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Ken Burns and the Coming Crisis of Academic History

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Ken Burns is the most famous historian in the country – and in some ways one of the most interesting. He has been writing, producing and directing historical documentaries for over twenty years now, and though not yet 50 years old he has amassed a huge body of work: twelve different studies of various men, women and events in the American past and a sprawling three-part, forty-hour epic of American history itself. He has single-handedly redefined the historical documentary as a cultural form, received honorary degrees and prestigious awards too numerous to list here (including two Oscar nominations and five Emmys), and been invited to show his films at the White House on three different occasions. He is also the first historian ever to have a retrospective of his work exhibited at the Smithsonian Institution. He has been called ‘the master film chronicler of America’s past’ (Time magazine) and ‘the most accomplished documentary filmmaker of his generation’ (New York Times).

His histories are immensely popular. Over twenty-three million people watched the first two episodes of The Civil War and fourteen million people watched the whole twelve hours, even though they were broadcast over five consecutive nights during the highly competitive opening week of the fall season, 1990. No one knows how many people saw the rebroadcast or watched it on video or read the accompanying book. Burns thinks the total number may run as high as one hundred million people but even if it turned out to be only half as many, that would still make The Civil War the most popular history ever written or produced. His eighteen-hour history of baseball would be second and Jazz – the final instalment in his trilogy of American history – would be third. At a time when Americans are said to be uninterested in history, Ken Burns has become a household name. His images, his particular way of seeing the past, have become part of the very texture of American cultural life. It is almost impossible for most Americans to think about the Civil War, for instance, or the history of baseball, without some refraction through the images Ken Burns has given us.

We academic historians do not know quite what to make of all this. We
are delighted to see so many people interested in the past, of course, but we tend to view the documentaries themselves as little more than historical melodramas, long on misty nostalgia but short on critical analysis. When we bother to review them at all – which is not very often – we invariably dismiss them as superficial, sentimental, simplistic – ‘the historiographical equivalent of Restoration Hardware’ as the Princeton historian Christine Stanstel once put it. Leon Litwack, who teaches United States history at University of California, Berkeley, even likened Burns’ The Civil War to D. W. Griffith’s viciously racist Birth of a Nation – a truly grotesque comparison. Although Burns does have a small circle of defenders within the academy, they have utterly failed to convince their colleagues that his documentaries are anything more than a mind-softening, saccharine-like substitute for real history. Burns knows this, of course. He once told the editor of the Journal of American History that ‘it’s only in the academic community that I’ve found a particularly – and for me, a particularly sad, painful – sort of rejection’. Why are academic historians so critical of Burns’ histories – histories most people seem to like? Part of the answer is that his films are not, in fact, cinematically or aesthetically innovative in any important way; indeed, many of them are slow, sentimental and downright boring. Moreover, he sometimes gets the facts wrong. And sometimes he leaves out things that should not be left out – like, in The Civil War, the fate of southern blacks after the collapse of Reconstruction. And then there is the matter of his presentism: Burns is not really interested in the past at all – or rather, he is interested in the past only insofar as he can make it reflect and dramatize his own interior emotional life (and, as it turns out, the interior emotional lives of tens of millions of other Americans). But we academic historians are interested in the past, if not ‘in and for itself’ than certainly as something more substantial than a reflecting device in which we can meditate upon our own sensibilities. So we dismiss him; or worse yet, we ignore him. But even if his critics are right – and I think they are, for the most part – Ken Burns is doing something more interesting and more important than we have given him credit for. And as we have seen, his particular recasting of American history has come to play a central and vital role in shaping the public’s sense of who we have been and who we are now becoming. If we academic historians want our discipline to survive and flourish in the new media-saturated world in which we find ourselves, we will have to come to terms with Ken Burns and the kind of history he is producing. And sooner rather than later, for what is at stake, as Burns himself once put it, is nothing less than ‘the historical memory of our people’.
Ken Burns is a lifelong liberal – ‘what’s called a yellow-dog Democrat by my Southern relatives’. He is also intensely patriotic. In his histories he invariably makes us feel shame and outrage at the suffering this country has imposed on its weakest citizens, but he also makes us believe in the redemptive potential of American history and in the still open, still vital possibilities of American citizenship. At a time when the idea of national identity and the emotion of national pride have all but disappeared from academic history, Burns insists not only that we breathe in our own complicity with the sins of this country but that we also find inspiration in the lives and work of Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln and Jackie Robinson and a host of others.

It is this incessant quarrel between criticism and the will to believe that drives the best of Burns’ films. Here he is describing The West, a twelve-hour documentary that he produced in 1996:

It’s about people who see the west as Wallace Stegner saw it: as a geography of hope. And at the same time, the series acknowledges the terrible cost of that hope in the form of the rape of the landscape, the loss of the buffalo, and the destruction of native cultures. Nearly every scene of western expansion is countered or accompanied by the effect of that expansion on native peoples. It’s impossible to tell the story of the gold rush or the transcontinental railroad without including in the same breath the story of the loss of the buffalo or the Sand Creek Massacre or Wounded Knee.

In The West Burns shows us, in graphic and often horrifying detail, how such celebrated Union Army heroes as George Armstrong Custer and William Tecumseh Sherman used the weapons and tactics they had developed in the Civil War to brutally exterminate Native Americans living in the trans-Mississippi West. Burns’ faith in American history is rickety and fragile, cramped and cramped and hedged all about by doubt and shame. National pride is not something he ever takes for granted; it is something he seems forever clinging to and arguing about – with himself as well as with his viewers.

But is it not just here, in this perpetual contest between national shame and national pride, between outright cynicism and the hope that America will one day live up to its own ideals, that this country really will enjoy a new birth of freedom – is this not precisely where we Americans have always had to find ourselves, and the meaning of American citizenship? Is this not
precisely where Frederick Douglass found himself? Reread the greatest of all his speeches, ‘What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?’. Even now, nearly a century-and-a-half later, it is difficult to read Douglass’ words without feeling overwhelmed by shame and outrage. Yet it was Douglass himself who, at the end of that same speech, paused, and then, looking out over the huge crowd assembled before him, declared, ‘Notwithstanding the dark picture I have this day presented of the state of the nation, I do not despair of this country.’ Those words, that affirmation, could not have come easily to Frederick Douglass; nevertheless, it was an affirmation he made over and over again, to the very end of his life.

