

## Film and Video Review

### Compte rendu de films et vidéos

Robert Brent Toplin, ed., *Ken Burns's The Civil War: Historians Respond*

David Bercuson and S. F. Wise, eds., *The Valour and the Horror Revisited*

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Toplin, Robert Brent, ed. *Ken Burns's the Civil War: Historians Respond*, Don Mills, Ont.: Oxford University Press, 1996. 194 pp., cloth \$35.95, ISBN 0-19-509330-5.

Bercuson, David J., and S. F. Wise, eds. *The Valour and the Horror Revisited*, Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994. 185 pp., paper \$14.95, ISBN 0-7735-1271-3.

Since the cinema was invented the debate about truth, realism and documentary approaches to history has been intense and often contradictory. In a similar vein, the invention of photography led to many similar questions, doubts and discussions on the potential for images to reflect the truth of a particular historical period or event. Generally, we tend to view historical images as if they have at least some relationship to the reality that they are depicting. This must be seen, in the first instance, as an assumption and not as a given. In the late 1890s the debate around realism and whether moving pictures were true or not was overwhelmed by the many instances of "faked" pictures that appeared in the cinema. Manufactured war footage and fake prizefights were common. "Boer war scenes fought in New Jersey scenery, a table-top Boxer rebellion, naval action, Russo-Japanese war episodes, prison escapes, executions, coronations," (Burnett, p. 161) were all part of the documentary film scene. It would not be an exaggeration to say that documentaries were always to some degree both an invention and the product of far more artifice than the images themselves suggested. Hence, the efforts by

documentarians to describe themselves as poets (from Lumière to Dziga-Vertov, Eisenstein to Ken Burns), even as they were making the claim that their real mission was to picture the truth in all of its manifestations.

If these contradictions seem at first glance to be fundamental, it is partially because the cinema has always subscribed to them. Early documentary films played with reality because as the film and culture theory of the late 1960s and early 1970s discovered, that playfulness was at the root of cinematic creativity. The rather arbitrary division between the documentary and fictional film is a good example of this playfulness at work. It has been convenient for documentarians to claim that truth, realism and images go together, but even as important and innovative a filmmaker as Frederick Wiseman (*Titticut Follies*, *High School*, *Model*, *Aspen*, *Basic Training*, etc.), who shoots hundreds of hours of *cinéma vérité* before he edits his films into a viewable form, would agree that truth doesn't just happen in front of the camera during a shoot, it has to be created. The creativity takes many different forms from the angle of the camera during a shoot, to the choice of lighting and sound. Post-production includes everything from editing to sound dubbing to the creation of special effects. In other words, no film, in fact no image ever escapes (nor should it) the rather magical artifice that makes the cinema a medium of communication in the first place.

In this context, the discussion so wonderfully recounted in Robert Brent Toplin's edited book, *Ken Burns's The Civil War: Historians Respond*, seems to be unaware of nearly thirty years of

scholarship in film studies. This is a reflection of disciplinary divides and the lack of communication between historians and their counterparts in the disciplines of film and cultural studies. It is also, and quite ironically, one of the reasons that many of the debates that surrounded the showing of *The Valour and the Horror* centred on "fairness." Truth and fairness go together and are bound up with assumptions about viewers and their ability to distinguish between fact and fiction, between what filmmakers say and how they pursue the truth through their use of images. Let us examine a key aspect of David J. Bercuson's criticism of *The Valour and the Horror* as an example of this argument at work:

*The clear impression presented is that Canada, as Britain's lap-dog, either deliberately and knowingly sent its young men, untrained for war, to the slaughter to stay in Britain's good graces, or should have known that they were being sent to the slaughter. This is pure fiction. Thus, although much of the film presents a balanced view of the Hong Kong battle and its aftermath, the central theme is developed without regard to a readily available mountain of evidence that that theme is a figment of the imagination of the producers. [Bercuson, Wise, p. 38]*

The contrast here between evidence, fact and fiction, has been a characteristic of nearly all discussions of the cinema and television whenever those media have dared to explore history with the eyes of a poet or storyteller while at the same time making the claim that they are creating a documentary. The producers of *The Valour and the Horror*, Terence and Brian McKenna, in response to the above accusations and many others of a similar kind, make the claim that they have history behind them and that other historians have examined *The Valour and the Horror* and found it to be a correct interpretation of the events (Bercuson, Wise, pp. 73–88). This is at best a naive response and at worst a misunderstanding of the public role that images play in the late twentieth century.

