

Transcript of the interview with Ken Burns and former CINE President Matthew Tombers

October 2007

Good morning Ken. How are you? You've been on the road for 150 days?

At least! We've been promoting *The War* and other such things since the very beginning of the year, and though I periodically get to come back and do my laundry, it just feels like it's been a real campaign – a tour of duty, to use the military analogy.

Yes, it does! A military analogy, or that you're the old-fashioned traveling salesman.

Well, you know, there is an evangelical dimension to all of this. You remember that high school philosophical question that "If a tree fell in the forest and no human being heard it, did it actually make a sound?" I can't actually answer that one, but I do know that if you make a good film and no one knows it's on, was it good? And my answer is "no." So you sort of are obligated to get out there and beat the hustings, and let people know that it's around and make a joyful noise about it.

You've certainly made a joyful noise about The War.

Indeed, thank you.

It's interesting, I was talking to one of my oldest friends in the world yesterday, and he was telling me how powerfully he had been affected by The War, so much so that sometimes he had to actually turn away from the screen, because it resonates with so many baby boomers – that our parents are all now fading away.

That's exactly right, and I think the impetus for doing the film was really part of that horrible calculus – that we're losing so many of our veterans, and that they do represent not just our parents, but our grandparents, our great-grandparents, our husbands, our uncles, and that we were trying to speak not only to the generation that is surviving and doing it – that's in some ways preaching to the converted, they're going to watch it. It's trying to understand and triangulate the very complicated emotional lives of those of us like myself, who lost my dad a few years ago. Part of that generation still is trying to have a conversation with the ghosts, and those people who are soon to leave us, and those who are fortunately still around and healthy, and how it influences the grandchildren who are in many cases the ones who finally got this generation to speak. You know, I remember doing interviews and someone would say, "Pop, you never told me that." That's a pretty spectacular thing. And you realize now, at the sunset of their lives, they're just now beginning to strip away the familiar or the funny, the superficial stories and get at what was really the essence of all war, not just the World War, which is, "I'm scared and I'm bored, I'm hot and I'm cold, I saw bad things and I did bad things, I lost good friends."

It certainly resonates with me. I didn't know until after my godfather had passed away that he had actually been on the deck of the battleship when the Japanese signed the surrender papers.

Wow!

And it was just amazing to me that in all my life I'd never known that, and I only found that out through one of his sons, saying it as part of the eulogy, and I went, "Oh my God! I didn't know that."

And it really opens up all rooms and corridors in your own family history, and you wonder why it is we don't ask, or why it is they don't tell, and that's a lot of the latter. I mean, I found so many people who went to their graves, who are planning to go to their graves, thinking that the only real heroes are the ones they left behind – their friends. And it sounds clichéd to us now, but I think we have to put ourselves as eighteen, nineteen-year olds, terrified, on the battleship, landing in a Pacific island or freezing to death in France in that cold winter of '44-'45 and realizing that you had forged friendships with people after you left home that were more important than any other relationships you had. And then all of a sudden, through just the luck, the horrible luck of war, the shell explodes and kills him and not you – and you have no one to talk to about it. And finally, at the end of your life, you're beginning to say something.

And I do believe that's true, and I do believe that my godfather began to open up to his children in the last five years of his life about his experiences in the war which he had never spoken about until that last five years.

It's still understandable, you know. You're that young, you're traumatized beyond belief, you've seen things no human being should have to see, and you come home and the world doesn't really understand it. They've already gone into that "hero" mode, where it's all just abstracted and bloodless and gallant, and you can't possibly tell them about brains or entrails. It's just too much. And so you lock it away, and yet you carry this secret for a long time, maybe go to a reunion and you can finally, *finally* find someone you can talk to and then you begin to realize that these memories are an important part of who you are and what your inheritance is to those that you've lived with. And so finally we found people at the sunset of their lives beginning to spill the beans.

It's so true. You know, we're doing this interview for CINE. The only times that I've ever encountered you personally have been at CINE events, and I remember that when you got your Leadership Award from CINE, the one thing that you said that has resonated and that I've repeated when I've been trying to explain the importance of the organization to people outside is that – and I hope I'm quoting you correctly – you said that when you received your first CINE Award, you walked away feeling like maybe you could make a living as a filmmaker.

Oh, absolutely. I mean that sincerely. The first film I struggled with after college was on the history of the Brooklyn Bridge. It was awarded a Golden Eagle, and at that point there was a kind of validation. "Yes, you know what you're doing." And of course in those days, the Golden Eagle was an entrée to so many other possibilities. It made you

eligible to be considered for an Academy Award® nomination. Now the rules have subsequently changed and it's a lot more difficult, and that film was eventually nominated for an Oscar®. So yeah, it was as if somebody said "Yeah, come into the club. You actually know how to do this."

