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A Visual Critique of Ken Burns's *The National Parks: America's Best Idea*

CINDY OTT

Abstract: This essay analyzes how Burns adapts his well-known documentary style to the subject of national parks and the effects of his visual representations on viewers' understanding of the parks. It offers two main critiques: first, Burns presents an ideal of nature that inhibits viewers from perceiving how they live in the same world as the parks and that undermines the management of actual parks, and second, he misrepresents park development by minimizing the contributions of American Indians and women, who are vital to understanding the history of park landscapes and nature protection.

Key words: American art, wilderness myths, visual culture, national parks

WATCHING KEN BURNS'S *The National Parks: America's Best Idea*, you see slow-moving visual pans of dramatic clouds crowning majestic mountaintops, rainbows flanking awesome waterfalls, and broad vistas of spectacular gorges without a person in sight. In the historic footage, you do see scenes with people, but the visual impression is ambivalent. On the one hand, you see them (mostly white men) either communing with nature—as they look out at and traipse through these iconic landscapes—or working diligently in offices to preserve them. On the other hand, you see hordes converging on the parks or crowded into city centers, images that are counterpoints to the isolated grandeur of the lone hiker at one with the wilderness. While the film is pleasing to look at

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(though painstakingly slow in many places), I do not think that after watching its full twelve-and-a-half hours that viewers will be any more savvy about how people encounter and preserve nature in America than before they tuned in. Burns perpetuates age-old wilderness myths that worship nature and vilify all but the most enlightened. He presents national park landscapes as isolated oases and wondrous and brilliant ideas, leaving viewers without any real vision of how the parks connect in real ways to the shared world outside their borders.

In this essay, I offer a visual analysis of the film; that is, I focus on the content, style, and meaning of the images instead of the narration, as well as on the relationships among the images. I explore how the visual imagery communicates the film's takeaway messages and how it builds the framework for the narrative. I looked for how Burns adapts his well-known documentary style of turning old photographs into moving pictures to the subject of national parks and the effects of his visual representations on viewers' understanding of the parks. Based on this perspective, I offer two main critiques. First, ignoring decades of scholarship in environmental history, Burns portrays nature as an idea rather than a physical place, which he poses in sharp contrast to the world Americans inhabit. Second, Burns marginalizes women and American Indians in the history of the national parks and the American conservation movement. The documentary misrepresents park development by minimizing the contributions of those who are vital to the history of park landscapes and nature protection. And it presents an ideal of nature that inhibits viewers from understanding how they live in the same world as the parks and that undermines the management of actual parks.

To think of wilderness in America has often been to think visually. Some of the great works of American art powerfully perpetuate this idea of wilderness as a place apart in stunning and convincing grandeur. Frederic Edwin Church's 1860 epic "Twilight in the Wilderness," any one of Albert Bierstadt's monumental paintings of the West, such as "Rock Mountains: Lander's Peak" (1863) and "Looking Down Yosemite Valley" (1865), and Ansel Adams' famous wilderness photographs from the early twentieth century are beautiful but problematic legacies from which Burns draws his inspiration.¹ His pictures

1. Works on American landscape painting and photography include Angela L. Miller, *The Eye of the Empire: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825–1875* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996); Amy Scott, ed., *Yosemite: Art of An American Icon* (Berkeley: Yale University Press, 2006); Martha A. Sandweiss, *Print the Legend: Photography and the American West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); Emily Ballew Neff, ed., *The Modern West: American Landscapes, 1890–1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); Sandra S. Phillips, et al., *Crossing the Frontier: Photographs of the Developing West, 1849 to the Present* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Art, 1996); Jules David Prown, et al., eds., *Discovered Lands, Invented Pasts: Transforming Visions of the American West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); William Truettner, ed., *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991); William H. Goetzmann and William N. Goetzmann, *The West of the Imagination* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1986); and Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825–1875* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

are so pristine that they also look as if they were pulled from the pages of a contemporary Sierra Club calendar. Whether celebrating American exceptionalism or advocating for environmental protection, all of his visual sources transform real-world places into iconic symbols.

