



Documentary filmmaker Ken Burns made a number of guest appearances in New South Wales in early October, drawing large and respectful audiences to hear him speak about his distinctive televisual approach to the telling of history. *Vital Signs* presents a suite of texts on Ken Burns over the next three pages ...

Ken Burns was invited by Bob Carr to the 2002 Premier's History Awards in Wauchope on the NSW mid-north coast, where he delivered the *History Awards Address*. Burns also appeared in conversation with film reviewer Paul Byrnes to an audience of local documentarians at Film Australia in Sydney.

Ken Burns has developed a loyal audience (particularly in Australia) for his brand of historical documentaries, which first came to great public attention with his account of the American Civil War and has continued through investigations of other individuals and institutions that have defined the American experience (*Thomas Jefferson, Frank Lloyd Wright, Baseball, Jazz*).

The Film Australia conversation was preceded by an edited episode of Burns' latest documentary series on the American writer and raconteur Mark Twain. The extract exhibited all the now familiar signs of a Ken Burns production with its lilting combination of still images, speaking voices and melodies.

When the film's various narrators described Mark Twain, it seemed that they might also be describing Burns and his American project: 'Mark Twain showed 'art could be made out of America', 'He made American speech something to be admired', 'He used the way we talk and turned it into literature'.

When Paul Byrnes asked if Ken Burns had in fact been making one and the same film throughout all his projects, Burns replied that, although each of his films were as essentially different as his two mirror-image daughters, the driving question remained the same: 'Who are those strange and complicated people who call themselves Americans?'

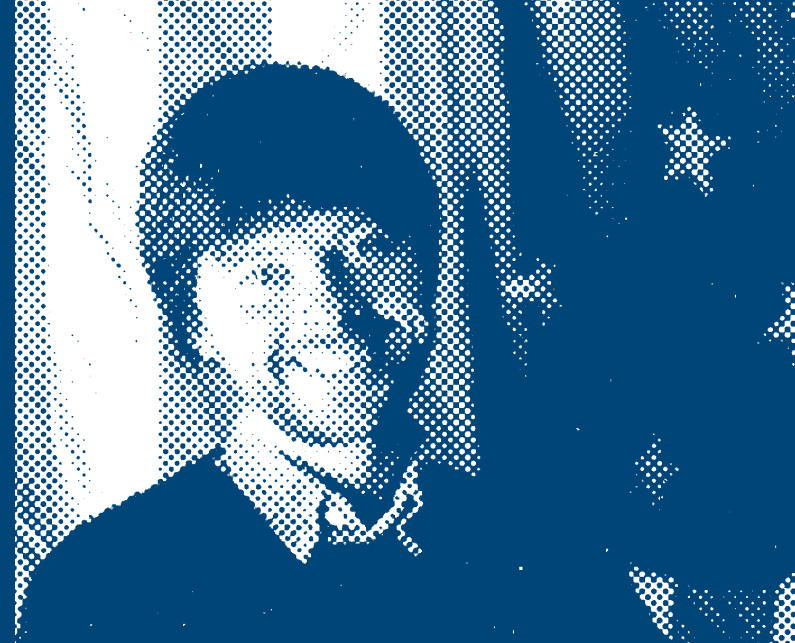
Apart from this continuing thread of enquiry that can be charted across all his films, Burns also acknowledged that his signature cinematic style was established from his very first film. When speaking at Film Australia, he described filmmaking as a series of problems to be solved and questions to be answered, with style and technique remaining as a residue of the filmmaker's 'distinct way of solving these questions'.

He described his process of combining image and narration, where the written script and documented images are at first worked on quite separately and then negotiated through many drafts and edit points to create 'a happy accident of trial and error'. Here he quoted his late friend and mentor, the cartoonist Chuck Jones (master of seven-minute 'Looney Toons') to describe the creative possibilities to be found within the seeming confines of the television documentary form: 'Sometimes constraint is your best friend'.

And when quizzed about the demographics of his viewership, he had two sets of figures of which he was very proud. The first related to his series on the uniquely American music form of jazz. After noting that jazz sales in the US had been 45% of all music sales in 1942, but had plummeted to only 1% in the 1990s, he was happy to honour the fact that they had doubled after the screening of his series. But he was perhaps most proud of a second set of figures, showing that after *The Civil War* premiered in the USA in September 1990, enthusiasm for the Gulf War dropped from 70% to 40% during the course of the show.

To place his own storytelling success in context, he humbly observed that 'if you tell good stories they will come', and, quoting Civil War historian Shelby Foote, 'it is God who is the greatest dramatist'.