Thomas Jefferson lived off the sweated labour of over 200 slaves. When they chanced to escape he had them hunted down with dogs; when they proved recalcitrant he had them shipped off to the West Indies. On his deathbed he saw fit to free only a handful of them. In The Civil War and again in his biography of Jefferson, Burns shows us all of this, forcing white Americans to accept their own complicity with the sin of slavery. But he also reminds us that when Chinese students in Tienanmen Square confronted tanks from the People’s Liberation Army they held up ‘the most powerful weapon on Earth’: copies of Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence. Present at the creation, Jefferson was a willing accomplice in the primal crime of slavery; nevertheless he somehow transcended himself to give us ‘a blueprint for human liberation’.

Burns treats the history of jazz in the same way. Created out of the excruciating contradiction of slavery in the midst of freedom, finding its voice in a society divided by war and segregated by race, jazz transcended its origins to become our most distinctive and characteristic artform. Rising from the quintessentially American idea of racial slavery, it has – irony of ironies – come to embody ‘the quintessentially American idea of free and talented and diverse individuals working, playing, frequently fighting, but most of all improvising together to come up with something beautiful and great. It is the truest artistic expression of who we are.’

For Burns, jazz holds out the promise of redemption precisely because it is a collection of talented individuals who together create something richer and more wonderful than anything they might have created by themselves, something transcendent and beautiful and great and, in fact, quintessentially American. In Burns’ hands the history of jazz, like the history of baseball, becomes a historical dramatization of our long national struggle with racism – a ritual re-enactment of American history and an imaginative revisioning of the kind of people we might become. It is, in other words, a richly metaphorical contribution to and commentary on the life of the republic.

Burns is a traditional liberal, clinging to that narrow ledge of psychic landscape that lies between the capacity for doubt and the will to believe. But
he is also a populist and a long-time admirer of Huey Long. His documentary on Long was the first of several biographies he has written and directed and after twenty years it is still the best of them all. There is a scene in that film in which Burns lets his camera linger on the faces of half a dozen farming people from North Central Louisiana – mostly middle-aged and old people, men and women, black and white, all of them poor. They are not strangers to us, since by now we have listened to each one of them for several minutes at a time, mainly talking about Huey Long. Burns obviously respects these people and he makes us respect them too, not only as personifications of rural poverty – though they are that – but as utterly unique and inimitable individuals. As the camera moves from one familiar but now quiet and listening face to another we hear the narrator reading the words Huey Long spoke in July of 1933 at the small Cajun town of St Martinville, Louisiana, under the same giant oak tree where Evangeline had waited for her lover Gabriel, who never came:

Where are the schools that you have waited for your children to have that have never come? Where are the roads and the highways that you send your money to build? They are no nearer now than ever before. Where are the institutions to take care of the sick and the disabled? Evangeline wept bitter tears at her disappointment, but it lasted through only one lifetime. Your tears have lasted through generations. Give me the chance to dry the tears of those who still weep here.

Arthur Schlesinger then appears on screen, all bow-tie and impatience, the very personification of Eastern intellectual superiority, obviously displeased with Long’s populist rhetoric. It was a charade from the beginning, he tells us; all Huey Long ever cared about was power. Perhaps so, but Burns does not believe that and neither do we. For by now we have come to believe in Huey Long, have come to believe that it was not only power he cared about but people, especially the rural poor who lived in upstate Louisiana. After all, these were men and women he knew as easily and surely as he knew the back of his own hand, people he had grown up with in Winnfield, people among whom he had spent his whole life up until then. We already know how this story turns out, of course: we already know that Long betrays them in the end. But when he does, we also feel betrayed; he has betrayed our hopes as well as theirs, for Burns has convinced us that their hopes are indeed our hopes. Moreover – and this is the real measure of Burns’ accomplishment – rather than a lesson in cynicism, Huey Long’s betrayal ends up strengthening our belief in what Burns calls ‘the redemptive possibilities’ of American history.
The consensus I seek is an emotional consensus.\textsuperscript{20}

It is virtually impossible to watch \textit{Huey Long} – or any other Burns documentary, for that matter – without identifying with the people we meet on the screen. Burns does everything he can to encourage that identification. If he has live footage – as he does in \textit{Huey Long} and \textit{Thomas Hart Benton} and \textit{Baseball} and \textit{Jazz}, among others – he pulls the camera in close and lets his people talk, sometimes for two or three minutes at a stretch. If he is using still photographs – as he did in \textit{The Civil War} and in most of his biographies – he lets the camera focus on a single individual, often starting with the man or woman’s shoes and eventually settling on the person’s face while an off-screen narrator reads from a letter or a diary that, as it turns out, may or may not have been written by the person staring out at us from the screen. The narrator tells us virtually nothing about this person, other than his name and his home town. Was this young soldier from Lynn, Massachusetts a shoemaker before he enlisted in the 23rd Massachusetts Volunteers? Was he a union activist? A Lincoln Republican? A Copperhead? A Baptist? An atheist? Burns does not tell us. He withholds every detail that might anchor that person to a particular historical context, anything that might narrow or limit the appeal of his image. After all, Burns has chosen this particular image – and whatever letter or diary the narrator may read while the man or woman’s face lingers on screen – not for their ability to represent a particular person in the past but for their ability to represent \textit{lots} of people in the past – and to touch even more people in the present. Burns strips his characters of historical detail in order to seduce his viewers into uninhibited flights of empathy. He shows us the immediately personal in the distant past. The resonance is always inward, then backward.

