After the Fact | Ken Burns: “America’s Storyteller” on the Creative Process

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TRANSCRIPT

[Intro music]

Ken Burns, award-winning documentary filmmaker: There is a presumption by folks who don't really think about it or consider it that what we do, when writing an article or making a film, is an additive thing. And it is, of course. But it's really subtractive.

We live in New Hampshire. We make maple syrup here, and it takes 40 gallons of sap to make one gallon of maple syrup. And it's very much like our process of 40- to 50- to 60- to 75-to-1 shooting ratio. So, it's distillation. It's subtraction. It's what doesn't fit. At the same time, you are also not trying to simplify it to the place where it no longer resonates with the complexities that the thing has.

Now, filmmakers are notorious for saying, “Well, that's a good scene. Let's not touch it. It's working. That scene's working.” And I've got a neon sign in my editing room that says, “It's complicated.”

[Transition music]

Dan LeDuc, host: Welcome to “After The Fact.” For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I’m Dan LeDuc. And you were listening to Ken Burns describe the subtractive art of his creative process. You can see it in his epic look at the Civil War. The 11 1/2-hour documentary captivated the nation in 1990 and was culled from 22.73 miles of film. And that’s our data point for this episode. Ken Burns has been called America’s storyteller, a title earned over more than four decades and 33 films, including his more recent one on country music. We traveled to his post-and-beam barn in rural New Hampshire to talk about how he creates art from history.

Ken Burns: My first film was on the building of the Brooklyn Bridge. And when I started fundraising for it in '77, I looked about 12 years old. And people delighted in turning me down, saying that this child is trying to sell me the Brooklyn Bridge. And when I finally amassed—I can't say a critical mass—but some money to film, I started filming in—I finished most of the principal photography in the summer of 1979 and realized, with all this footage and no money, that I needed to get a real job.

And I had a really nice offer for a job, but I felt in my bones, in my guts, that if I put the footage up on top of the refrigerator or on a shelf, I'd just wake up 20, 25 years later and having not finished it. So, I wanted to move to some place where I could live for nothing

and figure out how you made a film about a bridge, how you told stories in history, how you animated old photographs, how you use sound effects and music.

And I moved here to the house I'm living in now. I rented it for a couple of years, and my oldest daughter was born there. And, so, I had to buy it, and we just sort of stayed here. The best professional decision I ever made was deciding to stay here once that film was nominated for an Oscar.

Everyone said, oh, you're coming back to New York. And I said, no, I think I'm going to stay here. The work I do is so labor-intensive. It's like academic, or medical, scientific research. It takes years and years and years to do it right. And it was more important to put the very difficult—still to this day—grant money—and I'm very grateful for Pew's involvement for decades in the work that we've done—to put that all on the screen, to have zero overhead, in essence, so that we could tell the funders that, look, it's all on the screen.

If we're going to take 10 1/2 years to do Vietnam, or 8 1/2 years to do “Country Music,” or the war—the history of the Second World War that we did—that they felt that their money was going not to some costly rent in midtown Manhattan but in a rural area where it's very clearly all up on the screen.

Dan LeDuc: The work clearly energizes you. Are there things outside of work that allow you to have the energy and vitality and creativity—practices that you do yourself—hobbies, anything else—that allows you to sort of grow as beyond—as a filmmaker that also influences you as a filmmaker?

Ken Burns: So being a father is the most important activity I have. I have four daughters. I am blessed. I am rich in daughters who range from the late 30s to a 9-year-old. And they are the greatest teachers. I live in this spectacular place that nature continually reminds me of my insignificance.

And, so, the humility that comes from understanding how much nature adores us is actually—makes you bigger, just as if you think that you can say to somebody, you know, don't you know who I am? Doesn't commend you to the smallest and weakest little place. And, first of all, in Walpole, New Hampshire, any notoriety, awards, celebrity, plus $0.50 gets you a cup of coffee. I do *The New York Times* crossword puzzle in ink, physically. I buy the paper every day.

And I read, novels or stuff. And I read magazines. And I watch television, mostly for news and sports. I'm a rabid baseball fan, and then a pretty rabid football fan. Mostly, I walk. And I do that at least once a day, if not twice a day. And by the end of the day, I have about 10 miles.

And what happens in walking is very interesting. It's meditative. Sometimes it's social. I can talk to daughters. I can talk to colleagues. But mostly, it's usually solo or with my dog. And we just sort of watch things—leaves falling from trees, sunsets and sunrises. That's what Emily Dickinson called the far theatricals of day, which I still think is one of

the greatest phrases of all times, that I am very much addicted to the far theatricals of day.

