

Report on Ken Burns

John Rose

In this essay, I shall be looking at the documentary filmmaker, Ken Burns by analysing three of his creations; *Brooklyn Bridge* (Burns, Brooklyn Bridge, 1981), *The Civil War* (Burns, The Civil War, 1990), and *Defying the Nazis: The Sharps' War* (Burns, Defying the Nazis: The Sharps' War, 2016). I will analyse and compare the conventions featured within each of the films, aiming to show their similarities and differences, and how they break away from the norms and conventions of documentary filmmaking and storytelling. Furthermore, I will be looking at how Ken Burns's documentaries have impacted my upcoming documentary film piece.

A 1926 film review, in describing documentaries, said *"In documentary we deal with the actual, and in one sense with the real. But the really real, if I may use that phrase, is something deeper than that. The only reality which counts in the end is the interpretation which is profound."* (Grierson, 1926) Documentaries can be used to convey the past in a factual manner. They are a film that more often pushes fact over fiction. *"It's all movies for me. And besides, when you say documentaries, in my case, in most of these cases, means 'feature film' in disguise."* (Herzog, 2009) Documentaries in themselves both adhere to and break convention, but in the end aim to deliver a message, be it personal, historical, or theoretical.

Ken Burns follows the historical side of documentary filmmaking. Arguably, this itself doesn't break convention. However, Burns breaks conventions within the realm of the genre through his differing means of presenting narrative, as well as varying and unconventional technical methods.

His first film, *Brooklyn Bridge*, tells the story of the Brooklyn Bridge's construction, and its cultural impact through the years. The narrative is split into two very distinct parts – the first half of the film focuses entirely on the early history of the bridge, from its inception to the day it was opened to the public. Part one of the documentary definitely takes a more historical approach to creating a narrative, while the second half of the documentary takes a completely different tone, opting to look at the bridge in a contemporary manner, as well as how the bridge has been portrayed and perceived culturally. Narratively, this both provides the viewer with the historical context needed to have an understanding of the hardships involved with building the bridge, as well as showing how the bridge has had an impact on not just the people of New York, but on the world, through cinema, cartoons, and just general fascination for the bridge.

As such, the narrative breaks archetypes by not focussing on one aspect or the other – but rather, Ken Burns presents both the historical story and the cultural story of the bridge. Culture and art are intertwined, and Ernest Renan said *"History is as much an art as a science."* (Renan, n.d.) Therefore, the history of the bridge and the culture it exudes are just as important as each other, and the documentary pushes that fact. As such, the film also breaks convention in terms of genre, as it doesn't follow a purely historical narrative. Part

two takes an entirely different route to part one, while not diverging from the subject matter. The film, however, does defy audience expectation by not relying on juxtaposed opinions or focusing purely on the factual or political aspects of the subject matter – rather, it relies on a unified message in its second half, after delivering a purely factual first half.

In terms of its form, the film employs many techniques and styles that are unconventional for documentary filmmaking, both at the time of its release and at the time of writing. As footage of past events may not exist, Ken Burns uses existing stills or paintings, zooms into a part of the image, and pans across it to reveal more of the image, thus invoking motion and helping dictate pace. Burns utilised the technique so much that it has become known as the 'Ken Burns effect' – the effect is used throughout *Brooklyn Bridge*, primarily in the first half, where motion is used to give life to stills and paintings of the construction of the bridge. What would otherwise be rather dull visually, the use of the 'Ken Burns effect' brings life to explanations. Burns employed various techniques similar to this, such as the use of non-diegetic audio over these images, such as the sounds of men working, or fireworks going off during the opening celebration. Part one features minimal use of film, bar a handful of interviews and some archive footage of the bridge being used soon after its opening. While unconventional, this does give part one a factual, 'set in stone' tone to it.