There is nothing unusual about this, of course; we all personalize the past. When we look at pictures of men and women who lived a long time ago, when we read their letters and ponder their diaries, we inevitably try to imagine our way into their lives. Knowing that, Burns chooses images from the past that speak directly to the present, images that are both compelling and incomplete. It is their incompleteness, of course, that forces us to fill them in by dredging up our own memories, attributing our own recollections and emotions to the people on screen. Moreover, it is a two-way process, for we simultaneously use these images from the past to give shape and form to our own interior anarchy of memory and desire. As Burns once put it, ‘We are brought to our history in just this fashion, with story, memory, anecdote, feeling.’\textsuperscript{21} This is not how academic history works, of course, but it is how popular history works.
Burns believes he can convey a sense of history more powerfully – can get his viewers to absorb it more effectively – if he soaks it with emotional associations that resonate as deeply as possible. He views these memories as a kind of glue that makes even the most complex events ‘stick in our minds and hearts, permanently a part of who each of us is now’. His histories work because he makes images from the past resonate in the present. History mediated by images: Burns thinks this is increasingly and necessarily the nature of historical representation in the media-saturated societies we now inhabit:

As we gradually become a country and a society without letter writing and diary keeping, more and more dependent on visual signs and language, television will become more and more an important part of the making of history. More and more we will be connected to the past by the images we have made, and they will become the glue that makes memories.

Until recently written history was mainly political history, history from the top down, history full of famous white men who were, for most people, intellectually aloof and emotionally inaccessible. ‘We have had to rely on family memory and community recollection for the good stuff. Or at least the stuff that made all that political history meaningful.’ Note the linkage here: it was ‘the good stuff’ – the family recollections, the familiar stories soaked in personal memory – that made the political history relevant and meaningful. But as we began moving around more, as we lost touch with family and place, as movies and television usurped the story-telling role of parents and grandparents, the vast warehouse of secret stories and private anecdotes that had previously linked the personal and the political dried up and withered away. Now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, we no longer find our family histories reflected in the nation’s history. And, conversely, the national narrative has become increasingly remote, an empty and hollow history, pointless and hopeless, a landscape of bewilderment filled with malignant forces and implausible superficialities.

Burns wants to re-create that now-withered link between family stories and national narrative. He has said that he decided to produce a history of baseball because the poet Donald Hall had told him that baseball is ‘a place where memory gathers’. And he is right, for baseball once resided at the very centre of community life in America. If the country had something that could be called ‘background music’ it was baseball: walk into any gas station in mid-June, sit down in any barber shop in late July, and you would hear a baseball game on the radio. Even now, it is hard to imagine a town in America that does not have a baseball diamond – hard to imagine a school or a city park that does not have one. Fly across the country and look down:
coast-to-coast, the landscape is sprinkled with baseball diamonds. Burns figured that if he made a history of baseball it would be a history in which Americans might be able to see themselves in time. So he portrayed Lou Gerhig and Ty Cobb and Branch Rickey in such a way that in them ‘you’d recognize the benevolent uncle, the rouge cousin, the heroic patriarch’. But he also knew that his history of baseball would have to be a history that moved upward and outward, from the centre of family and community life to the outer arc of American political history. As Burns explained in an interview with the *American Historical Review*, it would be a history that included ‘all the intellectual ideas about black emancipation and empowerment over the last century and a third since the Civil War, all of the notions of heroism, of popular media culture, of labor playing itself out, of the rise and decay of great cities. In a word, the whole of America – political, social, racial, everything.’

And not just the whole of American history, for Burns is an allegorist par excellence; his films invite us to respond on several levels of meaning simultaneously. Thus *Baseball* is not only a history of the United States; it is also a collection of morality plays about the endlessly circular relations of self and community, the perpetual displacement of age by youth, the continual betrayal of genius and talent by greed and corruption. And, beyond or beneath all of this lies an almost Augustinian sense of human finitude.

V

There is more unum than pluribus in my work.

When Burns begins work on a new history he starts by searching for images – even before he writes the narrative. For him as for every other film-maker, images come first, words come second. Images are primary, the cinematic equivalent of topic sentences. He does not use images to illustrate words; he uses words to narrate images. Words simply provide a narrative line on which to string his images. Image and word mingle and merge, arousing empathetic identifications across enormous stretches of time. ‘I look for the “mystic chords of memory,”’ Burns says. ‘The consensus I seek is an emotional consensus.’

What kind of emotional consensus is Burns seeking? It is, first and most obviously, a consensus formed out of the stunning diversity that is and always has been the United States. In *The West* he shows us lands inhabited by an astonishing variety of Native-American cultures but also by Spanish conquistadors and Chinese gold-miners, Mexican vaqueros and African-American cowboys, Mormon women and Yankee traders. And in ‘New York’ he and
his brother Ric give us New York City as the place where America has always struggled, more continuously and intensely than anywhere else in the country, to come to terms with its own innately multicultural nature.

Burns has said that *The Civil War, Baseball and Jazz* – his great trilogy of American history – comprises ‘a meditation on race in America’. The *Civil War* is centrally about race and slavery, of course, as is his biography of Jefferson. And he devotes nearly one-third of *Baseball’s* eighteen hours to the Negro Leagues, reminding us that for most of its history ‘major league baseball’ actually consisted of two major leagues, one white, one black. Moreover, the Negro Leagues played a crucial role in the life of black America. Rube Foster, a former black player, created the Negro National League in 1920, just as black people were transforming themselves from a Southern rural people to a Northern urban people. By the mid-1930s the Negro National League and the new Eastern Colored League had together become the third largest black business in the country. Burns claims that it was the Negro Leagues, as much as any other institution, that ‘stitched black America together, helped hold it together by its seams in small southern towns and teeming northern ghettos’. He makes us see that black baseball was a powerful expression of African-American talent and accomplishment. Like jazz, baseball becomes, in the cinematic world which Burns has created, an integral part of the political awakening personified by W. E. B. DuBois and Marcus Garvey – and of the cultural flowering that became the Harlem Renaissance.