It's amazing. I also in doing some research for this interview, I [read and] love the story of that morning you awoke being told you had an Academy Award® nomination and then falling with the wood.

Yeah, it was so funny. I had left my house, and it was heated entirely by wood. I was dirt poor, and I came back and the house was freezing cold. And usually you try to do it so that there's a few embers that you can rake, but this time the fire was out. And then I glanced over at the phone answering machine that usually had, at best, one call if you were gone. And this had twenty, all of them filled with mysterious, inscrutable sort of [messages]: "Please call the Associated Press." "Please call the UPI." "Please call the *Boston Globe*." "Please call *The New York Times*." And then finally, someone said, "congratulations, you've been nominated." And I was so excited that when I went out to get the wood, in just my shirtsleeves, I was sort of bouncing up and down and I slipped on a patch of ice and fortunately just sort of twisted so I could fall into a snow bank, plowed snow from my driveway. And I just remember, you know, the sensation of the snow sort of touching the skin of my back and melting and kind of dripping down my pants and thinking, "You know, I'm the only nominee who's had this!" And I always saw that as a good thing – some sort of reminding you that all of this stuff doesn't – in the larger scheme – matter, and that was a very helpful reminder at that moment of glory, if you will.

I thought it was a wonderful story, one which I empathize with because in my house I have a wood stove, and I use it all through the winter, and I do carry in the wood. And I could feel that, because I've fallen in those snow banks a couple of times! One of the things that I was realizing this morning when I was again doing some reading was that obviously you have a passion for history. And I realized it for the first time – your body of work is all about America.

That's right.

Where does that come from? Because that's very unique.

I don't know. I've got a lot of theories. The last time I took an American history course was in high school, eleventh grade. I'm untutored. I'm a filmmaker, that's what I do. But I've found that the best, most expressive way to practice my craft is by exploring history, and, more importantly, American history and aspects of it. And that's what I like to do.

One of the things that most struck me was that when you were going to General Motors for The Civil War, you said that you were trying to explain it to these folks. You said that before the Civil War, people said "the United States are." And after the Civil War, people said "the United States is." And that's an enormous shift in the consciousness of the country.

That's exactly right, and that's, I think, what I've tried to go to. I mean, I realize, with a bit of [humility] that in some ways I've made the same film over and over again, and I beg the indulgence of the audience as I just explore and practice my own craft of filmmaking in these subjects of American history. But how you approach each subject has been really, really different, engaging the elements, the techniques, and the styles in vastly different ways (at least, it seems to me, up close – or, at least, the experiences have been). And one of the things that I'm after is not just merely the old traditional educational documentary – which is expository, and it's somebody sort of telling you what you should know, rather than (as I've hoped I've been able to do), sharing with you our process of discovery. So we've been interested in a kind of higher emotional meaning that comes from an investigation of the topic, and for me the Civil War is not just who won, who lost, the movement of armies, the numbers of dead, even the social issues that were transforming as it is this larger, incredibly ethereal thing which is that we actually *do* say "the United States is" today. That is actually ungrammatical. And what happened was the Civil War took us from an "are" to an "is," and I was interested in that sort of psychic/psychological definition or transformation.

It talks about something that was so historically important and so riveting for this country. And the other thing that I also thought about this morning was that The Civil War, your film, really changed the consciousness of America in terms of documentary films, because before, I think people respected them, but they didn't notice them and they didn't think about them, and they didn't think about them in the way they did after The Civil War. I think that's a compliment.

I think in some ways that's true. You know, since the beginning of film's invention documentaries have always had a large and important contribution, and thing to say. And they have primarily existed in the consciousness of people as being kind of informative and sort of something that you might be shown in school or before a movie, and no one thought about it in an artistic way – or more to the point, I think, in an entertainment or emotional and artistic way, and that's what I wanted to do. And lots of other people have done that – it just happened to be that because I chose a subject matter that had a kind of deep, deep resonance – whether people knew it or not – with almost everyone in the country, that the Civil War was a great traumatic event in the childhood of this nation. And disguise it as we might, distort it as we usually do, ignore it – it's still there. That if you were able to touch it, people would respond. And I think that it wasn't just the informational content, it was the *emotional* content. And its huge success [bred] a kind of curiosity about the entertaining as well as artistic possibilities of the form. So a lot of those folks who've *always* made good films and were always there, but sort of relegated – as I was too – to just the festivals and limited television broadcasts suddenly saw the horizon opening up and the possibilities multiply.