As a result, the second half of *Brooklyn Bridge* carries a very different tone thanks to it using almost entirely moving images. Part two showcases clips from other films in order to show the cultural impact the bridge has had, allowing the documentary to address the bridge's impact on society in terms of culture rather than its functions. Burns interlinks footage from films and cartoons with interviews in order to create a unified message – an interview with an architect critic praising the bridge is followed with a clip from a film talking about the beauty of the bridge. Burns challenges conventions by having sources compliment each other through their own words, rather than relying on narration as the first part of the documentary did. Narration is instead driven by various voices creating a solid narrative – a one-hundred and six year-old man is interviewed on his perspective on working at the bridge during its early days, juxtaposed with footage of children playing with building blocks to create the bridge. Music is also used throughout both parts of the film – however, Burns uses instruments associated with the topic at hand, such as string instruments when talking about farming, to further bring the still images to life.

With *Brooklyn Bridge*, Ken Burns created a unique and unconventional approach to a subject matter by dividing the narrative into two distinctive parts – one purely factual and historical, another routed in cultural perception and impact. The film also falls just shy of the sixty-minute mark, meaning the documentary is concise, yet delivers two very different ways of studying the bridge.

Another of Ken Burns' films takes a completely different approach in terms of its length and structure. *The Civil War* (1990) breaks convention even in its own genre. Rather than being a single programme, the documentary is a nine-part series, with each episode being around an hour long each, with some parts extending to the ninety-minute mark. This allows the series to cover a broad range of topics related to the American Civil War, and allows each

episode to focus on its own subject matter and unified message, while not being hindered by time constraints.

With each episode carrying its own narrative and story, Burns uses the opening minute of each episode to set the scene and tone for most of the episode. For example, the third episode opens with an image of two men, with narration describing who they are, a brief history, and describes how one of the men had been captured. Burns sets the tone for the episode by introducing the sombreness of the war and how it affected the individuals fighting it. This idea of using the opening minute to set tone is carried from the first episode to the last, with the last episode opening with an account from a Confederate Private talking about the death and destruction caused by the war, accompanied by a sombre-sounding piano track. Once again, Ken Burns demonstrates how through the use of music, the tone can be set for a segment, or in this case, an entire episode.

The Civil War is clearly a natural evolution of Ken Burns's style from *Brooklyn Bridge*, as he uses the 'Ken Burns effect' extensively - *"I treat the photograph as a work of great complexity in which you can find drama. Add to that a careful composition of landscapes, live photography, the right music and interviews with people, and it becomes a style."* (Burns, 2017) The marriage of music with stills provides a sense of immersion for the viewer. A conventional documentary would have the narrator explaining how the slaves would sing as they worked, however, Burns breaks convention by having stills of slaves working in fields pan across the screen as songs they would sing are played over the images. Burns uses this to transition into talking about the hardships and suffering the slaves went through. This is emphasised through the use of narration from various accounts of slaves, intertwined with accounts from slave-owners. Burns once again shows both sides of the narrative; however, he does this not to show the sides as equals, but to further demonstrate the unjust treatment of the slaves.

Throughout *The Civil War*, Ken Burns uses music to convey a message or meaning without the need for dialogue. In the first episode, rather than describe the brutality of war, Burns opts to not use narration, but rather 'show' it through the use of photographs from battlefields. The imagery of bodies, battlefields and destroyed buildings, all accompanied by a melancholic soundtrack all create a form of pathetic fallacy, allowing the viewer to understand the severity of the war without the need for a verbal explanation. Burns does this numerous times throughout the nine parts of *The Civil War*, each to invoke a different feeling, like dread, futility, despair, or hope. On the soundtrack, Alexander Klein said *"The pianist not only changed the songs' original mood but also allowed herself some harmonic liberties so as to make these century-old marching tunes into piano lamentations that contemporary audiences could fully identify with."* (Klein, n.d.) Tone of music clearly played a big part in making scenes carry their themes. Further to this, Burns ensured that the documentary had a tune of its own, called *"Ashokan Farewell"* plays numerous times throughout the nine parts, giving documentary a melancholic feeling throughout. Burns's unconventional use of music helps escalate the scenes within *The Civil War* to a level it otherwise wouldn't reach, in terms of emotional connection and synergy between what is

being described or shown on screen, sometimes without the need for wordy segments other documentaries would feature.