Burns’ documentaries are meditations on race in America but they are also dramas of integration, attempts ‘to find a way in which we can include the diverse tributaries of our experience into something that might nourish the whole’. The enslavement and eventual emancipation of black people is the moral anchor of *The Civil War* and the central act around which the entire narrative is constructed. *Baseball* works the same way. On the one hand, Burns holds up baseball as a mirror that reflects the horrors of racial segregation. Indeed, he even ties the rise of European fascism to American apartheid. On the other hand, he uses Jackie Robinson and the integration of baseball in 1947 as the film’s intellectual and emotional centre of gravity. The seeds of Robinson’s accomplishment are planted in each of the preceding episodes and its consequences shape and form each of the following episodes. *Baseball* reminds us not only of what segregated baseball meant to black people in this country, and of the central importance of the Negro Leagues, but also that the first great movement in civil rights after the Second World War occurred on the nation’s baseball diamonds – seven years before the Supreme Court ordered American schools desegregated, eight years before Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat in Montgomery, Alabama, thirteen years before six young black students refused to give up their seats in
Greensboro, North Carolina, seventeen years before Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and eighteen years before he signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965. If *Baseball* is a metaphor for who we have been, it is also a ritual enactment of who we might become. So is *Jazz*: underlying the whole nineteen hours is Burns’ stubborn hope that in the genius of Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker and Billie Holiday – that is to say, in the continual improvising carried on by the sons and daughters of American slaves – America might find ‘the way not only towards our own future but towards redemption for the crimes that permitted this injustice to happen’.

But *Baseball* is also a meditation on class, a cinematic history of the 150-year struggle between owners and players over who would control the conditions of labour in what had become, by the third quarter of the nineteenth century, a multimillion-dollar industry. As we might expect, Burns’ sympathies lie utterly and exclusively with the players. He portrays the owners as pompous, humourless, stubborn, stupid, tight-fisted iron-brained tyrants, arbitrary and authoritarian, viciously racist, myopically selfish, utterly ruthless and, as the courts eventually declared, criminally conspiratorial. He likens their baseball clubs to slave plantations and he compares the Reserve Clause – which prohibited players from offering their services to any other team, thereby denying them the right to negotiate and forcing them to accept whatever salary the owners offered – to the Fugitive Slave Law. He reminds us – and explains how it came to pass – that baseball players were virtually the last major employee group in the country to win the right to negotiate with their employers. He equates their struggles repeatedly with the struggles of workers in other industries and he takes us through their every attempt to organize, beginning with the Brotherhood of Professional Baseball Players in 1885 and culminating in the abolition of the hated Reserve Clause in 1975.

Burns’ history of baseball is a tapestry woven of two primary threads: the narrative of racial segregation and the narrative of class struggle, the story of how the owners segregated the national pastime and how they exploited their players. Just as they used the Reserve Clause of 1876 to control the conditions of labour, so they used The Gentlemen’s Agreement of 1887 to ensure that organized baseball meant organized white baseball. In the Reserve Clause they agreed never to negotiate with a player already working for another team; in The Gentlemen’s Agreement they agreed never to hire black players at all. Each of Baseball’s nine ‘innings’ shuttles back and forth between race and class, between the struggle for economic justice and the struggle for racial justice, using the spaces between to celebrate individual players and memorable games.
VI

... loved things held in common.

Burns’ documentaries constitute an extended meditation on race and class but that meditation is part of a larger project: the (re)creation of a common American culture. Burns believes race and class are critical elements of that culture but it is the culture itself – that which he thinks all Americans share, that which defines us as Americans – that really interests him. His films work to remind us that, surrounded and beset as we are by all the loosening forces of American commercialism, living as we do in the midst of what sometimes seems an utterly eclectic and dispersed culture, we do in fact possess a rich fund of common experiences and shared sentiments – and, by extension, a culture of shared beliefs.

Cultural conservatives have always dreamed of re-creating a public culture – and just as continually lamented what they see as a frightening upsurge of identity politics and multiculturalism that threatens to wipe out the last vestiges of that culture. But the common culture that cultural conservatives imagine is, in origin, a European culture. As Arthur Schlesinger recently explained, Europe is

the source – the unique source – of those liberating ideas of individual liberty, political democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and cultural freedom that constitute our most precious legacy and to which most of the world today aspires.51

Like Schlesinger, Burns wants we Americans to think of ourselves as inhabiting a world that has been shaped and formed by shared cultural values and social ideals – a mutual understanding of who we are, what we value, how we mean to live. But he thinks those values and those ideals can be found not in European intellectual traditions but in American social practices, in the myriad things Americans actually do together. For Burns, a culture is a collection of social practices and the sentiments those practices engender. Cultures are held together by emotional attachments and bonds of affection that people develop through time and doing. The first-century Roman philosopher Cicero thought it was commitment to principle – ‘agreement on the right’ – that defined a people and held them together. But Augustine knew better: ‘A people is a gathering of many rational individuals united by accord on loved things held in common.’52 Burns’ understanding of American culture is deeply Augustinian in this sense (though not only in this sense, as we shall see).

For Burns as for Augustine, ritual and sentiment underpin and reinforce one another. Together they create a sense of allegiance and belonging that
somehow transcends the negating realities of everyday life. *Baseball’s ‘Eighth Inning’* covers the 1960s. It is devoted in large part to the system of racial segregation that prevailed and continues to prevail in postwar America, and to the ways in which that system condemned and continues to condemn so many black people to lives of despair and destruction. Toward the end of ‘Eighth Inning’ the writer Gerald Early appears on screen, describing his life as a bright, eager, politically sophisticated black boy growing up amidst the tumult of the 1960s in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. It was a life that included, for all its apparent incongruity, moments like this:

> When I was a boy I played baseball. I would go to baseball games as much as I could. One of the most important moments of the game was when the National Anthem was played and everyone stood up. I would go with my friends and we’d have our baseball caps on and we’d take them off and put them over our hearts. It was at this moment that there was a certain sense that we were all Americans. And when I’d play the game with my friends and we would be in the ballpark we would follow the ritual that was at the stadium and so we would have the National Anthem and we would sing the National Anthem and we would play. You know, there would be these twelve ragamuffin black boys out there playing at some playground somewhere, or some little grass field and we would do the National Anthem. We would put our hats over our hearts and everything. And I don’t think there was anything in America that made me feel American except baseball.\(^{53}\)

Whitman would have understood immediately. So would the novelist Robert Coover. In *The Universal Baseball Association* (1968) – a wonderful and quirky theology traveling in the guise of a sports novel – he makes us see baseball’s green, diamond-shaped fields as the true cathedrals of America. In a similar way, Burns’ *Baseball* makes us see that for over 150 years baseball has served as one of our primary rituals of ascent, one of Augustine’s ‘loved things held in common’ that defines us as Americans – sometimes, as for the young Gerald Early, in the absence of everything else. By the time you finish watching *Baseball* or *Jazz* you are pretty much convinced that Burns is right: if we Americans really do possess a common culture, then the experience, the rhetoric and the sentiments associated with baseball and jazz probably lie somewhere near its centre.