Dan LeDuc: Well, one of the things we want to do is talk just about your creative process, how you go about doing what you do. Could we start with the most basic question, which is how you pick your topics? You've talked a lot about how you've got a whole range going out for the next 10, 20 years, which is amazing. But how do you decide?

Ken Burns: The glib answer is that they choose me. I'm just looking for good stories in American history. And that's what I want to say, first, is that I'm a storyteller. I'm not looking to make a political comment on the present, though I know, as Mark Twain is supposed to have said, that history doesn't repeat itself, but it rhymes. That is to say, I've never finished a project where I haven't lifted my head up at the end of this long, usually multiyear process, and not seen the way in which the themes—the important themes—are not only evergreen, but are resonating in the present. We do get completely distracted by the idea that history repeats itself. It does not. It never has. Please show me where it has. You know, are we condemned to repeat what we don't remember? No. It doesn't seem that that's the case. Is knowing history a good thing? Of course it is.

So, I think we just come to it from the sense that we have an amazing story to tell in our country. I feel that too often it's been sanitized, and that the real version, which is incredibly diverse and incredibly complicated, is the one we ought to be focusing on, and that in no way does it diminish the positive aspects to give some of the negative stuff.

The novelist Richard Powers said, "The best arguments in the world won't change a single person's mind. The only thing that can do that is a good story." So, I'm not in the business of changing people's minds, but I am in the business of trying to figure out what a good story is.

Dan LeDuc: You had mentioned the binary aspect. And, unfortunately, that's where we're in—that phase of our society today. But we're also in a world where attention spans have been shortened, wherein social media driving so much of what goes on. You continue to draw tens of millions of viewers to 8, 10, 12, 18 hours worth of material. What does that tell you about where we are as a people?

Ken Burns: Well, it's really good news—

Dan LeDuc: Yeah, it is.

Ken Burns: —first off. When “The Civil War” series came out in 1990, there was no real cable proliferation. So, we're dealing with around 40 million people who watched some or all of it the first time it was out. That was a big and surprising chunk. But we've kept that 40 million people as the cables have proliferated to 500 or 1,500 channels. And the internet has exploded with literally tens of millions, if not hundreds of millions, of places that you can go to.

I was told by the critics this is really good, but no one's going to watch it. Everybody said that through baseball, through jazz, through World War II, through the national parks. But they didn't say it for the next big series, which was the Roosevelts. And they didn't say it for Vietnam. And they didn't say it for “Country Music.” And that's because we're starved for curation.

We're also starved for meaning. Now, the acquisition of knowledge and facts doesn't make meaning. Meaning comes in duration. The work you're proudest of, the relationships you care about, have benefited from your sustained attention.

And what offering complex stories do is it reminds you that this thing that has apparently forced you into a binary stance, you can—it's neither and both. You can occupy both spaces.

I mean, our superficial history would convince us that our heroes are perfect and that our villains are sort of uniquely one-dimensional. And, so, if you give dimension to those villains, and you remind that the heroes very often have feet of clay—I mean look, you can take, in my estimation, the greatest president since our founding, Abraham Lincoln, and understand that even as late as April of '61 when the guns were opening up at Fort Sumter, he was thinking of colonizing blacks to South America, or back to Africa, just to deal with the problem, you know? Or that he's tardy on emancipation.

Or, say, with the Roosevelts, you can understand the dynamics of these three heroic individuals who are also just human beings, all of them with glaring failings that are just out there. But nothing about those failings ultimately disqualifies them. They just become intimate.

Dan LeDuc: Could you pull back the curtain a little bit and tell us, literally, about the process of gathering the information and making these decisions? You don't create a script and then shoot it and be done. Yours is a continual process, as you've described it.

Ken Burns: My business usually proceeds with a set research period, which is followed by a set writing period, which produces a script, which animates not only the shooting, but the editing. Boom, done.

We never stop researching. We never stop writing. And we are out doing interviews before we've done all the research, or before we've done all the writing, so that we can be informed. We are collecting images that we're drawn to visually not because they fit sentence three of paragraph two on Page 4 of Episode 6. And that's the way a lot of people do it, and it's understandable.

Then you have a checklist, but it’s a much more complicated and much more fluid dynamic. We're recording our music before we begin editing so that the music can influence the pace and rhythm. I mean, why do you add music at the end? Which, music is one of the most powerful art forms there is.