Absolutely. I can remember there being a change of consciousness about nonfiction film post-The Civil War. I've spent my whole professional life working in nonfiction film, and it was as if someone had turned on the switch.

It was a sea change, and it had to do with the emotional energy of everyone watching it. That when the whole country [watches] – when it cuts across race, when it cuts

across gender, when it cuts across age or region or class – and speaks that way, which is what I've tried to do and to a lesser extent, other films have and now *The War* has in the same way, you end up helping to sponsor a good number of changes in the way people look at things.

Absolutely. One of the things that I think you do in your films – and I think it's been described, or you have described it – is you actually do emotional archaeology.

That's right.

And I think that is a marvelous gift. Where did that come from?

Well, I remember using the phrase a little bit when I was trying to argue – often unsuccessfully – on that very first film, *The Brooklyn Bridge*. At that point, here was this young kid and he was trying to make a film about the Brooklyn Bridge, and people would laugh and say "this kid is trying to sell me the Brooklyn Bridge!" And laugh and say no. And I think a lot of it had to do probably with their own lack of faith or confidence in me, but I think it was also the sense that "who cares about a bridge?" And I was trying to describe the fact that there were two kinds of history: one which excavated the dry dates and facts and events, that was about memorization and rote kind of learning, that had made history for most people a kind of castor oil, that everyone knew was kind of good for you but not good tasting; and that I was interested in something else. And I remember saying that it was an emotional archaeology that I was attempting to do, and straining to listen to the ghosts and echoes of an almost inexpressibly wise past. And that's at the heart of what I've tried to do.

One of the other things is that you have a really distinct style, which has actually been called "the Ken Burns Effect."

Can I interrupt that? "The Ken Burns Effect" is a name that Steve Jobs has applied to the ability to pan and zoom through still photographs on all Apple computer products, and it's been there for about four years. And it's a funny thing that when he named it such then it became retroactive to all the things that've been going on. I do believe you're right, that there is a style and if you examine what style is, style is the authentic or the organic application of technique and I engage a particular way of filming old photographs, of conducting interviews, of using narration and first person voice, live cinematography in interviews. That combined, in, I think, hugely different quantities, or calibrations, in all the different films, but that nonetheless in their totality do represent a style which is authentic to me. It doesn't mean that people can't do the things that I've done, or do them well, or even better, it just means that for me, in my own limited, narrow way, the way I've been able to successfully tell the stories I've wanted to tell has been engaging these eight or so elements of sound effects, music, first person, third person and visually live cinematography, interviews, newsreel and the re-photography of old photographs. And each different combination and recombination of them, depending on the film – you know, some films have no live cinematography, some of them are mostly live cinematography; some have a handful of interviews, some are filled with them. Some have lots of first person voices, some have none. You know, we have a wide variety of chances to use these techniques, that I guess now in the aggregate the

shorthand is the style, but it's no different than when you recognize the work of a painter, or of a feature film director, or a still photographer or even a choreographer.

It's amazing. Is there something that influenced you, or started to generate this style?

Oh, of course! None of us are *sui generis* in any sense of the word. We are all dependent on the influences. You know, my father was a cultural anthropologist and an amateur still photographer, and the first images that I can remember – my first memories – are of in his darkroom and watching that great alchemy of the picture coming into being. All of my teachers in college – particularly Jerome Liebling and Elaine Mayes – were social documentary still photographers, not only reminding me how much drama there is in what is and what was but also requiring a kind of humanistic exchange that counteracted Susan Sontag's rather pessimistic pejorative sense that in the taking of a photograph you appropriate a world. There is an appropriation that takes place, but it's not robbing the grocery store; you can find a way to pay for those groceries you're taking! And I think what Jerome Liebling did was insist that we set up some sort of system of return to our subject – in just the way we conducted ourselves, in how we honored it. I've had lots of filmmaking influences. I very early on wanted to become a feature filmmaker, and so I have been really steeped in the history of not only American cinema but world cinema and have many heroes and mentors. And I have never felt that the documentary because of its expository nature ever had to be dry and boring, that it could engage the same kind of narrative sophistications that a feature film would have. And so, you name it: Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, Orson Welles, Alfred Hitchcock, John Ford, Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese and others all have been influences. And then within my own profession, there is such a wide range of *spectacular* talent. "Documentary" is hardly a good enough [term] to describe the wide variety of stylistic techniques, from Fred Wiseman's cinema verite to Errol Morris' magnificent stylizations to the political advocacy of a Michael Moore to Werner Herzog's ecstatic art to Morgan Spurlock and the Jareckis and countless others who have been able to remind us all of the power of this form.