VII

... the tooth that nibbles at the soul ...\(^{54}\)

But it’s a big ‘if’. And nobody knows it better than Ken Burns. Here is an example: like most of his histories, *The Statue of Liberty* opens with a
prologue. The first image we see, before the title screen or any of the credits, is the Statue of Liberty holding up her torch against the somber after-glow of a sun that has already set. And the first voice we hear is David McCulloch’s:

Listen: “‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness’”. Thomas Jefferson.’ By now the sun has set. It is dark. The Statue is lit from below. Burns pulls the camera in tight. Against the pitch-black sky we see – are surprised to see – the deep and mournful sadness in the Statue’s eyes. Most of us have never seen these brooding eyes so closely before. Burns holds his camera on them for what seems like a very long time but after a minute or two we hear the soft, plaintive voice of Paul Simon singing the words to ‘An American Tune’ – words that, like Jefferson's words, we know all too well by now:

Many’s the time I’ve been mistaken
And many times confused
Yes and I’ve often felt forsaken
And certainly misused.
Oh, but I’m alright, I’m alright
Just weary to my bones
Still you don’t expect to be bright and bon vivant
So far away from home
So far away from home.

Now we see a series of faded black-and-white photographs from the early twentieth century, depicting the hopeful faces of European immigrants standing on the deck of a ship just entering the harbour. We see a mother with a tired smile holding a baby in her arms; a wound-up but worried young father pointing out the Statue of Liberty to his eager but puzzled young son. We see the faces of other mothers, other fathers, other teenage boys and girls. They look into the camera with eager, anxious and self-conscious smiles on their faces while Paul Simon sings, to them as much as to us. But of course it is the Statue who sings:

I don’t know a soul who’s not been battered
I don’t have a friend who feels at ease
I don’t know a dream that’s not been shattered
Or driven to its knees
Oh but it’s alright, it’s alright
For we’ve lived so well so long
Still when I think of the road we’re traveling on
I wonder what’s gone wrong
I can’t help it, I wonder what’s gone wrong.
A troubling ambivalence pervades Burns’ histories. It is as if his imagination were constantly sabotaging his own will to believe, leaving him perpetually suspended in a world of double visions and second thoughts. As he himself knows all too well, his affirmations rest on a trembling foundation. His films seem to radiate redemptive truth and moral splendour but scratch the surface and they collapse into scepticism and doubt.

When the *American Historical Review* asked Burns what drives his work he did not hesitate for an instant: ‘It is an absolutely undying love of my country.’55 Indeed, his deep affection for the underlying rhythms of American life is the ground note that throbs and swells just beneath the surface of all his films. But this is not the high, thin, hypnotic patriotism of the cultural right; it is rather a sense of national pride that’s full of vacated places, that has been stripped of illusions and set upon the ocean of time, one of its two remaining sails already on fire. And it’s a history that’s saturated with irony – a sad, fugue-like irony that dwells right at the center of his Ken Burns’ vision and that has spread its shadow over every film he has ever made, from *Brooklyn Bridge* to *Jazz*.

**VII From practitioners to critics**

Conservatives think Americans know nothing about their own history, that high school graduates cannot tell Andrew Jackson from Stonewall Jackson, that they do not know the difference between the Civil War amendments and the Civil Service Act. In actual fact, Americans are more deeply interested in history now than they have ever been. Three-quarters of the museums in the United States were built in the past twenty-five years and most are packed with visitors, virtually every weekend.56 Hollywood used to make three or four big-budget historical dramas a decade; now they turn out three or four a year. Even historical documentaries are reaching a mass audience, as Ken Burns’ career so richly demonstrates. Indeed, a career like Burns’ would have been inconceivable twenty years ago. And historical fiction is more popular now than at any time since the Civil War. *Cold Mountain* (1997), a dense 500-page novel set in the backwoods of North Carolina in the autumn of 1864, was the most commercially successful novel in recent memory.57 The same year that *Cold Mountain* appeared – 1997 – Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon and Caleb Carr also brought out bestselling historical novels. The following spring there were even more, by Gore Vidal, Elmore Leonard, Jane Smiley, T. C. Boyle, Charles Johnson, Peter Carey, Russell Banks and others.58 And an impressive number of them have been both popular and critical successes.

What should we make of this new interest in the past – and all these films and novels that are catering to it? David Lowenthal is Professor Emeritus of
Ken Burns Geography and Honorary Research Fellow at University College London. In The Past is a Foreign Country (1985) and again in Possessed by the Past: The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History (1996) he draws a distinction between ‘history’ and what he calls ‘heritage’. ‘History’ reconstructs the past as a foreign country, a place where they do things differently, but ‘heritage’ reconstructs the past as a theatre of the present, a sort of a costume drama filled with people you already know, people you can relate to, people like Bob and Jane next door. Lowenthal thinks ‘heritage’ is the abyss into which ‘history’ is disappearing. To hear him tell it, our new-found interest in the past is little more than a fascination with retro-chic collectables; whatever remains of the historical imagination is utterly awash in the waste products of the mass media.59

The Past is a Foreign Country and Possessed by the Past were lamentations sent up at the end of the century to announce what Lowenthal could only see as an impending millennial disaster. But he is not the only one weeping in his beard. Sean Wilentz teaches American history at Princeton. Two years ago, in a widely discussed cover article for The New Republic – ‘America made easy: McCulloch, Adams, and the decline of popular history’ – he launched an all-out attack on these new non-academic histories.60 Like Lowenthal, he thinks popular history has fallen into the gravitational pull of the entertainment industry. It has become a fascinating but passive and even debilitating spectacle, a neon epic of mind-numbing nostalgia. He thinks popular histories are little more than sticky-sweet compounds of yearning and melancholy, utterly incapable of challenging their readers, or forcing them to confront the pleasing platitudes of American culture, or contemplate its darker possibilities. Ken Burns comes in for particularly brutal treatment. Indeed, he attacks Burns’ Civil War like an outraged missionary trying to pull down the alter of some savage idol. For Wilentz as for Lowenthal, popular history is a seductive and captivating distraction that opens the heart but castrates the mind.61

