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Ken Burns's Rebirth of a Nation: Television, Narrative, and Popular History

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*Edited and with an introduction by
Marcia Landy*

The Historical Film

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in Media



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Gary Edgerton

Ken Burns's *Rebirth of a Nation*: Television, Narrative, and Popular History

Striking a Responsive Chord

I don't think [the story of the Civil War] can be told too often. I think surely it ought to be retold for every generation.

—Ken Burns, 1990¹

It's been nearly four years since the phenomenon of *The Civil War* premiered over five consecutive evenings (September 23–27, 1990), amassing a level of attention unsurpassed in public television history. Ken Burns's 11-hour version of the war between the states acted as a kind of lightning rod for a new generation, attracting a spectrum of opinion that ranged from rapturous enthusiasm to milder interest in most segments of the viewing public, to outrage over Yankee propaganda in a few scattered areas of the south, to both praise and criticism from the academy.² Burns employed twenty-four prominent historians as consultants on this project, but understandably, not all of these scholars agreed with everything in the final series. With so many experts, and with a subject the size and scope of the Civil War as the historical terrain, a certain amount of controversy was unavoidable.³

One historian even concluded his analysis of *The Civil War* by calling the series "a flawed masterpiece," thus evoking the customary judgment of D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) that's been repeated in literally dozens of general film histories over the past fifty years.⁴ This analogy only goes so far, however, making more sense on the grounds of shared cinematic brilliance than because of any similarities in outlook and sensibility. Indeed, one of Burns's stated intentions was to amend the "pernicious myths about the Civil War from *Birth of a Nation* to *Gone with the Wind*," especially in regards to racial stereotyping and the many other bigoted distortions in plot and imagery.⁵

Still *Birth of a Nation* and *The Civil War* were similarly indicative of mainstream public opinion during their respective eras. For example, Russell Merritt

from *Film and History* 22:4 (December 1992). Reprinted with permission of the editors.

has argued convincingly that the racist aspects of *Birth of a Nation* were anything but the ravings of some "isolated crackpot," but rather representative of white America at the time. According to Merritt, Griffith "attracted his audience . . . because the drama itself was one . . . Americans wanted to see."⁶ As a result, *Birth of a Nation* was embraced by an estimated ten percent of the U.S. population in its original release, making it the preeminent box-office success in silent film history.⁷

The widespread reaction to *The Civil War* was likewise lavish and record-setting. The initial aim of this essay, in fact, is to examine the unprecedented response to this series, focusing specifically on why *The Civil War* struck such a spirited chord with a contemporary mass audience. A second and related priority, moreover, is to analyze Ken Burns's approach to doing history, assessing both the historiography of *The Civil War* as well as the filmmaker's relationship to the practices and goals of traditional scholarship. More than anyone before him, Ken Burns has transformed the historical documentary into a popular and compelling form through the apt though unexpected forum of prime-time television.

The Public Broadcasting System actually achieved its highest ratings when 39 million Americans tuned into at least one episode of *The Civil War*, averaging more than 14 million viewers each evening.⁸ Interestingly, the viewership "skew[ed] older, male and upscale," while nearly half the audience would not have been watching at all if it had not been for this program.⁹ These inclinations were also reflected in the range of published responses to *The Civil War*, even including political pundits who rarely, if ever, attend to the opening of a major motion picture or television series. George Will, for example, wrote: "Our *Iliad* has found its Homer . . . if better use has ever been made of television, I have not seen it."¹⁰ David Broder and Haynes Johnson weighed in with similar praise.¹¹

Film and television critics from across the country were equally effusive. *Newsweek* reported "a documentary masterpiece"; *Time* "eloquen[t] . . . a pensive epic"; and *U.S. News & World Report* "the best Civil War film ever made."¹² David Thomson in *American Film* declared that *The Civil War* "is a film Walt Whitman might have dreamed."¹³ Tom Shales of the *Washington Post* remarked: "This is not just good television, nor even just great television. This is heroic television."¹⁴ And Monica Mullins of *The Boston Herald* informed her readers that "to watch 'The Civil War' in its entirety is a rare and wonderful privilege." She then urged: "You have to keep in mind that the investment in the program is an investment in yourself, in your knowledge of your country and its history."¹⁵

