

Portal to the Past

Ken Burns

Ken Burns has been making documentary films for almost 40 years. Exploring subjects from the Civil War and cancer to baseball and the Brooklyn Bridge, Burns's painstaking work and distinctive style have helped make history accessible, intimate, and deeply meaningful. As he explains, understanding history not only helps us understand who we are as a people; it gives us the opportunity to help shape our future.



DANIEL J. WHITE

The power of pictures

When I was 11, my mother passed away. My father imposed a fairly strict curfew, but he would forgive that curfew if there was a good movie playing, and we would go to the movies together. I saw my dad cry for the first time at a movie. I realized the power of film, and I decided—at age 12—to be a filmmaker. When I arrived at Hampshire College in 1971, all my teachers were social documentary still photographers. They reminded me that there is as much drama in what is and what was as anything the human imagination can dream up.

I tell stories that help answer the question, who are we? Who are these strange and complicated people who call themselves Americans? What does an investigation of the past tell us, not only about where we were, but where we are now? History isn't just about the past. It's a set of questions we ask of the past, informed by our own anxieties, fears, and desires, and by our wish for the future—our wish to be better.

Timeless themes

All of my subjects deepen our understanding of who we are as a people: the Civil War, Prohibition, the Dust Bowl, the

national parks. We did a film about dyslexic boys in a school in Vermont memorizing and then publicly reciting the Gettysburg Address, and another about the Central Park Five, the five black and Hispanic boys falsely accused and convicted in the Central Park jogger case. We recently aired a series on PBS on the Roosevelts. All of these subjects speak to timeless American themes of freedom, justice, race, and the beauty of our environment and the threats to it.

We're finishing a film on Jackie Robinson that's much deeper than any previous treatment of him. He's a heroic figure in American history, yet we've permitted that heroism to distract us from questions about the whole arc of his life—not just that one season when he came up to the major leagues. That arc speaks directly to themes we're talking about today: Confederate flags, driving while black, discrimination. He represents the first progress in civil rights since the Civil War, and following the course of his life puts us in the unusual position of being able to watch the civil rights movement unfolding.

History as healer

My long-time partner Lynn Novick and I are producing a 10-part series on the history of the war in Vietnam. There could be no more complicated subject. It's very provocative, because it suggests that almost every assumption we have about the war is only a shadow of what really happened. We've benefited from new scholarship and access to Vietnam and its archives and people. It's helped us tell a story that is complex and rich and might help to heal the deep wounds that festered during Vietnam. These are wounds that have since metastasized in our country and are, I think, responsible for many of the ills we see in our political and social systems: people don't talk with each other; they talk at each other. They don't have an argument in order to work something out; they have an argument in order to argue, and a good deal of that began with Vietnam.

A matter of trust

In our media-driven society, we can access an avalanche of information with the click of a mouse. What we desperately seek is curation. How do you digest a gazillion different entries on the war in Vietnam? How do you know which one is true, which wasn't made by someone with a political axe to grind? Who will cut through the clutter? The binge watching we do is just a desperate cry for help. It's us saying, "I trust you. Take me to *House of Cards* or *The Roosevelts* or *Downton Abbey*. This is a good brand. I love the writing and the cinematography and the casting." With *The Roosevelts*, they'll see a



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portrait of three deeply talented, great human beings who were also deeply flawed and complicated. Some 35 million people watched that series.

Art of history

I hear that pieces of *The Civil War* are shown every day in hundreds of schools across America, and that's wonderful. But I want it to be more than the sum total of its educational content. I want it to produce feelings and create dominant, long-lasting associations so that today, at a memorial service or wedding, people are playing "Ashokan Farewell," which was the theme of *The Civil War* series—a film that was released 25 years ago. Or they're reading a letter from a Union soldier to his wife in Smithfield, Rhode Island, one of the great love letters of all time. That means there's an aspect of a work of art in *The Civil War*. That's what I aspire to with every film I do.

The value of surprise...

History really is full of surprises. The little town of Winchester, Virginia, changed hands 72 times during the Civil War. We don't think of American towns as changing hands, let alone 72 times, but that individual fact tells you a lot about the Civil War. I'm constantly bumping into an area of American history where I think, "Wow. I didn't really realize that," and before you know it, I'm working on a film. I've also found that the past is not fixed, but is in fact extraordinarily malleable—not just as new information emerges, but as we get distanced from a particular subject and gain experience.

...and perspective

If we'd made the Vietnam series in the first decade after the war ended, say in 1985, you would have been informed by a dominant Japan, the recession at that time, and the sense that it was this punishing war—the only war we'd ever lost—this ball and chain we drag around. But if we'd waited until 1995, we were in the largest peacetime economic expansion ever. We were the dominant superpower. Vietnam may have had importance, but it wouldn't have been a raincloud following us around. If we'd waited 10 more years, until 2005, we would have found ourselves

bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the lessons of Vietnam were figuring daily in our minds. Then we could begin to understand that we're not infallible as a country.

The Vietnam film, produced at each of these times, would have been a totally different film. The facts of Vietnam hadn't changed, but new facts emerged. Ho Chi Minh was not the leader we thought he was. He was a figurehead, and another man that no one was aware of was in charge. This is one of a thousand revelations that have come with the passage of time, new scholarship, the opening of relations with Vietnam, and the fall of the Soviet Union.

An American narrative

As you make these films, you begin to understand that there are dominant themes, patterns of American life: What is the nature of freedom? What's the tension between individual freedom and collective freedom? What's the role of government in that freedom? Why is race the central sub-theme of American life?

When Thomas Jefferson said, "All men are created equal," he owned more than 200 human beings. He didn't see the hypocrisy, and set in motion an American narrative that—with Ferguson, and Staten Island, and North Charleston—we're still grappling with.

History as armor

In 2008, I had several friends, financial professionals, who were saying, "This is a depression." I said, "No it isn't. In the Depression in most American cities, the animals in the zoo were shot and the meat distributed to the poor. When that happens, I'll tell you that we're in a depression." Having a historical awareness provides you with a kind of armor, with perspective. You see the repetition of human nature.

There are no cycles of history. We're not condemned to repeat what we don't remember. Those are beautiful phrases, but human nature remains the same. The Bible says it well in Ecclesiastes: "There's nothing new under the sun." Human nature superimposes itself over the seemingly random, chaotic passage of events, and you begin to see the way in which human beings respond. History is a wonderful teacher. It gives us perspective that makes it easier to decipher what's going on in the present. ■

Learn more about Ken Burns's work at www.pbs.org/kenburns.