Dan Carter is the William Rand Kenan University Professor of American History at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. He has decided to avoid popular history altogether. In a dismissive and condescending review of John Frankenheimer’s taut and fascinating film George Wallace: Settin’ the Woods on Fire he charged that historical documentaries are little more than ‘soap opera substitutes for real engagement with the past’. They have become enormously popular, of course – and seductive, what with the often lavish consulting fees they dish out to their historian-consultants. But Carter has steeled himself against temptation: ‘When asked to become a part of such productions, the greatest contribution historians can make is to take the advice of a former First Lady: “Just say No.” I’ve taken the pledge.’62

David Lowenthal, Sean Wilentz and Dan Carter are highly accomplished
historians whose work has deepened and enriched our understanding of the past. But if we follow their advice about popular history we will entomb ourselves in a pyramid of irrelevance. After all, it is we academic historians who are in danger of becoming a priestly caste, not the historians who write novels and produce documentaries. If you doubt this, ask your undergraduates whether they will ever read another academic history after they leave university. Chances are that unless they’re headed for graduate school they’ll say no. Even most of the history majors will say no. That does not mean that their interest in the past will wither away; it just means that they will feed their interest with memoirs, autobiographies, historical novels and films, rather than with academic monographs and journal articles. In the media-saturated society that is already upon us, academic history will no longer be an important or influential arbitrator of the past, even for college graduates – indeed, even for history majors. The historian Robert Rosenstone probably put this as well as anyone:

To think of the ever-growing power of the visual media is to raise the disturbing thought that perhaps history is dead in the way that God is dead. Or at the most alive only to believers – that is, to those of us who pursue it as a profession.63

We academic historians like to think of ourselves as ‘practitioners’, members of a first-order discipline engaged in the professional production of original and reliable knowledge about the past (as opposed to those pinched and timid souls in the English Department who content themselves with commenting on other people’s work).64 We assume that our primary responsibility is to convey this professionally certified knowledge to our students. In other words, we teach them how to read academic history. But that is not what our students need any more. It may or may not have been what they needed in the past but it is certainly not what they need now. A new history is being written outside the academy, by novelists, autobiographers, memoirists and film-makers. If we intend to meet the challenge of this new history, if we want our students to develop historical imaginations that are morally sustaining and politically relevant, we must teach them to be thoughtful, reflective and resourceful readers of all the forms in which American society represents the past to itself. Academic history is one of those forms, of course, but it is only one, and it is neither the most interesting nor the most important.

We have been slow to address the question of whether and how the past might be legitimately represented in other than conventional academic form. Since the late 1970s there has been an explosion of professional interest in filmic history (and, to a lesser degree, in autobiography, beginning with the work of James Olney and Paul John Eakin). But even the work on film has
failed to address the most important questions, namely: Have film-makers developed their own protocols and conventions for staging the past? It would not be surprising if they had; after all, they have been making history movies for over a hundred years now. If they have, are they such that we academic historians could use them to think more deeply about the relationship between filmic history and written history? And how might all this change the responsibilities of those of us who teach history?

What we need now is a map that would delineate the primary forms of historical representation that American culture uses to represent the past and the particular realm of the past over which each of them presides. For example, historical novelists typically re-create the past by (among other things) trying to recover the specific details of everyday life – details that are often so fine-grained and seemingly insignificant, so deeply embedded in the ordinary experiences of ordinary people, that we tend to overlook them. Here is the novelist Margaret Atwood describing the kinds of historical detail she needed in order to re-create the lost world of Grace Marks, one of the most notorious and enigmatic women of nineteenth-century Canada:

[Academic] history is frequently reluctant about the now-obscure details of daily life... Thus I found myself wrestling not only with who said what about Grace Marks but also with how to clean a chamber pot, what footgear would have been worn in winter, the origins of quilt pattern names, and how to store parsnips.

Novelists working with the past have to create historical worlds that are so richly furnished and completely realized that their readers can actually inhabit them, often for days at a time. To create such worlds they put down layer after layer of tiny, now almost forgotten details: how bedpans were emptied, how turnips were stored, how quilt patterns were named, how bodies were washed. And since conventional history is usually silent about such seemingly trivial facts, the historical novelist has to search them out herself. So while she may find herself sitting next to an academic historian when she visits the archives, she is mining a historical realm all of her own.

The details she mines are used not only to re-create and furnish a particular period of the past; they also become the stuff out of which historical characters emerge. Don DeLillo once said of Libra – his novel about Lee Harvey Oswald and the Kennedy assassination – that it succeeds ‘not because it provides a blue-print of what really happened, but because the inner lives of its many characters take shape and substance in the closely rendered details of everyday life’. So before he wrote a word of Libra, DeLillo spent several months digging up just the sort of dreary details that Atwood had spent so much time digging up for her novel: ‘School records, lists of possessions,
photographs of knotted string found in a kitchen drawer ... the dental records of Jack Ruby’s mother’, and so on.68

The details of how ordinary people went about their ordinary tasks are important to the novelist for both of these reasons and others, but voice and language – the way those same people talked – are even more important. The historical novelist is betting that speech patterns – the vocabulary, the rhythms and cadences of everyday talk – will give him access to his characters’ consciousness, and at some deep interior level. He is betting that if he can re-create the way his people talked – not only the way they talked to other people but the way they talked to themselves – he can re-create their mental and emotional lives. So when DeLillo was poring over testimony in the Warren Commission Report he was not looking for what people said so much as how they said it. It was ‘the period language, the regional slang, the twisted syntax of Marguerite Oswald and others’ that he was after, their mixed and meagre vocabulary, their fractured phrases and broken rhythms – the oddly improvised linguistic genius of working-class immigrants living in Dallas, Texas in the early 1960s.69 It was just there that he thought he could gain access not only to some essential aspect of Lee Harvey Oswald’s inner character but to the inner character of all those ‘trainmen and strip-teasers and telephone clerks’ among whom he had lived and worked.70 Getting the voice right was the secret key that let him slip into a subculture that would have otherwise have remained utterly impenetrable. Academic historians often try to enter into the thoughts and emotions of the people they write about, of course, but they hardly ever use voice as a means of entry, even though historical novelists have been doing exactly that for longer than anyone remembers. And like their film-maker counterparts, they have developed protocols and conventions for doing so that we academic historians can no longer afford to ignore – at least not if we hope to become thoughtful readers of what is rapidly becoming one of this culture’s most important and interesting ways of talking about the past.