Between 1990 and 1992, accolades for Ken Burns and the series took on institutional proportions. He won "Producer of the Year" from the Producers Guild of America; two Emmys (for "Outstanding Information Series" and "Outstanding Writing Achievement"); a Peabody; a duPont-Columbia Award; a Golden Globe; a D. W. Griffith Award; two Grammys; a People's Choice Award for "Best Television Mini-Series"; and eight honorary doctorates from various American colleges and universities, along with many other recognitions.¹⁶ As Burns remembers,

I was flabbergasted! I still sort of pinch myself about it . . . it's one of the rare instances in which something helped stitch the country together, however briefly, and the fact that I had a part in that is just tremendously satisfying . . . I don't really know how to put my finger on it. A generation ago as we celebrated, or tried to celebrate the centennial, we seemed focused on the battles or the generals, and the kind of stuff of war, but here we seemed to respond to the human drama and maybe it just resonated in a particular way with how we are. I feel a tremendous sympathy for this country and somewhere along the line that sympathy must line up with where we are now and whatever the subject is.¹⁷

The Civil War became a phenomenon of popular culture. The series was mentioned on episodes of *Twin Peaks*, *Thirtysomething*, and *Saturday Night Live* during the 1990–1991 television season. Ken Burns appeared on *The Tonight Show*; and he was selected by the editors of *People* magazine as one of their “25 most intriguing people of 1990.” The series also developed into a marketing sensation as the companion volume by Knopf, *The Civil War: An Illustrated History* became a runaway bestseller; as did the accompanying Warner soundtrack and the nine episode videotaped version from Time-Life.

The Civil War has continued to fascinate Americans for more than 130 years. James M. McPherson, the 1988 Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Battle Cry of Freedom* estimates that the literature “on the war years alone . . . totals more than 50,000 books and pamphlets.”¹⁸ Reader interest had actually been increasing in the five years preceding the debut of *The Civil War*: 520 of the 1,450 titles that were still in print in September 1990 had only been published since 1986. After the premiere of the series, however, fixation with the war became “higher . . . than it has ever been.”¹⁹

Several interlocking factors evidently contributed to this extraordinary level of interest, including the quality of *The Civil War* itself, its accompanying promotional campaign, the momentum of scheduling Sunday through Thursday, and the synergetic merchandising of its ancillary products. Most significantly, though, a new generation of historians had already begun addressing the war from the so-called “bottom-up” perspective, underscoring the role of African-Americans, women, immigrants, workers, farmers, and common soldiers in the conflict. This fresh emphasis on social and cultural history had revitalized the Civil War as a subject, adding a more inclusive and human dimension to the traditional preoccupations with “great men,” transcendent ideals, and battle strategies and statistics. The time was again propitious for creating another rebirth of the nation on film which included the accessibility of the “bottom-up” approach. In Ken Burns's own words, “I realized the power that the war still exerted over us.”

Shelby Foote was the first contemporary writer to liken the Civil War to the *Iliad* in the third volume of his trilogy, *The Civil War: A Narrative* (1974); and his intent was to emphasize how “we draw on it for our notion of ourselves, and our artists draw on it for the depiction of us in the same way that Homer and the later dramatists—Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides—drew on the Trojan war for their

plays."²⁰ Much of the success of Ken Burns's *The Civil War* must be equated in kind to the extent to which his version makes this nineteenth century conflict immediate and comprehensible in the 1990s. The great questions of race and continuing discrimination, of the changing roles of women and men in society, of big government versus local control, and of the individual struggle for meaning and conviction in modern life, all remain. The Civil War fascinates because its purposes continue; Americans are as engaged as ever in the war's dramatic conflicts. As Burns summarizes,

there is so much about *The Civil War* that reverberates today . . . a developing women's movement, Wall Street speculators, the imperial presidency, new military technology, the civil rights question and the contribution of black soldiers . . . there are also approximations and that sort of thing. You have to cut stuff out. I would have loved more on the congressional sort of intrigues during the Civil War. I would have loved to do more on women and more on emancipation and more on Robert E. Lee and more on the western battles, but limitations of photographs or just time or rhythm or pacing, or whatever it is, conspired against those things. And they were there, but they were taken out to serve the demands of the ultimate master, which is narrative.

