Film, Media and Museum Reviews

Roundtable: Ken Burns's *Baseball*

Introductory Comments

The *Journal* introduces a new feature within this section. An annual roundtable discussion will present commentary from several sport scholars on a particular film, media event, exhibition, personality, or critical historiographical issue. Although all points of view cannot possibly be addressed, an effort will be made to include a provocative spectrum. We welcome agreement. disagreement. reminiscence, elaboration, and alternative perspectives. Space permitting, several concise letters will be published. All such responses are subject to editing.

The *Journal's* pioneering "roundtable" discussion focuses on Ken Burns's 1994 *Baseball.* Prior to *Baseball,* Burns had produced PBS specials on the Brooklyn Bridge, the Shakers, the Statue of Liberty, Huey Long, the U.S. Congress. Thomas Hart Benton, radio, and the Civil War. PBS achieved its highest ratings ever when 39 million viewers tuned into at least one episode of the *Civil War* series—which not only garnered two Emmys, two Grammys, and a Peabody Award in 1990 (as well as $60 million worth of coffee table books and videotapes), but became a central reference point throughout American media culture.

Burns is both filmmaker and popular historian. Though he took only one college history course, Burns not only professes "a mystical affinity for American history," but sees himself as "an emotional archaeologist, trying to excavate what there is in our past that speaks to the 'better angels' in our nature, the *unum* and not the *pluribus."* Burns blends narration with what he calls a "chorus of voices"—interpretive commentaries from onscreen "experts" from personal papers, diaries, letters—with his "rephotographing" technique that scrutinizes photographs, paintings, drawings, and artifacts, set to a musical track of period compositions and folk songs. The effect, as Gary Edgerton concludes, is to "create the illusion that the viewer is being transported back in time, literally finding an emotional connection with the people and events of America's past."

Burns presents a characteristically liberal-pluralist historical perspective. While liberal on social issues, evident by his abiding concern for civil rights, Burns is traditional in his respect for "core" American "values" and institutions. In this sense, Burn's histories are closer to the consensus historiography of the 1950s and early 1960s that celebrated the vitality of American culture and posited that while different people may have clashed on certain issues, their disagreements ultimately took place within a broader framework of agreement on underlying principles. Taken as a whole, Edgerton argues, Burns has created a series of films as "morality tales, drawing upon epic events, landmarks, and institutions of historical significance, populated by heroes and villains who

allegorically personify certain virtues and vices in the national character as understood through the popular mythology of our cultural memory" (Edgerton, "Ken Burns's America: Style, Authorship, and Cultural Memory," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 21 [Summer 1993], 51–42).

Burns exploited the successful formula in "Baseball." The sport, according to the celebrated filmmaker, "is a mirror in which we can see the whole of America—political, social, racial, everything—and its story is an odyssey that helps tell us who we are, because how we play is also who we are." Fair enough. Most sport historians would agree with this assessment, although many have grown tired of the "mirror" metaphor. Where many sport historians, including the three in this "roundtable," demur is with the series's "nostalgic" content. The quaintness of numerous renditions of "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" (250 versions were recorded for the series) evokes a desire for a simpler past when, as James Wolcott parodies in a *New Yorker* review, "players seemed to be cut from plain cloth and America itself was still rawboned, gawky, just off the boat from the farm." Burns responds defensively to accusations that his "Baseball" is nostalgic in orientation. "Nostalgia is a dead end," he is quoted in *The New York Times* (September 18, 1994, sect. II, 27). "I despise nostalgia. Nostalgia is lazy. You have to separate nostalgia from history. This is history."

For many sport historians, the nostalgic element of "Baseball" oozes most obviously from the pat, knee-jerk homilies of the middle-aged male chorus of talking heads. There was no shortage of the baseball stadium as cathedral where America gets its religion; the Garden of Eden pastoral myth; returning home; and the baseball equals democracy equals America equals eternal promise variety from the George Will, George Plimpton, Roger Angell, Bob Costas, and Billy Crystal crowd. Anticipating his critics, like Wolcott, who characterized the homogeneous, highbrow analysts as members of the fraternal order of the "Field of Dreams," Burns declared that he wanted people who "understand the poetry of the game . . . in the radioactivity that the game gives off, the free electrons of baseball."

With that, I leave it to three recognized experts: Steven Riess, Jules Tygiel, and Larry Gerlach.

S.W. Pope