So our map – let us call it ‘The newly expanded territory of the academic historian’ – should, first of all, identify the most important of these realms or provinces, explain the sorts of things that count as ‘facts’ in each one, describe the research methods used to mine those ‘facts’, and give some account of the protocols that govern representation in each realm. Second – overlapping with and similar to yet distinct from the first – our map should describe the codes and conventions that govern evaluation in each realm. This would have the great advantage of demonstrating what we already know but constantly forget: that the criteria for evaluating any representation of the past must be both media-specific and genre-specific. We simply do not have a set of generic meta-criteria that could be applied to any and every form of historical representation. The criteria that we have developed
for evaluating history-on-the-page, for example, simply do not apply to
history-on-film, though we continually try to make them do just that. This
is not to say that anything goes in filimic history, of course; it is just that like
every other realm, history-on-film has its own areas of expertise, its own
methods of representation and its own criteria for determining what counts
as good history and what does not – its own ways of explaining, for example,
why Oliver Stone’s *Nixon* is good history and Alan Parker’s *Mississippi
Burning* is not.

Third, how should we understand the shifting relationships between a
culture’s various modes of historical representation? How, for example,
should we interpret the different forms of meaning and understanding
generated by Edward Zwick’s film, *Glory* (1989) and Peter Burchard’s book,
*One Gallant Rush: Robert Gould Shaw and His Brave Black Regiment*? Both
offer interesting, informative and even insightful accounts of the Fifty-
Fourth Massachusetts Regiment and of the nature and persistence of racial
prejudice during and after the Civil War. But they have very different things
to tell us about their common subject and they do so in very different ways.
What can we learn from the one that we cannot learn from the other? More
generally, what can we learn from films that we cannot learn from books?
And how are we to understand the relationship between them? Filmic
histories are not replacing written histories, the eloquent funeral dirges of
Sven Birkerts, Mitchell Stephens and others notwithstanding. Nor is film
merely a supplement to written history. Film rather stands adjacent to
written history, at a location whose coordinates are yet to be specified.
Hence the third thing we would like our map to do: delineate and describe
the shifting relationships between the culture’s primary modes of historical
representation.

With this we finally arrive at the heart of the matter: the nature of the
historical imagination in a media-saturated culture that, mercury-like, has
been spilled into drops that cannot be gathered. If our students are to become
thoughtful and resourceful readers of the past in a culture as dispersed and
eclectic as this one, they will have to become adept at finding their way
between competing but equally valid truth claims made in distinct and often
divergent modes of historical representation. They will have to become
*bricoleurs*, sophisticated multimedia rag-pickers, quick, shrewd and witty
readers of *all* the forms in which their culture represents the past, shuttling
back and forth, to and fro, cutting and pasting, weaving and reweaving
interpretive webs of their own devising. For only thus can they hope to
develop a historical imagination that is morally coherent and politically
effective – a historical imagination that can help them say, ‘This is how we
mean to live but do not yet live; this is what we mean to value but do not yet
value.’
Notes


4 See his testimony before the House Energy, Telecommunications and Finance Committee, 12 September 1994.

5 Nearly thirteen million people watched at least the first two episodes of Baseball when it was first broadcast on PBS. As with The Civil War, no one knows how many have seen the video and/or read the book. Eleven million people watched the first two episodes of Jazz. Although that is twice as many people as usually watch PBS during prime time, it is only half the size of the audience for The Civil War. But as Jim Rutenberg, the New York Times’ television critic, pointed out, ‘There is a simple explanation, which does not necessarily have anything to do with the quality of the work or its subject. As the television landscape has become increasingly crowded with channels, each of his big documentaries has faced more competition than its predecessors. Even the kind of highly educated and intellectually curious viewers drawn to the work of Mr. Burns who once could find refuge only in PBS now have new outlets on cable, like the History Channel, Discovery and A&E. The challenges that face Jazz also face PBS as a whole.’ Rutenberg, ‘TV Notes’.

6 The nature of that refraction varies, of course, from viewer to viewer. The fact that Burns’ films have been so enormously popular, and the fact that they have managed to evoke such intense responses from such a broad range of people, suggests that they are anything but univocal. What Lee Clark Mitchell once said about popular culture generally could just as easily be said about Ken Burns’ films: ‘Books and films that appeal overpoweringly at a given time resist a straightforward reading – indeed, attract disparate audiences because they do so effectively satisfy different constituencies. Readers and viewers simply respond to the same materials in differing ways, reconstructing texts to suit views that are often diametrically opposed.’ Lee Clark Mitchell, Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 16.

7 See e.g. the selections in Robert Brent Toplin (ed.), Ken Burns’s Civil War: The Historians Respond (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).


10 See Thomas Cripps, ‘Historical truth: an interview with Ken Burns’, *American Historical Review*, 100(5), June 1995, p. 744. Burns’ father was a well-known anthropologist at the University of Michigan – which may be why he takes this criticism so personally.

11 Burns as quoted in Cripps, ‘Historical truth’, p. 745.

12 Ken Burns as interviewed by Steve McClellan, *Broadcasting & Cable Magazine*, 14 March 1994, p. 34.

13 ‘I am, in fact, what is called a yellow-dog Democrat by my Southern relatives.’ Burns, ‘Why I am a member of this party’. Burns in a speech delivered on 6 March 1998 in honour of then Vice-President Al Gore. It may be found at http://douglass.speech.nwu.edu/burn_b31.htm.