The Filmmaker as Popular Historian

Television has become more and more the way we are connected to the making of history.

—Ken Burns, 1992²¹

Academia has taken away the idea that the world history is mostly made up of the world story. . . . I would like to suggest that television can become a new Homeric mode. What other form would allow such powerful emotions of the war to come forward, would allow you to follow the spear carriers as well as the gods?

—Ken Burns, 1990²²

Narrative is a particular mode of knowledge and means of relaying history. It is a historical style that is dramatic and commonly literary, although *The Civil War* does indicate that it can be ideally adapted to film and television as well. In selecting the Homeric mode, Ken Burns drew certain narrative parameters which are epic and heroic in scope. The epic form tends to celebrate a people's national tradition in sweeping terms; a recurring assertion throughout Ken Burns's filmic history is how the Civil War gave birth to a newly redefined American nation. The final episode, "The Better Angels of Our Nature," for example, begins with three commentaries on nationhood which rhetorically sets the stage from which the series will be brought to its rousing conclusion:

Strange is it not that battles, martyrs, blood, even assassination should so condense a nationality.

—Walt Whitman

It is the event [the Civil War] in American history in that it is the moment that made the United States as a nation.

—Barbara Fields

Before the war it was said the United States are, grammatically it was spoken that way and thought of as a collection of independent states, and after the war it was always the United States is as we say today without being self-conscious at all—and that sums up what the war accomplished: it made us an is.

—Shelby Foote

These remarks are then immediately followed by the bittersweet and tragic lament that serves as the series's anthem, "Ashokan Farewell," thus reinforcing the overall heroic dimensions of the narrative. Heroism, honor, and nobility are related Homeric impulses that permeate this series, shaping our reactions to the "Great Men" of the war, such as Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, and Robert E. Lee, along with the many foot soldiers whose bravery often exceeded the ability of their officers to lead them, resulting in the appalling carnage recounted in episode after episode.

The series's most celebrated set piece, in fact, the eloquent and poignant voiceover of Major Sullivan Ballou's parting letter to his wife before being killed at the first battle of Bull Run (and again accompanied by the haunting strains of "Ashokan Farewell"), foregrounds why there has been a degree of criticism lodged at *The Civil War* by some professional historians. This scene, which lasts approximately three and one-half minutes with an air of melancholy, romance, and higher purpose. Poetic license is used throughout the scene, as Ballou's declaration of love is heard over images that have nothing factually to do with Sullivan Ballou, but evoke the emotional texture of his parting sentiments, including photographs of the interior of a tent where such a letter might have been written; a sequence of pictures portraying six other Civil War couples; and three static filmed shots of Manassas battlefield as it looks today in a pinkish twilight.

The impact and effectiveness of this section, entitled "Honorable Manhood," was apparent immediately as Ken Burns recalls:

Within minutes of the first night's broadcast, the phone began ringing off the hook with calls from across the country, eager to find out about Sullivan Ballou, anxious to learn the name of Jay Ungar's superb theme music ("Ashokan Farewell"), desperate to share their families' experience in the war or just kind enough to say thanks. The calls would not stop all week—and they continue still.²³

Several historians, in contrast, took a closer and more analytical look at the Ballou letter, raising serious questions about its authenticity, and the number of different versions that do indeed exist. Burns himself expresses

[Poetic license] is that razor's edge between fraud and art that we ride all the time. You have to shorten, you have to take shortcuts, you have to abbreviate, you have to sort of make do with, you have to sometimes go with something that's less critically truthful imagery-wise because it does an ultimately better job of telling the larger truth, but who is deciding and under what system becomes the operative question.

Here Burns raises the two fundamental differences between his own approach to documentary film structure as history and the goals of more critically-based historians. First, Ken Burns is more concerned with the art of storytelling than detailed accuracy, although he is careful and meticulous in marshaling the "facts" of history as his stated goal of capturing an "emotional truth" warrants. He continues:

the historical documentary filmmaker's vocation is not precisely the same as the historian's, although it shares many of the aims and much of the spirit of the latter. . . . The historical documentary is often more immediate and more emotional than history proper because of its continual joy in making the past present through visual and verbal documents.²⁴

Second, Ken Burns is not as self-reflexive about historiography as the professional historian. He is aware that there are "systems" to history, but there are times when he is chided for stressing narrative instead of analysis.