*Susan Charlton*



KEN BURNS

KEN BURNS

KEN BURNS

KEN BURNS KEN BURNS

*'When I was working more than a dozen years ago on a film about the Statue of Liberty, its history and powerful symbolism, I had the great good fortune to meet and interview a man named Vartan Gregorian, who was then the President and Director of the New York Public Library.*

*After an extremely interesting and passionate interview on the meaning behind the statue for an immigrant like him, from Tabriz, Iran, Vartan took me on a long and fascinating tour of the miles of stacks of the New York Public Library.*

*Finally after galloping down one claustrophobic corridor after another, he stopped and gestured widely. "This", he said, surveying his library from its guts, "this is the DNA of our civilisation".*

*That Library, and indeed all true libraries, archives, historical societies, educational institutions (the grist, by the way, for the films that we work on) are the DNA of our civilisation, storing what we value most, leaving a memory of excellence and intention for generations to come.'*

*KEN BURNS* Extract from 2002 *History Awards Address*  
2002 Premier's History Awards, Wauchope, New South Wales

Ross Gibson on Ken Burns page 14 >

# untold insights

ROSS GIBSON was intrigued when documentary filmmaker Ken Burns appeared on the *US Today* show to help celebrate the TV breakfast program's 50th birthday with a meditation on September 11

Ken Burns' appearance on *Today* was one of those televisual moments that play at the back of your mind until their cryptic meaning rises to the surface. To celebrate 50 years of breakfast television, Burns offered a 30-second 'valentine' to the American people.

'Imagine', he called upon the viewers, 'imagine if we could undo the damage of that terrible day ... ' Then the World Trade Center footage was shown once more. Only this time it played in reverse, so that the twin towers resurrected, spat the planes out backwards and stood sentinel again over Manhattan. At the end Burns returned to sign-off: 'Oh, it would be so great to, just for a second, have it undone.'

Though his video valentine was momentarily thrilling, its after effect was one of deep disenchantment. It seemed to offer no real insight into the event at all. In this, Burns is not alone. Few other American storytellers have offered anything about the event and its aftermath beyond the political discourse of outrage and the promise of hunting, capturing, judging, healing and re-commencing.

Where are the truly perceptive stories to account for the attacks? Especially stories delivered in the established American idioms of mainstream television and popular journalism. And why require more of a Ken Burns meditation on September 11 than from any other storyteller? Because these are idioms in which Burns excels.

Ken Burns is the American TV Laureate, a master of satisfying narratives accounting for past conflicts and communal desires in stories that are thrilling, persuasive and conclusive. The old photographs, the music, the compositional rhythms, the anecdotes and expert commentaries all combine to convince. There's always a delicious sense of closure at the end of a Ken Burns tale.

But good endings need to convince us that the challenges raised in the story have been resolved. Mythic stories succeed only if this sense of having been persuaded engulfs and comforts us at the end. Despite the beautiful, desirable ending, Burns' valentine did not convince. Possibly for the first time, a Ken Burns film had failed to deliver a persuasive happy ending. Why was he unable to deliver, even though he declared at the outset that September 11 was 'the most important event in American history in the last 50 years'. I wanted to learn more from his valentine.

Part of the answer seems to lie in the slippage between myth and history. Myth is a popular story that highlights contradictions which a community feels compelled to resolve narratively and emotionally so that its citizens can get on with living. In contrast, history offers an analysis so that we might avoid being lulled into complacency by the myths that we use to console and encourage us. Which is why we desire our myths and we need our histories.

In mythic mode, Burns is supreme at telling stories that end well. Perhaps he is so much the consummate American storyteller that he is not equipped to propose anything about September 11 outside the structure of a well-ended American tale. But not even Ken Burns can persuade us that American life has returned to its once customary certainties in the aftermath of September 11. Like Burns, we might wish we could wipe out what has happened. But what we actually need are cultural forms that help us comprehend a life devoid of the tidy closure that the valentine yearned for.

This puts me in mind of the photographic work of Robert Frank, whose book *The Americans* (1958) was first savaged and later revered for the non-narrative way it shows you the painful irresolution of many Americans' lives. Rather than wishfully circumventing national irresolution, Frank found pictorial and contextual ways to make it his theme. He helped the viewer to acknowledge irresolution, to see the fact of it, without rhetorical feint. In the words of Museum of Modern Art curator Russell Ferguson, Frank's 'images somehow drift, colliding with each other in unpredictable ways, leaving traces that stick but defy resolution'.

Inadvertently Burns' valentine shows that some forms of understanding cannot be corralled into narrative. Photos, objects, things that are non-linguistic and irresolute have something for us. They may not tell perfect, singular stories but they can still be true. They can be true in ways that can be known and shown, but not always told so they end well.

*Ross Gibson is Research Professor of New Media & Digital Culture at the University of Technology, Sydney*