Yeah, absolutely. I do some work with Jon Alpert, and I am always stunned by the power of the camera in the hands of someone like yourself or Jon or Albert Maysles.

Well, you know, what you're looking for – what the equation of all of art is – is that one and one doesn't equal two, but three, and it's a magic that you can't actually describe. You can't articulate how it happens. But it has to do with the collision of the materials you use, the consciousness of the filmmaker who is employing them, and now we are in an explosion where everyone seems to think that they're documentary filmmakers, by virtue of the portability of the DV equipment and access to millions through the Internet. You still have to be able to tell stories. You still have to do something more than a YouTube, couple-minute presentation. And those people who have a kind of narrative control on their film are going to be the storytellers of our generation.

Speaking of storytellers and the next generation of filmmakers, one of the things that CINE has done over the years is that it has – as it did in your case – acknowledged young filmmakers, often at the beginning of their career. CINE’s had the honor of being the first major award that was given to Steven Spielberg, to yourself, to a number of filmmakers. From the perspective of where you are now, what would you want to say to filmmakers who are coming up?

Well, I think that CINE represented a really important milestone – we touched on it before – a really important milestone in my professional life, because it was a kind of validation of all this early effort. And I can’t speak for any of the other filmmakers who you’ve given a boost to over the years, but that’s exactly what it’s been – it’s a kind of legitimacy. It’s a sense that there ought to be some organization out there trawling for the newcomers, knowing that they may not be fully formed or fully accomplished but that we can recognize in their work the beginnings of this. We live in a world in which our craft is really exulted, and sometimes for the wrong reasons, and so it attracts a lot of people – both serious and frivolous. And one of the great weeding out things is how difficult it is to raise the money, how hard it is to tell a good story, how hard it is to realize a vision, how hard it is, conversely, to understand that you may *not* have something to say, and to figure out something else to do. And I think that early recognition sort of helps to be part of that winnowing process – the people who move on. It’s the next level. In some ways, the lack of recognition – I mean, I don’t want to speak of it in the negative – but the lack of recognition from CINE is, in some ways, being voted off the island! And you ought to be seriously considering something else. And yet, the positive reinforcement that a Golden Eagle represents is just great. I’m still smarting at the fact that my film *Thomas Jefferson* was, for some reason, either not submitted or something happened and it’s the only film I’ve made, I don’t think, that [didn’t] get a Golden Eagle!

Oh my God!

It was ten years ago, and I sort of wish there was some form to grandfather it in! I sit there and scratch my head – it’s one of the best films I’ve made, and somehow it didn’t receive a Golden Eagle. And I still – even though I had already by that time ten or fifteen – it was smarting!

Well, we’ll have to investigate...

Retroactive...

Retroactively, we’ll have to take a look at this and find out what happened. Ken, I can’t tell you how grateful I am for the time on the phone today.

Oh, not at all. I hope it’s been helpful.

This has just been spectacular, and I’m so glad that we did this. I don’t know if you’re aware, but this is going to be the first of a series of audiocasts that we will do with filmmakers that we can have on our website so that people can learn from people like yourself, in a really “present tense” sort of way.

I think it's important, and we can even hopefully move beyond all of the sort of celebration of individual achievements into the sort of nuts and bolts of what it takes to make films and to read your own self for what it is. I think the real test is whether you've got something to say. Who you are – knowing who you are, those old ancient Socratic requirements, and then having the perseverance to follow through. These are the incredibly difficult aspects – it's very easy to say, they sound like clichés and platitudes (and they are), and then in the real world and real life situations it becomes really hard. And I think that anybody who's made a film is to be applauded. Just the ability to marshal those resources and individuals to make a film is an amazing accomplishment, and whether it needs a lot more work or a lot more polish is just going to be part of the process.

And it is a process, and it is often a collaborative process, and it's often – as you say – sometimes incredibly painful to get from one point to the other.

It is indeed, and I'm glad you said "collaborative," because I think when you mention films and filmmakers there is this sense of singularity, the authorship that we quite correctly attribute to a writer of literature. But our medium is so gloriously collaborative that whenever and whatever "a Ken Burns film" is, it always represents the talents of my writer Geoffrey C. Ward or Dayton Duncan, producers Dayton Duncan and Lynn Novick, cinematographer Buddy Squires and editor Paul Barnes. You feel so privileged to be working with such talented people, and that you're in some ways more the conductor of a really finely-tuned orchestra. And the great gift of filmmaking, it seems to me, is the very collaborative nature, that you forge this family that is not part of your own nuclear family but has many of the same rewards in terms of the intimacy and the growth and the friendships and the love. And that's one of the huge attractions of filmmaking that I think we all forget to say in the glamour of release and the egotism of individual achievement in the sense of getting it out. It's easier for a media structure to just say "oh, it's one person" when it's not. And I like the idea of being the front man for a lot of pretty amazing human beings.

