*, 763

⁵ *Ibid.*, 747

⁶ *Ibid.*, 746

⁷ *Ibid.*, 764

⁸ *Ibid.*, 744

⁹ *Ibid.*, 747

the leaders and to the common man. This certainly seems to be appreciated by historian Mark Wahlgren Summers in his review who approves especially of Burns' look at two ordinary soldiers, Elisha Hunt Rhodes and Sam Watkins.¹⁰ This "bottom up" approach is indeed typical of modern historians, who focus upon the common people and their experiences, whether through microhistories or through subalternity. However, historians who focus upon ordinary people are often ambivalent about narration. Some, such as Jonathan Spence, do create stories amid their analysis; others like Carlo Ginzburg rather focus upon analysis over story.¹¹

Burns believes his synthesis of historical techniques will create a consensus, "more *unum* than *pluribus*". Nevertheless, he claims to seek not an *academic* consensus of history, a claim made by his critics, but an *emotional* consensus.¹² However, this seems disingenuous. How can historians reach an emotional consensus without also reaching some academic consensus? Burns here is rejecting outright an important theory of history. He declares the postmodern attitude to history a "tragedy."¹³ The postmodern emphasis upon context over text clearly bothers him. Postmodernists would argue that in order to create a coherent narrative and tell a story, there must be some measure of linearity. Details that do not support the story or even contradict must be cast aside. These details are a function of the creator of that narrative. For narrative is an interpretation of data from a cultural, social and temporal viewpoint. The creator of narrative might consider it rational, but that reason is based upon his or her cultural paradigm. Thus, narrative is, ultimately, subjective and only one potential interpretation of events.¹⁴ However,

¹⁰ Mark Wahlgren Summers, "Review: *The Civil War* by Ken Burns," *The Journal of American History* 77.3 (December 1990) 1106.

¹¹ Jonathan D. Spence, *The Death of Woman Wang* (New York: Penguin Books, 1979); Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth Century Miller*, translated by John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980)

¹² Cripps 747

¹³ *Ibid.*, 755

¹⁴ William Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History and Narrative," *The Journal of American History* 78.4 (March 1992)

Burns denies bias and claims an objectivity and breadth in his work.¹⁵

Nevertheless, in Burns' work, the thrust of his narrative comes from his particular viewpoint. Not only is Burns intent upon telling a story, but also it is a story with a definite emphasis. Burns is telling an *American* story. He does not deny his love of country nor that he made *The Civil War* with the intention of inspiring others with that love.¹⁶ If ordinary viewers could understand the "higher cause" of the civil war, then they too could be so stirred.¹⁷ In particular, Burns emphasized the issue of slavery in *The Civil War* and notes that it forms with *Baseball* a diptych on American race relations. However, while clearly slavery played its part in the civil war, some scholars argue that Burns' agenda has unreasonably skewed his narrative voice. Cash Koeniger notes, "When race enters the picture, Northern virtue is exaggerated while the South gets badly stuck."¹⁸ Both he and Matthew Melton further criticize Burns' portrayal of slavery. Koeniger notes, "It reduces a complex historical tapestry to a simplistic morality play [...] searing [Burns' portrayal of slavery] is, informed and scholarly, it is not."¹⁹ Similarly, Melton writes, "While there is no real "positive" view of slavery, Burns chose to present worst case scenarios."²⁰ Clearly, this is a subjective rather than strictly objective history.

A further factor that might slant not only Burns' work but also that of any filmmaker is the appeal to emotion. Burns does not deny that he sees emotion as a fundamental part of good history and history itself as an "emotional force."²¹ This, he says, is an aspect of history that historians not only ignore but also fear.²² However, he

1349 and Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Use and Abuse of History for Life," translated by Ian Johnson (1873)

<<http://www.mala.bc.ca/~johnstoi/Nietzsche/history.htm>>

¹⁵ Cripps 746

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 744

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 764

¹⁸ A. Cash Koeniger, "Ken Burns', *The Civil War*: Triumph or Travesty" *Journal of Military History* 55 (April 1991) 228

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 229

²⁰ Matthew Melton, "Ken Burns' *Civil War*: Epic Narrative and Public Moral Argument", *Regent Online Journal of Communication* 1.2 (Spring 1994)