17 Ibid.


20 Cripps, ‘Historical truth’, p. 756.


24 My emphasis. Burns, ‘Four o’clock in the morning courage’, p. 177.


26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Ken Burns, ‘My favorite baseball photograph’, *American Heritage*, 45(6), October 1994. See the end of the ‘Ninth Inning’ of *Baseball*, where Donald Hall says, ‘Baseball, because of the sense of its continuity, over the space of America, and the time of America, This is a place where memory gathers. It’s a place that we can return to and it’s a place that we can even imagine existing in the future.’

29 Which is what allowed Doris Kearns Goodwin, writing her memoir about growing up in Brooklyn, to know that if she wrote about baseball she was not ‘just writing about myself’. Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Wait Till Next Year: A Memoir* (New York:
David Harlan


30 See Ken Burns' statement on ABC News' Primetime Live, 8 September 1994 (Transcript #366-2).

31 From one of the interviews about Baseball.


36 ‘Most films are scored that is to say, music is added after editing as an amplification of the emotions already arrived at. I work exactly the opposite. I record my music before I start editing and often conform scenes and indeed sentences to the emotional power of the music.’ Burns as quoted in ‘Ken Burns and Stephen Ives, on-line with People Magazine’.


38 Burns as quoted in ‘Ken Burns and Stephen Ives On-line with People Magazine’.

39 Burns as quoted in Cripps, ‘Historical truth’, p. 749.

40 Ken Burns on ‘Nightline’ (ABC), 26 September 1994.

41 ‘Early this century, the black baseball league was the third-largest black business in America. There was a glorious flowering of black culture, tied very much to jazz, the Harlem Renaissance, a Marcus Garvey sense of empowerment, and the great black migration to the North. Baseball became an amazing expression of this culture and journey. Rube Foster, a former black player, started the Negro League in 1920 and kept it together through sheer will. Burns as quoted in ‘Perfect game’, Washingtonian (September 1994). See also the discussion of the Chicago race riots of 1919, the emergence of the Harlem Renaissance, and Andrew Rube Foster’s founding of the Negro National League in the Fourth Inning (32:30) and Buck O’Neil in the Fifth Inning (00:15:50) for the relationship between the Negro Leagues and the emergence of jazz. The following appears near the end of Baseball’s Second Inning: ‘W. E. B. DuBois, editor of The Crisis, the journal of the new NAACP, recruited boys to sell subs door-to-door by promising them baseball equipment. “Baseball is the most pop sport in this country. In every hamlet, town and city may be the future Rube Fosters, romping over corner lots, batting, pitching, and learning how to play the game. Organize your team.” W. E. B. DuBois.’

42 Cripps, ‘Historical truth’, p. 748.

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‘By 1934 the world economy was in ruins. Fascism was on the rise. In Germany the National Socialists had come to power and begun to institute exclusionary laws of Jews in an eerie echo of Jim Crow statutes in the United States.’ *Baseball*, ‘Fifth Inning’, at 1:15:40.

‘Jackie Robinson and his story are sort of the center of gravity for the film, the Gettysburg Address and Emancipation Proclamation rolled into one.’ Ken Burns as quoted by Steven McClellan, *Broadcasting & Cable Magazine*, 14 March 1994, p. 34.

Branch Rickey’s birth and early upbringing are noted in the ‘First Inning’.


Burns as quoted in Gerzon and De Shong, ‘E Pluribus Unum’.

‘After race, the second sub-theme of this film is labor.’ Burns as quoted in *People* magazine, 19 September 1994.


Gerald Early, 58–9 minutes into the Eighth Inning of *Baseball*.

Emily Dickinson, ‘The world is not conclusion’, Poem #501.

Burns as quoted in Cripps, ‘Historical truth’, pp. 746–7. He once told an interviewer from the Smithsonian, ‘My emotional life is animated by a connection to the life and promise of this country. This is what my ear listens to, this is what moves me.’ Burns as quoted in Donald Dale Jackson, ‘Ken Burns puts his special spin on the old ball game’, *Smithsonian*, 25(4), July 1994.

As the historian Neil Harris noted in a special issue of *Daedalus* devoted to museums, ‘American museums are at an historic peak of institutional power and influence.’ The issue was entitled ‘Crossroads for American museums’.

*Cold Mountain* sold over a million-and-a-half copies in its first nine months and went through twenty-five printings in its first year (*Washington Post*).

The same thing is happening in Great Britain – with the same surprising intensity. See Richard Evans, ‘How history became popular again’, *New Statesman*, 5 March 2001.


Even more remarkable than Wilentz’s condescending attitude towards popular history is the gendered nature of the oppositions he employs to describe it. Popular history is ‘passive’, ‘nostalgic’, ‘sentimentally descriptive’, ‘fascinating but undemanding’ and so on. Popular historians ‘simplify’, ‘sensationalize’ and basically ‘gossip about the past’. Their books and films offer ‘forms of reassurance’ and ‘sentimental appreciation rather than critical analysis’. Academic history, on the other hand, is distinguished by its ‘love of historical facts’. It is ‘meant to rattle its
readers’ by ‘the advancing of strong, even heretical personal judgments’ and ‘a remorseless reexamination of the nation’s past’. See Sean Wilentz, ‘America Made Easy’.


64 Mortimor Adler once drew a distinction between ‘first-order disciplines’ and ‘second-order disciplines’. See Mortimor J. Adler, ‘Philosophy’s past’, in his The Four Dimensions of Philosophy (New York: Macmillan, 1993). ‘First-order disciplines’ employ a common methodology to produce empirical knowledge about specifically defined subject matter. ‘Second-order disciplines’ concern themselves with the critical examination of concepts, methods and assumptions used by first-order disciplines. That is not to say that they presume to resolve disputes within first-order disciplines; they are more like midwives. (The analogy is Wittgenstein’s. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, ‘Philosophical foundations and philosophical systems.’)

65 I have borrowed this idea (and much else) from Robert A. Rosenstone’s intriguing article, ‘Does a filmic writing of history exist?’, History and Theory 41 (December 2002), p. 143.


69 Ibid.

70 Ibid.