As Wynton Marsalis says, "It's the art of the invisible." It works on you so much faster than anything else. Why would you wait to add it like icing to a cake when you can bake it into the equation? And it has the same functional value as the old photographs, the footage, the commentary of talking heads, the words, the first-person voices, the third-person narration, the sound effects. Put it in there where it has a chance to do what music is supposed to do.

And that's why the soundtracks of our film in probably, you know, go gold like “The Civil War” soundtrack. Documentary soundtracks don't do that. Went platinum like the jazz. You can understand that, and I assume that will happen in country as well. I mean if you're always corrigible—that is to say, you can change something—you can lock the picture and then say, wait a second. I learned it's this. It's not like, oh, don't touch that scene. It works too well. It's like, let's go—let's make it better than it can possibly be. And I would suggest that all of the things, and many, many other aspects, are why the films are so successful.

There's not anything necessarily special about me. It's just the willingness to trust to this different kind of process.

Dan LeDuc: Is there advice you would give to anyone, would be they an aspiring filmmaker, or a writer, or a painter, or anything else? Is there something you would tell someone who wishes to create something?

Ken Burns: Well, yeah. But it will sound so platitudinous that I feel like I should just warn everybody in advance, because I think the first is Socratic. I think you have to know who you are. I mean, that's an ongoing project. This is what we're here for, is to figure that out. But to ask that question. I mean, I'm in a medium that is hugely popular. But it's really, really hard and not glamorous the way that people who are initially drawn to it believe it is. And, so, there's no crime in saying, you know, I thought that I had something to say, but I don't.

I mean, it is just as honorable to raise a child, or tend a garden, or be a carpenter, as it is to be a filmmaker. If you find what you're supposed to do—Emerson said in "Self-Reliance" to do only what inlyI-N-L-Y—what inly rejoices. So just make sure that this is what you want to do. Don't get stuck.

And then the other thing, I think, is to persevere. I don't think I'm the smartest or the most talented person, but I just knew that I stuck with it. And particularly in my area, nothing is handed to you. There is not enough money for the good ideas and good filmmakers to go around. And that tends to make people competitive. It doesn't have to be.

And one of the great blessings of being in New Hampshire is I don't have to compete. I've ended the competition. It's just a competition with myself. Don't fall into formula, and don't get too big for your britches. Our last episode of “Country Music” was "Don't Get Above Your Raisin'." And that means, don't forget where you came from. Don't get too big for your britches. So, I've tried not to get above my raisin' and to just compete with myself on trying to be excellent and not with anyone else.

But it also tells you that you need to persevere, and that life is about perseverance, that—you know, I used to keep on my desk two three-ring binders—big, thick guys—you know, 4 or 5 inches wide—with all the rejections from one film—my first film, “Brooklyn Bridge.” Dear Mr. Burns, thank you so much for your kind letter. Unfortunately, dot, dot, dot. And I just had literally hundreds of pages of those rejections.

But I kept at it. And eventually, 10 or 12 or however many funders in the end—$1,000 here, $2,500 here, $10,000 here—added up to enough to finish the film.

Dan LeDuc: You've gone from—you know, the Brooklyn Bridge—one project, all about it. You now have multiple projects going at one time. Congratulations. How does the actual gathering of information happen? Where do you go to find the amazing photographs or the amazing letters?

Ken Burns: It's still a model that feels, to me, very similar to the way it was in “Brooklyn Bridge.” You just check the photo credit in the book and start at that archive, and go to this archive, and end up at, you know, dozens and dozens of places. And same with the footage that you find. We're continuing that. I'm not doing it all. It's delegation. I'm more the coach. I used to play every position on the team. Now I can coach and send in the play.

And I work with really talented people—writers and editors and people who go and find this. But it's not a big team. It's an intimate, handmade team. But we still try to keep that same spirit of exploration.

And it's up against a huge testing that takes place not just once, but dozens of times over many years as we're working on a project—even something that's a smaller film. “Brooklyn Bridge,” I edited in a cabin right out here. And it took forever, it seemed, to me, for a one-hour film, because we were sort of inventing a wheel.

Dan LeDuc: I want to go a little more granular again with the next question, which is, when you're finding the characters that you want to interview, you often avoid the obvious ones. In Vietnam, you avoided the political figures—the Kissingers of the time—to find the real people who lived history.