It matters little that the producers of *The Valour and the Horror* tried their best to present their interpretation of history; what is more important is that they used images to convey their point of view. From the start they were caught in a paradox. Images edited into a presentable form and then shaped for broadcast on a television network convey far more than a written history every could. But images do this in an ambiguous and highly contentious manner.

As with any form that depends on narrative, the direct line between truth and representation is at best an imaginary one. Historians have always understood this even as they have argued about whether the truth can nevertheless be found in the texts that they produce. Simon Schama's book *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations)* is a good example of the contradictions at work as is his recent book on landscape, which mixes the personal with the academic, highly speculative thoughts on environmentalism with rigorous historical research. "So *Landscape and Memory* is constructed as an excavation below our conventional sight-level to recover the veins of myth and memory that lie beneath the surface" (Schama, 1995).

The point is that to claim that history can be produced through images is quite valid, but that cannot be done without recognizing that history is as much about our myths, historical and national identity, as it is about truth. The producers of *The Valour and the Horror* made the mistake of attacking the mythology of war, the very *idea* of war, in the context of one of the most difficult periods of the twentieth century. They certainly had a right to do this and efforts to censor or sue them were clearly unacceptable within a modern democracy. But what if images, by definition, are evocative, emotional and manipulative? This means that the truth will be screened, layered and subjective. Again, in my view, there is nothing wrong with this. The error is to make a claim of truth when that is never the whole story, nor given the way our media are created should it be. *The Valour and the Horror* successfully used nearly every device in the history of the documentary cinema and television, mixing genres (news, docudrama, drama) while at the same time claiming a privileged point of entry into a new truth about the history of Canada's role in World War II.

Schama's model of excavation strikes me as more creative because it took him through an appreciation of his own experience, his own memories into an openly subjective relationship with his subject matter. He interspersed narrative with both scientific reasoning and historical research. The producers of *The Valour and the Horror* tried, both in their writing about the series and in the production itself, to make a claim about historical truth that somehow put them beyond reproach.

To some degree the producers of *The Valour and the Horror*, in attacking many commonly held notions of how the war was fought, also ended up attacking the collective memory of the

veterans and individuals who had lived through it. What surprises me is that the producers didn't anticipate this, particularly because they made use of so many levels of artifice and reconstruction. The details the McKennas uncovered, the details which contradicted conventional histories about the war and the experience of soldiers, could only be brought to the fore by the sophisticated use of docudrama techniques. In a written text those details would have formed part of a carefully footnoted argument, but in a television *show* the claim to have written the text just doesn't work.

The McKennas were driven as much by entertainment as they were by history. The Docudrama form, a Canadian invention, came into being as a response to the desire to show and re-enact events. Re-enactment never just brings us the truth. It is also designed to show us events that have never been filmed, events that could not have been filmed. The techniques of reconstruction range from the sophisticated to the banal. It is to the credit of the McKennas that their reconstructions are brilliant, well-photographed excursions into their interpretation of history. Yet, as we saw with the reaction this is dangerous territory precisely because it *looks* so real! Bercuson and Wise's book does an excellent job of bringing all of these elements to the forefront of discussions about the series. It fails, however, to address the central issues that surround the production of televisual images. The book is at best naive about the ways in which images communicate and at worst shows a fundamental disregard for the history of Canadian television. At a minimum, there should have been some effort to situate the form chosen by the McKennas within the broader palette of debates about how images communicate and why their impact is so powerful.

Ken Burns faced a different problem. "This film is a close kin of literature. Words count for nearly as much in it as images and sounds. The team of filmmakers have both the ears and the eyes of poets. They turn dull black and white photos into haunting images full of life. The pictures hold us captive. They make us choke up. And so do the words." (Gabor S. Borritt in Toplin, p. 84) For Burns, the documentary television series, *The Civil War*, was as much of an excursion into images as it was an effort to distill the history of the period. I believe that the excitement about the series was in part based on its recovery of the archival photographs that it used. Burns not only introduces motion through his skillful use of music and narration

but, as the authors of the various essays in the book suggest, he brings history to life. This is a central if not driving concept behind the production of historical images. It is the idea that the public will better understand the complexities of a period, its main events and personalities, if they can *see* and *hear* what happened. The use of narration merely supports this objective. Unlike *The Valour and the Horror*, Burns was not afraid of the ambiguity of word and image. Instead, he capitalized on that ambiguity to great effect.