²¹ Cripps 746, 762

²² *Ibid.*, 747

does not really counter Cripps' question about the balance between fact and emotion in film. Cripps suggests that film often places the emphasis upon emotion over fact. Burns denies this but then prevaricates. The balance is instead "an exquisite tension."²³ His strong implication is that he has the balance correct. Some reviewers clearly disagreed. Both Wahlgren Summer and Koeniger point out numerous factual errors in *The Civil War* that, while not detracting from the enjoyment of the film, do take away from its veracity and its value as history.²⁴ It is indisputable that the film does have emotional power, however. Both reviewers note this and Burns himself comments on the positive reaction from the public, including increased book sales and visits to historical sites.²⁵

Thus, *The Civil War*, or any of Burns' other work, is not a dry, academic work like something written by Fernand Braudel, nor does it attempt to be.²⁶ It is a popular and emotional story of the Civil War that might educate and inspire Americans with a tale of their nation. With that as an aim, it succeeds well. However, Burns does not want it to be just that. He was clearly hurt by criticism by historians and vigorously defends his work as valid history. He asserts that he uses academic methods in his work and to a certain extent that is probably the case. He uses archives and explores primary sources, as might a "professional" historian.²⁷

However, there are two fundamental differences between his methods and those used by academics. Firstly, while he draws upon the expertise of scholars and submits to a limited peer review process from the National Endowment for the Humanities, none of their advice or criticism is binding. He can ignore their comments. He has the final edit. Ultimately, while he works with others, the final product is his alone.²⁸ This is almost the exact

opposite of conventional scholars who might conduct research and write a first draft in isolation but who must listen to their peers, submit their works to critical review and make changes in order to have their work published.²⁹

Secondly, as a filmmaker, he has the responsibility to create an artistic work that "flows" within a set time.³⁰ While initially he admits that the temporal nature of film might lead to a lack of rigor compared with written works, he later refutes this. He claims that both written works and films are limited for space and so cuts must be made in both, albeit using different rules. When Cripps challenges him, he prevaricates again.³¹ He never really fully addresses the point that the cuts he makes, as a filmmaker, can be more drastic and made for emotional or artistic not historical reasons. He denies, for instance, scripting the "talking head" historians. However, he admits that he cut out many of these same historians for not saying what he wanted in the way he wanted. Conversely, he gave Foote an important role in *The Civil War*, not necessarily because of what he said – although Burns was clearly enamored with Foote's head for detail – but also because Foote was a great storyteller and had the same attitude to narrative as did Burns.³² Both of these factors might make for a better *film*, but they do not make for better history.

Yet, perhaps this begs the question of what *is* history? Is history an emotional force as Burns asserts? Is it solely the job of history to educate, to inspire and to provide a particular viewpoint upon a nation's past? If it is, then Burns clearly creates not only history but also successful history. He does reach more people than any author might possibly hope to reach. He suggests that critical reaction from historians is due to the scholars' jealousy and that they are too "parochial", "obscure" and anti-populist. Historians no longer love history.³³ Perhaps,

²³ *Ibid.*, 752

²⁴ Wahlgren Summer 1107; Koeniger 226–227.

²⁵ Cripps 747, 752

²⁶ Fernand Braudel, *The Structures of Everyday Life, Civilization and Capitalism 15th–18th Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992)

²⁷ Cripps 761.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 750–751

²⁹ Cronon 1373.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 758–9. See also Robert A. Rosenstone, "History in Images/History in Words: Reflections on the Possibility of Putting History onto Film," *The American Historical Review* 93.5 (December 1988) 1173–1185 for more insight on the limitations of film time.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 743, 759

³² *Ibid.*, 745, 761

³³ *Ibid.*, 744–5, 748, 760

however, Burns does not need to “rescue history” from historians but to find a way to coexist with them.³⁴ History needs not only narrative and emotion but also analysis of that narrative, the understanding of the context and the complex currents running through the past. It needs calm, academic thinking in addition to ways of communicating that knowledge beyond academia. Burns makes history, but should also recognize the limitations of film, just as he exalts the special value of film for the creation of history than can connect on an emotional as well as intellectual level.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 742.