But when you interview someone like that, I'm curious—what's it like? Does it take time to warm them up in front of the camera? How do you get them to relax and talk to you? Does the best stuff come at the beginning of the conversation, or three-fourths of the way through?

Ken Burns: And there's no formula, that everybody's different, of course. Everybody's unique. What we want to do is sit down with so-called ordinary people. Immediately—particularly if your subject is war, you understand instantly there's no such thing as an ordinary person.

The art of interviewing, I still feel—I did connect on my first interview in January of 1972 when I was a freshman and first year student at Hampshire College in Amherst,

Massachusetts. It was terrifying then, and the interviews now are terrifying, because if it doesn't come out right, it's your fault. If it comes out right, it's their great gift. And that's the way it should be. And it's different. Sometimes people give you everything upfront, and then they're exhausted. Sometimes they're reticent. Sometimes they're nervous. Sometimes they want to be somebody they're not. You know, they know, coming in, who I am. And maybe they want to be Shelby Foote. It's the worst thing in the world to want to be somebody you're not.

I had one person I was interviewing for a film, and he was just staying on the surface. And I finally just said to him at the beginning of the third or fourth reel—and I was about to roll the film. I was about to end it. And I just said, you saw bad stuff. And he just—his lip started quivering, and his cheeks started twitching. And then all of a sudden, out came these stories of a 19-year-old grizzled veteran of a war who was handling the kids.

And I finally stopped, and I said, wait a second. How old are you? He goes, 19. How old are these kids? He goes, 18. So the difference of just a few days, a few weeks, a few months in combat had changed this person.

Dan LeDuc: You have plotted out films for the next—

Ken Burns: 10.

Dan LeDuc: —10 years. How do you decide the order of them?

Ken Burns: Well, they sometimes change. You want to make sure that you're not so certain that you can't change—"Country Music," for example, was not going to be "Country Music." It was another subject that we hadn't really even begun. We were sort of early in thinking stages.

And when "Country Music" came, I just went to Dayton Duncan—who was going to be the partner on that project and just said, we don't want to get rid of this, but what about country? And that other one, we haven't talked about in literally in years and years and years. That wasn't abandoning something. It was just early ideation. So, we plot stuff out.

We're working on a biography of Ernest Hemingway, a biography of Muhammad Ali, a biography of Benjamin Franklin. We're doing a history of the United States in the Holocaust. We're doing the story of the buffalo, a kind of biography of an animal, which is also, I presume, a parable of de-extinction. But it's mostly about the human beings that both prize the buffalo, the other human beings that brought it to the brink of extinction, and the human beings of the same tribe who said, no, let's save it, and did. It's a really, really great story.

We're doing a history of LBJ and Great Society, the second most accomplished in terms of legislative achievements after FDR in the history of our country. So, if I were given 1,000 years to live, I wouldn't run out of topics in American history. We're also doing a film on Leonardo da Vinci, which is our first non-American topic.

Dan LeDuc: Oh, that's big news. A non-American topic.

Ken Burns: It's huge. It's huge for us. But he's such a polymath. He's so interesting. He seems to be speaking to the highest aspirations of what the United States in its—

Dan LeDuc: So, you will relate him to—

Ken Burns: Well, I don't think we'll relate him directly.

Dan LeDuc: OK.

Ken Burns: But I can't help but think that the life of Leonardo doesn't inspire a kind of desire to be more than just the thing that you're supposed to be doing.

Dan LeDuc: Your historical advisers provide materials?

Ken Burns: They often do. And that's extremely helpful.

Dan LeDuc: As I understand it, the very famous Sullivan Ballou letter came from one of the advisers during “The Civil War.”

Ken Burns: It was Robert Johansson, who was sort of a soft-spoken member of our advisory board. And he taught in Illinois. And he sent something that he'd come across in the Illinois State Historical Society or something like that, which was based on a Rhode Island soldier. And I read it out loud.

By the time I finished reading it in my office over there, I was breaking up and everyone else was in tears. And I handed it to my brother, and I said, make a copy of it and put it at the end of the first episode. And he said, it’s the Battle of Manassas. Put it in Manassas. I said, no. These are the stakes for the whole film. We can retrospectively look back at Manassas, but look ahead to what the whole thing is about.

Because this is the greatest love letter ever written, I believe. And putting it at the end said this is what the stakes are going to be.

Dan LeDuc: Could I ask you to read it?

Ken Burns: Sure.