*When I expressed my admiration for Burns's ability to touch his audience at a panel on film and history, and confessed that at times I was moved to tears by the poignancy of some of The Civil War's images, a member of the audience berated me with a rejoinder that in Germany today young neo-Nazis weep over the films of Leni Riefenstahl. [Catherine Clinton in Toplin, p. 64]*

Although Clinton goes on to severely critique Burns's omission of women as important participants in the Civil War, the above paragraph reveals the depth of the effect that the series had as a visual and aural experience. Does the strength of Clinton's identification with the images suggest that the series moved from history to propaganda? I don't think so. But the criticism bears careful examination. Burns uses his narrative abilities very well. He is a great storyteller (and this was reinforced in his follow-up television series on baseball) but, as Gary Gallagher says, Burns uses "storehouses of comfortable old stories that undoubtedly move audiences when told well, [yet] these books cluster toward the bottom of any scale of reliability" (Gallagher in Toplin, p. 58).

Can history as entertainment, history as a televisual experience deal with these contradictions and at the same time avoid a "sanitized" view of the war? I think not. As Burns himself suggests, creativity, for him, means not knowing exactly what the documentary process will produce, not anticipating the results before the specific character of the process, as televisual, gathers enough momentum to become both an original creation and a unique experience. Yet, Burns says the following:

*But more than any one thing, creativity seemed to be attention. Attention to detail. Attention to authenticity. Attention to craft. Attention. We became in a way the Paul Masson of documentary film companies, refusing to release our project until it was finished. This of course flew in the face of established*

*media production in this country which demands that things be produced on the fly, quickly, for immediate dissemination. [Burns in Toplin, p. 168]*

The claim of authenticity is perhaps the most problematic and Burns shares this with the McKennas. In arguing this way, Burns plays into the criticisms of historians and dilutes the capacities of the viewer to challenge what he is saying. A series of images, however true and however well situated historically, cannot retain their authenticity once they have been placed into an eleven-hour epic. The juxtaposition of one image next to another, editing — the further links established between images and sounds — means that audiences are witnesses to a *re-creation* of history. Every moment of drama is there as a result of careful image placement and even more careful post production.

Consequently, the excitement about *The Civil War* is as much with the form as it is with history *coming to life*. The drama is there not to confirm or deny what we already know, but to allow us to re-imagine its very premises. The fantasy of history is as important as its reality and in this respect image-makers face a peculiar challenge. They cannot at one and the same time make a claim on truth without also playing with artifice and in so doing they often dissolve the boundaries between fiction and fact. The filmmaker most aware of this energizing contradiction is Peter Watkins. His film *Culloden* remains, to this day, one of the most self-reflexive examinations of the many differ-

ent ways in which images bring us history and also transgress against the principles of historical research.

The other crucial factor in this debate is the attitude that documentarians have towards the medium of television as a means of communications. "Television is rapidly eroding the strength of our republic from within (just as Lincoln predicted); substituting a distracting cultural monarchy for the diversity and variety and democracy promised in its conception and unveiling." (Burns in Toplin, p. 175). Burns goes on to say, "Television has equipped us as citizens to live only in an all-consuming, and thereby forgettable and disposable, present, blissfully unaware of the historical tides and movements that speak not only to this moment, but to our vast future as well" (Burns in Toplin, p. 175).

This review essay is not the place to fully examine the contradictions of Burns's statement, suffice to say that it is curious he has so little faith in the medium he himself uses. But this is at the heart of a more profound problem that suffuses both books. Image-makers and historians could benefit from a broader view of television and a more profound understanding of spectatorship, of the many divergent and often resistant readings that viewers bring to the experience of popular media. Ironically, so much of the controversy about both *The Valour and the Horror* and *The Civil War* is evidence of this diversity at work, of this capacity and desire to redraw the narrative and to generate the very alternative readings that the image-makers, themselves profess to bring to their subject matter.

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