And you do have some amazing people that work with you. I was reading, for example, Buddy Squires' filmography, and some of the other people that you mentioned, and the amazing films that they've worked on with you and individually.

That's right, and it's really, really important that *The War* has just been broadcast, and the conventional wisdom is that this is "a Ken Burns film" when it is co-produced and co-directed by Lynn Novick, who I've been working with for eighteen years. And Sarah Botstein, an associate who rose to full producership. Paul Barnes and his crew of editors – Erik Ewers and Tricia Reidy. And of course Geoffrey Ward, who I've been working with for twenty five years making films, was the principal writer. So it was a magnificent collaboration and we haven't even moved over the compositions of Wynton Marsalis and Gene Scheer, and some of the other amazing things. And, of course, Buddy Squires and I have been shooting together for thirty five years!

Oh my God!

He was my assistant early on, when we started our company. And now we have grunts and hand signals, and we can tell what each other is thinking.

That's an amazing thing.

It is an amazing thing, and it's very much like those relationships in your personal life that you cherish the most. They're beyond description; there aren't really words to describe the intimacies and the intricacies of them, and – let's be fair – also the difficulties. No family is without its dysfunction. But I think also in the end, you're just so sustained by your ability to work with and be around amazingly talented people.

And as a collaborative group, you have put together a body of work which I think is unmatched in nonfiction film and documentary.

You know, what's been nice is that thirty years ago, I moved to this little village in New Hampshire, and we've made all the films there. And it may not sound like much, but I assumed when I decided to make historical documentary films that I was taking a vow of anonymity and poverty, and I needed to find someplace where I could live inexpensively. And I moved to this little village and it is in the context of this intimacy, in this isolation that many of the film have been made. And what it's permitted us to do is to grow this family of people in a much more intimate way. If it had been in the city, we'd all be taking the cab or the subway to the office and going home to our individual lives. Here, there are the blurring of the lines between our work lives and our personal lives, and that isolation permitted us to stay on message, to have us grow, to not be distracted in some ways by the society of my colleagues, which I actually miss – other filmmakers that I would enjoy if I lived in a town that had thousands of filmmakers, as New York does, instead of Walpole, that doesn't. But at the same time, I think we've been able to hold true to our message and to refine and – I hope you'll be a much better judge of this – get better with each succeeding project. I think we have, but it's hardly our position to make those kinds of judgments.

Well, I know your next work is going to be on the National Parks.

Yeah, we're halfway finished editing a massive series on the story of the National Parks. It isn't pretty pictures of wildlife, though we have some of that there. It isn't which lodge or inn to stay at. It's the story of the ideas and the individuals behind this, what now we take for granted – this originally American idea that land would be set aside not for kings but for everybody, and how they got into being was an incredibly dramatic struggle that engaged not just political and physical energies but spiritual ones and artistic ones as artists and writers and – one might say – prophets attempted to articulate what a world and, more specifically, America might be with or without us saving these spectacular places.

Well, it's one of the things that makes this country unique in so many ways.

That's exactly right. The writer, Wallace Stegner, called the national parks "America's best idea." Now, I'm not sure about that – I think the best idea was articulating and attempting to put into practice the notion of individual liberty and self-government, but at the same time one of the best ideas that's ever come out of *that* has been this notion that land could be set aside for everybody.

Well, again, I thank you so much for your time today. This has been a spectacular interview. Thank you so much, and I know that many people who saw The War are going to be buying the DVD set so they can relive it and watch it again and again and again, as they do with so many of your works.

Well, that's very kind of you to say. We moved up the DVD release to the time of the broadcast because we knew, given how long the series is – seven episodes, fourteen and a half hours – and how busy we all are, that people ought to have that freedom to watch it when they want. So the DVDs are there, and the soundtrack and the book. And I think it is a kind of evergreen story in which it permits us, through that emotional archeology, to touch again and again and again these higher emotions that are part and parcel of what the real meaning of our lives are, and our connection to the people around us.

And on that thought, I will thank you again and say goodbye. And I look forward to having this posted on the CINE website.

Me, too, thanks so much. I appreciate the intelligence of your questions, and I look forward to sharing this conversation with everyone else.