[Instrumental music plays over the reading of the letter]

Ken Burns: "My very dear Sarah, the indications are very strong that we shall move in a few days—perhaps tomorrow. Lest I should not be able to write you again, I feel impelled to write a few lines that may fall under your eye when I shall be no more. I have no misgivings about, or lack of confidence in the cause in which I am engaged, and my courage does not halt or falter.

I know how strongly American civilization now leans on the triumph of the government and how great a debt we owe to those who went before us through the blood and sufferings of the revolution. And I am willing—perfectly willing—to lay down all my joys in this life to help maintain this government and to pay that debt.

Sarah, my love for you is deathless. It seems to bind me with mighty cables that nothing but omnipotence could break. And yet, my love of country comes over me like a strong wind and bears me irresistibly on with all these chains to the battlefield. The memories of the blissful moments I have spent with you come creeping over me, and I feel most gratified to God and to you that I have enjoyed them for so long, and how hard it is for me to give them up and burn to ashes the hopes of future years when, God willing, we might still have lived and loved together and seen our sons grown up to honorable manhood around us.

I have, I know, but few and small claims upon divine providence, but something whispers to me that I shall return to my loved ones unharmed. If I do not, my dear Sarah, never forget how much I love you. And when my last breath escapes me on the battlefield, it will whisper your name. Forgive my many faults and the many pains I have caused you. How thoughtless and foolish I have often been. How gladly would I wash out with my tears every little spot upon your happiness.

But, oh, Sarah, if the dead can come back to this earth and flit unseen around those they loved, I shall always be near you in the gladdest days and in the darkest nights—always, always. And if there be a soft breeze upon your cheek, it shall be my breath. As the cool air fans your throbbing temple, it shall be my spirit passing by. Sarah, do not mourn me dead. Think I am gone and wait for me, for we shall meet again."

[Instrumental music ends]

Sullivan Ballou was killed a week later at the First Battle of Bull Run. Never fails. I carry that around in my pocket, that copy. One of them I put up on the wall—on the side of a piece of furniture in my office, and the other I put in my wallet. And I would bring it out and read it for the next 20 years until it just completely dissolved. And I just—I've got it, but it's all in a million different pieces.

Dan LeDuc: I can remember hearing it for the first time in my living room in suburban Philadelphia and my wife and I weeping next to each other on the couch. You created that communal experience for millions of Americans that night.

Ken Burns: It's a huge group of people that made that happen. It is particularly the genius of Sullivan Ballou's great writing. It is Paul Roebling, who read it—an actor. It is the music of Jay Ungar, "Ashokan Farewell," underneath it. It is the choice of editing that the editors and I chose to put in to illustrate in that small amount. It's my deciding that we should call the scene Honorable Manhood. And then it served as the coda—the location of it. So, it's a whole bunch of things coming together.

Dan LeDuc: You have said that in your work, you wake the dead. And maybe there's no better example than that letter, in some ways.

Ken Burns: Well, I think that Sullivan Ballou is talking about something that's way above my pay grade. My late father-in-law told me that—I had an early death of my mother, and I seemed to be not able to be present at the anniversary of her death. And he said, I bet you blew out the candles on your birthday cake the same way.

And I go, yeah, how did you know? And he said, it's the magical thinking of an 11-year-old. And look what you do for a living: You wake the dead. You make Abraham Lincoln and Jackie Robinson come alive. Who do you think you're really trying to wake up? And, so, it's sort of stuck in that what we've tried to do is take old photographs and animate them, not through traditional animation, but just by the way we rephotograph, refilm them, and bring them alive.

[Transition music]

We add a complex sound effects track to that that listens to them. We add first-person voices complimenting, we hope, third-person narration. And we add music, and the commentary of other people, and footage. And all of that together gives a sense that history is not was but is, which is what Faulkner always talked about.

Dan LeDuc: Ken Burns, thank you so much.

Ken Burns: My pleasure.

[Transition music ends]

Dan LeDuc: Our deepest thanks to Ken Burns and his team for their generous time with us during our visit to New Hampshire. This marks our second conversation in our occasional series with artists discussing their creative process. You can find our talk with Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Jennifer Higdon on our website, pewtrusts.org/afterthefact.

And if you are a new listener, welcome. Check out our range of episodes—explorations of faith today, conversations with scientists at work around the globe, examinations of the American family, and looks at the future of learning—all of it grounded in data, all of it nonpartisan. We appreciate you tuning in and hope you'll keep listening and keep sharing this podcast with friends. For the Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc.

[(Female voice over music) "After the Fact" is produced by The Pew Charitable Trusts.]