I am primarily a filmmaker. That's my job. I'm an amateur historian at best, but more than anything if you wanted to find a hybridization of those two professions, then I find myself an emotional archeologist. That is to say, there is something in the process of filmmaking that I do in the excavation of these events in the past that provoke a kind of emotion and sympathy that remind us, for example, of why we agree against all odds as a people to cohere.

At first blush, this final statement might appear to confirm the assessment offered in a 1992 *American Quarterly* essay, "Videobites: Ken Burns's 'The Civil War' in the Classroom," which suggests that "'The Civil War' stands as a new nationalist synthesis that in aims and vision can be most instructively compared to James Ford Rhodes's histories of the Civil War (written at the end of the nineteenth and in the early twentieth centuries)."²⁵ A 1991 appraisal in *American Historical Review* similarly takes the filmmaker to task:

Burns used modern historical techniques, at the level of detail and anecdote, to create an accessible, human-scale account of the Civil War. But, when it comes to historical interpretation, to the process by which details coalesce to make events meaningful, *The Civil War* is vintage nineteenth century.

The severity of these judgments is encapsulated by the same author in a final dismissal: "[*The Civil War*] is the visual version of the approach taken by generations of Civil War buffs, for whom reenacting battles is a beloved hobby."²⁶

Historical documentaries should certainly be subject to evaluation and criticism, especially if they are to be viewed by audiences of tens of millions on television or in theaters, and subsequently used as teaching tools in our nation's schools. *The Civil War*, for example, was licensed after its premiere telecast to over sixty colleges and universities for future classroom use; and Ken Burns reports that he's "received over 6,000 letters and cards from secondary school teachers alone, grateful for the series, pleased with how well it works."²⁷ There

is clearly a responsibility to assess any film being employed for educational purposes to such a widespread degree. Both of these articles, in fact, do raise important questions of interpretation and detail that are useful and edifying. It is a welcome development that historians are increasingly attending to the validity of films and television programs.

These reviews, on the other hand, concurrently demonstrate the academy's longstanding and persistent tendency to underestimate yet another motion picture or television series which, in turn, shortchanges *The Civil War* as a classroom supplement. One of the primary goals of scholarship is to create new knowledge and be "cutting edge." No more thorough indictment exists, according to this frame-of-reference, than to reject a text for its obsolete conception and design; in this case, banishing it to the dustbin of the nineteenth century. *The Civil War*, however, deserves a more measured examination than merely being dismissed as the stuff of "Civil War buffs."

In his widely acclaimed book, *That Noble Dream* (1988), Peter Novick has skillfully examined the controversies that have fundamentally affected the historical discipline over the last generation.²⁸ Current debates continue in the literature and at conferences over the relative merits of narrative versus analytic history, synthetic versus fragmentary history, and consensus versus multi-cultural history. Lawrence Levine suggests that all of these historiographical exchanges make

sense only when it is seen as what, at its root, it really is: a debate about the extent to which we should widen our historical net to include the powerless as well as the powerful, the followers as well as the leaders, the margins as well as the center, popular and folk culture as well as high culture.²⁹

The Civil War is similarly a product of this intellectual climate. In this respect, it is not enough to focus exclusively on the eleven hours of *The Civil War* without also considering Ken Burns's ideological bearings alongside the scope of his "historical net." This more comprehensive unit-of-analysis does, in fact, reveal fragments of a nationalist approach to historiography as the aforementioned reviewers suggest. *The Civil War*, moreover, evinces elements of the romantic, progressive, "new" social history, and consensus schools as well. As Burns explains,

in narrative history you have this opportunity, I believe, to contain the multitude of perspectives. You can have the stylistic, and certainly my films have a particular and very well known style. You can involve yourself with politics, but that's not all there is. And that's what I'm trying to do, is to embrace something that has a variety of viewpoints.