Burns also ensured to make as many aspects of the war as personal to an individual as possible – from a lowly Private's feelings of an oncoming battle, to Abraham Lincoln's loss of his child and his rise to presidency. Burns strikes a delicate balance between factual storytelling and personal perspective from those involved, while also ensuring that the documentary doesn't explicitly take a side. While it is not necessarily unconventional for a documentary to show an individual's viewpoint, Burns's method of interlinking the personal with the factual creates a narrative that helps the viewer understand reactions to occurrences, as well as their motivations and beliefs, regardless of what side of the war they fell on. This leads into the third of Burns's films I am looking at: *Defying the Nazis: The Sharps' War* (which I shall refer to as simply *Sharps' War*.)

In *Sharps' War*, Burns takes the approach used in *The Civil War* of using individuals to tell a story, and amplifies it by telling the story of two individuals. As such, the film is a very personal and heartfelt story. In terms of structure, the film is very similar to *Brooklyn Bridge*, in that it closely follows one subject without the need for dividing the story into separate episodes. Similar to the first part of *Brooklyn Bridge*, the story follows the Sharps' journey chronologically, from opening to end credits. The film introduces the characters from the off, and allows the characters and their story to drive the narrative of the film. Conventionally for an expository documentary, a film would rely on a 'voice of God' style of narration. However, while still very much falling into the expository mode of documentary filmmaking, the film borrows from other modes of documentary, such as performative. The film follows the characters of the Sharps throughout, relying on character narration and interviews with people who knew them.

Interviews play a key role in *Sharps' War*, which features the voices of many of the children saved by the Sharps. These interviews are used to provide another layer of personality to the overall narrative, as the viewer can clearly see how the Sharps affected the war: they can see the results of the Sharps' hard work in front of them, talking to the viewer. All interviews are, in some way, connected to the subject matter. The Sharps' daughter is interviewed, as well as their biographer.

However, Burns does make an effort to set the scene for the Sharps' cause. The opening shot of the film is a time-lapse shot, overlooking Prague's Vltava river. While not unconventional for a documentary to open with an establishing shot of a location, or to even open with a time-lapse, Burns breaks convention by having the shot slowly fade into black and white to make the footage look as if it were from the era of the Second World War, matching up with the archive footage used throughout the documentary. This leads into the scene following this, which is a series of archive footage showing the Nazis storming across Europe. The film is also bookended by narration from the character of Waitstill Sharp, with both the opening and closing scenes featuring him as a character are a speech directed towards his wife saying how much he misses her. Burns opens the film by showing the effect their experiences caused the Sharps, and ends it with the exact same dialogue, with the

audience now having a further understanding of the introduction, further connecting the audience to the characters.

Further to this, Burns has the film end with each interviewee and character within the film being given closure. This is done with no narration, rather a simple piano track plays as text describes the conclusion to each person's life. Burns presents *Sharps' War* as a whole story and shows how each person was affected and lived on after the events of the war.

In conclusion, Ken Burns manages to showcase a clear progression of his stylistic approaches throughout his career. The extensive use of his 'Ken Burns effect' is prevalent throughout the three examples I have looked at, and what was once considered unconventional is now a convention used by others. Burns's use of the individual, rather than the event, to drive the narrative was a unique approach that many have adopted since. His stylistic approach to archive images as well as his ability to make any story feel personal have even inspired myself as I work towards creating a documentary of my own. His challenging of conventions and his refinement of his technique has given each of his films a feeling of mastery, to a point where his style is revered to this day. Burns manages to tell a story with two sides, such as in *The Civil War*, and not take a clear side, or with *Sharps' War*, where he focuses in on the smaller scope of the individual.

"Whether you love or hate Ken Burns, you cannot deny the influential footprint he has made on the film industry." (Poole, 2018)

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