The Civil War is essentially a pastiche of assumptions derived from a number of schools of historical interpretation. As just mentioned, the series is nationalistic in its apparent pride in nation building, but without the nineteenth century arrogance that envisioned America as the fulfillment of human destiny,

The Civil War is romantic in its narrative, chronological, and quasi-biographic structure, but it lacks the unqualified, larger-than-life depictions of the unfinished "Great Men" approach. *The Civil War* is progressive in its persistence that the war was ultimately a struggle to end slavery and ensure justice, although this perspective too is tempered by passages, such as Burns's assertion in the final episode that the Civil War "is still to be fought; regrettably, it can still be lost."

The Civil War is also informed by social history with its attention to African Americans, women, laborers, farmers, and especially firsthand accounts in the nine episodes by two common soldiers (Elish Hunt Rhodes, a Yankee from Rhode Island, and Sam Watkins, a Confederate from Tennessee), but there is nowhere near as purely representative of the "bottom-up" view as are the histories. In Burns's own words, "I try to engage, on literally dozens of levels, ordinary human beings from across the country—male and female, black and white, young and old, rich and poor, inarticulate and articulate."³⁰

What Ken Burns is announcing is the liberal pluralist perspective where differences of ethnicity, race, class, and gender are kept in a comparatively stable negotiated consensus within the body politic. Consensus history is marked by agreement than is the multicultural or diversity model which grounds "new" social history. The preservation of the Union, and an emphasis on ideals and achievements, are fundamental to consensus thinking; they are some of Burns's primary themes throughout *The Civil War*:

It's interesting that we Americans who are not united by religion, or patri-
or even common language, or even a geography that's relatively similar, we
agreed because we hold a few pieces of paper and a few sacred words to-
we have agreed to cohere, and for more than 200 years it's worked and the
cial alchemy is something I'm interested in. It doesn't work in a Pollyan-
way . . . we corrupt as much as we construct, but nevertheless, I think the
the aggregate the American experience is a wonderful beacon . . . and I thi-
overwhelming response to *The Civil War* is a testament to that.

Rather than being ideologically stuck in the nineteenth century, Burns and the audience for *The Civil War* are instead very much of the 1990s. The tenets of liberal pluralism have understandably been challenged and qualified in the academy since the mid-1970s, but the consensus view remains the most prevalent view on the streets of contemporary America. Popular metaphors, such as the "quilt" or the "rainbow" or to a lesser degree the old-fashioned "melting pot," are still widespread images used by public figures across the political spectrum to evoke a projection of America that is based on agreement and unity, despite whatever social differences may exist. In realizing this outlook on film, Ken Burns has, moreover, usurped one of the foremost goals of social history, which is to make history meaningful and relevant to the general public. *The Civil War* brilliantly fulfills this objective in books, or motion pictures, or television series, or even teachers, for that it has ever done.

The Historical Documentary and the Academy

My job is to convey history to people. No film, however well done, can ever replace that task.

—Barbara Fields, 1990³¹

We have begun to use new media and new forms of expression—including films and television—to tell our histories, breaking the strangle hold the academicians exercised over this discipline for the last hundred years.

—Ken Burns, 1991³²

The mutual skepticism that sometimes surfaces between the historian and the historical documentary filmmaker is understandable and unfortunate. Each usually works with different media (although some professional historians now make films and videotapes); each tends to place a dissimilar stress on the respective roles of analysis versus storytelling in relaying history; and each tailors a version of history which is designed for disparate though overlapping kinds of audiences. These distinctions are certainly real enough. Still the scholar and the filmmaker, the professional historian and the amateur, complement each other more than is sometimes evident in the expressions of suspicion, defensiveness, and even on occasion, scorn, that are too often apparent in published remarks.

Ken Burns's *The Civil War*, for example, conveys some genres of knowledge better than books or lectures ever will, such as the empathetic and experiential aspects of history that are generally communicated best through the electronic media (or in a much different way on field trips); Burns's series render the people of the 1860s accessible to contemporary audiences in a direct and intimate way. As the filmmaker explains,

we wanted you to believe you were there . . . there is not one shot, not one photograph of a battle ever taken during the Civil War. There is not one moment in which a photographer exposed a frame during a battle, and yet you will swear that you saw battle photography. . . . You live inside those photographs, experiencing a world as if it was real inside those photographs. . . . Once you've taken the poetry of words and added to it a poetry of imagery and a poetry of music and a poetry of sound, I think you begin to approximate the notion that the real war could actually get someplace, that you could bring it back alive.

Burns accordingly eschews detailed analysis by stressing "poetry and emotion" above all else. His series has a tendency to present contradictory points-of-view as if to suggest their eventual reconciliation in the renewal of America. Ken Burns has even stated that *The Civil War* was meant "to emphasize the story in history, avoiding the contentions of analysis."³³ In the "Was It Not Real?" segment of the final episode, for example, there is a montage of three commentaries presenting both corroborating and conflicting opinions about the lasting meaning of the Civil War. Barbara Fields, who previously had suggested that Lincoln was actually a moderate on the issues of race in comparison to his contemporaries, begins by observing that "the *slaves won the war* [my emphasis] and

they lost the war because they won their freedom, that is the removal of slavery but they did not win freedom as they understood freedom."

Next James Symington provides a different slant on the issue by declaring that "the significance of *Lincoln's life and victory* [my emphasis] is that we never again enshrine [slavery] into law," while affirming Fields with "let what we can do to erase . . . the deeper rift between people based on race . . . the hearts and minds of people." Stephen Oates then ends this section by bringing the focus to the survival and triumph of popular government, ending with an assertion that the Civil War is "a testament to the liberation of the human for all time." Oates's conclusion has little to do with the specific subtext addressed in the previous statements by either Fields or Symington, although coming where it does, his testimony cannot help but soften the reference to racial injustice that preceded it.

More importantly, this specific sequencing of remarks establishes the liberal pluralist consensus: in other words, different speakers might clash on certain issues (such as what degree of freedom was actually won in the Civil War or whom), but disagreements ultimately take place within a broader framework of agreement on underlying principle. In this case, the larger principle is the evocation of popular government, which is understood to guarantee the diversity and human rights needed to eventually eradicate racial inequality and disharmony. Historical narrative, therefore, does not merely record what happens; it interprets events and shapes the presentation of the subject at hand.

Furthermore, this particular example illustrates that the historical documentary is not a particularly useful instrument for in-depth analysis (as opposed to scholarly publication or classroom discussion and debate, for instance). Expert testimonies and first-person reports that Burns employs do provide differing angles-of-vision that sometimes agree and, at other times, differ and contrast with each other. These multiple voices, however, form a cultural consensus because of both the filmmaker's liberal pluralist orientation, and in Burns's words, "the power of film to digest and synthesize."³⁴

The limitation of the liberal pluralist perspective resides in its belief in the aspiration that all outlooks and disagreements are ultimately reconcilable into a consensus. As Ken Burns proposes,

we have begun to speak of a synthesis of the old and the new histories, a combination of the best of the top-down version, still inspiring even in its "great man" addiction, with the bottom-up version, so inspiring too at times, with the heroic acts of women, minorities, labor, ordinary people.³⁵

In contrast, new historians, social and ideological, would argue that the "top-down" and "bottom-up" approaches are fundamentally incompatible since combining of the two perspectives is destined to be incomplete and uneven. One of the Achilles' heels of liberal pluralism is the way that it subordinates all differences, such as race, class, ethnicity, and gender, to a consensus which in the end serves the present power relations in society essentially as they are. Some do indeed benefit from current conditions, while other subordinate

stituencies are left silent and outside the supposed consensus. In this way, *The Civil War* does have its limits in interpretation, but its strengths as a teaching tool far outweigh any weaknesses.

By any standard that has gone before, *The Civil War* is a masterful historical documentary. Its liberal pluralist framework can serve as a topic for discussion and analysis, along with the multiple responses that a classroom full of students are bound to have to the series or one of its episodes. In many ways, Ken Burns is the ideal filmmaker for this period of transition between generations, bridging the sensibilities of the people who came of age during World War II along with his own frame of reference as a babyboomer. He agrees that his perspective was shaped by both

the fifties and sixties because I think that maybe all of that stimulus from the centennial celebration of the Civil War, to the mythology that still pertained, not only got fixed, but then got challenged in the sixties. And I think that those two things going in opposite directions, probably accounts for why we're all drawn to [*The Civil War*] right now.

Burns similarly contends, "the Civil War compelled me to do the film," enabling him to establish "a dialogue with the past." As Barbara Fields reminds us in the final episode of the series: "the Civil War is in the present as well as in the past." In this sense, at least, all history is contemporary. We can never escape our own time or set of ideological predispositions; and within this context, no one has ever done a better job of "bringing [the Civil War] back alive" to more Americans through the power and reach of television than Ken Burns.

NOTES

1. Matt Roush, "Epic TV Film Tells Tragedy of a Nation," *USA Today*, 21 September 1990, 1.

2. See Lewis Lord, "'The Civil War': Did Anyone Dislike It?" *U.S. News & World Report*, 8 October 1990, 18; "Ken Burns," *People*, 31 December 1990–7 January 1991, 47; *Civil War Illustrated*, July/August 1991; and *Confederate Veteran*, January–February 1991, March–April 1991, and July–August 1991.

3. Some of the more prominent critiques of *The Civil War* focus on errors in detail, the way the series abridges the origins of the war and later the matter of reconstruction, and the condensing of other complex issues, such as policymaking and the formation of public opinion. For additional disagreements in interpretation, see Jerry Adler, "Revisiting the Civil War," *Newsweek*, 8 October 1990, 62; David Marc and Robert J. Thompson, *Prime Time, Prime Movers* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1992), 307; Jane Turner Censer, "Videobites: Ken Burns's 'The Civil War' in the Classroom," *American Quarterly* 44:2 (June 1992), 244–54; Ellen Carol DuBois, "The Civil War," *American Historical Review* 96:4 (October 1991), 1140–42; A. Cash Koeniger, "Ken Burns's 'The Civil War': Triumph or Travesty?" *The Journal of Military History* 55 (April 1991), 225–33; Hugh Purcell, "America's Civil Wars," *History Today* 41 (May 1991), 7–9; and Mark Wahlgren Summers, "The Civil War," *The Journal of American History* 77:3 (December 1990), 1106–1207.

4. Koeniger, "Ken Burns's 'The Civil War': Triumph or Travesty?" 233. Like many film scholars before him, Louis Giannetti writes, "Birth is a diseased masterpiece, steeped in racial bigotry," in *Masters of the American Cinema* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1981), 67.

This critical ambivalence about *The Birth of a Nation* in general film histories dates back to Terry Ramsaye, *A Million and One Nights* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1926); Benjamin Hampton, *A History of the Movies* (New York: Covici, Friede, 1931); and Lewis Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1939).

5. John Milius, "Reliving the War Between Brothers," *New York Times*, 16 September 1990, Sect. 2, pp. 1, 43.

6. Russell Merritt, "Dixon, Griffith, and the Southern Legend: A Cultural Analysis of *Birth of a Nation*," in *Cinema Examined: Selections from Cinema Journal*, ed. Richard Dyer MacCann and Jack C. Ellis (New York: Dutton, 1982), 167, 175.

7. *Ibid.*, 166.

8. "Learning Lessons from 'The Civil War,'" *Broadcasting*, 8 October 1990, 52-53; Richard Gold, "'Civil War' Boost to Docu Battle," *Variety*, 1 October 1990, 36; Bill Carter, "'Civil War' Sets an Audience Record for PBS," *New York Times*, 25 September 1990, C17; Jeremy Gerard, "'Civil War' Seems to Have Set a Record," *New York Times*, 29 September 1990, 46; and Susan Bickelhaupt, "'Civil War' Weighs In With Heavy Hitters," *Boston Globe*, 25 September 1990, 61, 64.

9. "CBS, PBS Factors in Surprising Prime Time Start," *Broadcasting*, 1 October 1990, 28.

10. George F. Will, "A Masterpiece on the Civil War," *Washington Post*, 20 September 1990, Sect. A, 23.

11. David S. Broder, "PBS Series Provides a Timely Reminder of War's Horrors," *Sunday Republican* (Springfield, Mass.), 30 September 1990, B-2; Haynes Johnson, "An Eloquent History Lesson," *Washington Post*, 28 September 1990, Sect. A, 2.

12. Harry F. Waters, "An American Mosaic," *Newsweek*, 17 September 1990, 68; Richard Zoglin, "The Terrible Remedy," *Time*, 24 September 1990, 73; and Lewis Lord, "The Civil War, Unvarnished," *U.S. News & World Report*, 24 September 1990, 74.

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