Each episode of the documentary begins and ends with a sequence of images of sublime natural scenery absent any human presence except for one historic photograph of a lone half-naked American Indian perched on a rock overlooking a mountain panorama. Viewers see, for example, aerial views of Yosemite Valley, snow-capped Denali, Yellowstone Falls, Grand Canyon, Acadia, and the Tetons. In style and content, Burns's visual presentations of nature in America continue a tradition as old as the nation itself of imagining the country's natural resources as divine inspiration, as a symbol of God's blessing on the nation and, by the nineteenth century, as a source of personal salvation as well. They also uphold the antiquated and problematic belief that Indians are a part of this world rather than the world in which most Americans live.

Instead of interpreting and historicizing the American idea of wilderness, Burns perpetuates it in the most stock ways. Like Church, Adams, and the others, Burns portrays nature as a sublime, inspirational source of self-discovery and a national icon instead of a physical place with a history. Strangely absent, for example, are Frederick Law Olmsted's landscape designs for Yosemite, Acadia, and the Great Smoky Mountains, which would show how the famous planner construed and constructed the parks to reflect ideas about nature, scenery, modernity, and the nation.² These parks are as much products of popular imagination and modern engineering as the landscape architect's best known creation, New York's Central Park.

Throughout the six-part series, Burns transitions back and forth between his contemporary though timeless images and historic footage of the park landscapes. The contrast between his images and the vintage ones probably appears seamless to viewers, but anyone who pays close attention will notice that most of the historic images are populated with people either working or touring the parks, whereas Burns's own images contain only a rare trace of the human presence, such as a picturesque wooden fence or small footbridge visible in the margins. Unlike the historic footage that is busy with activity, he creates still and timeless images that erase any sense of the ways people have helped make the wild places what they are through construction and management. Portraying nature as an idea accentuates its disconnections and isolation from people, as scholars from Raymond Williams to William Cronon, one of the film's consultants whose work Burns seems to have mischaracter-

2. Anne Spirn, "Constructing Nature: The Legacy of Frederick Law Olmsted," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1996), 91–113; Ethan Carr, *Wilderness by Design: Landscape Architecture and the National Parks* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999); and Linda Flint, *Building the National Parks: Historic Landscape Design and Construction* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

ized or ignored, have long stated.³ And making his colorful and breathtaking images a central framing device around the black-and-white footage that often lacks their grandeur helps to convince viewers of his point of view.

Burns bolsters this position by setting up dramatic visual juxtapositions. Whenever he shifts to the places where most Americans live and work, he shows scenes of devastation. He chooses the most extreme examples of environmental exploitation, industrialization, and urbanization to represent the world outside the idyllic wilderness settings. For example, in the third episode he segues from a set of his striking wilderness portraits to a series of photographs featuring mammoth billowing smoke stacks, assembly-line workers jammed into factories, a forest desecrated by lumbermen, and congested, overcrowded, and chaotic urban streets and neighborhoods.

Viewers get no sense that parks and cities shape one another, which, of course, is exactly what they should think about if they wish to keep parks healthy. The old paradigm of evil humanity versus benevolent nature does not do much to preserve either the parks or communities outside the parks. Roaming bison, wolves, and grizzlies are classic evidence of shared ecosystems. The smog that sometimes inundates the Grand Canyon or the changing water levels and temperatures of the Colorado River are not so very subtle reminders of how Americans' daily lives cross inseparably over the parks' boundaries. And if you imagine Yellowstone as simply divine, how do you explain the millions of pounds of garbage that park employees carry out of the park during high season to be dumped in neighboring small towns in Montana? My point is not that national parks are not special or even sacred spaces, but only that Burns has missed an opportunity to pull apart the outdated and simplistic definitions of wilderness in America. He could have shown viewers the complex interrelationships between themselves and the iconic places that they cherish, connections that will help maintain the natural places they so admire as more than subjects of reverie.

Of the many people who influenced these particular American landscapes, Indians and women get short shrift and often misrepresentation in Burns's film. One of the commentators, the Mandan-Hidasta park ranger Gerard Baker, is the only Indian depicted here who defies the popular stereotype of the primitive Native. Possibly the most enduring image is the photograph of the man on the cliff who appears as part of the collage of wilderness scenes

3. Raymond Williams, "The Idea of Nature," in *Problems in Materialism and Culture: Selected Writings* (London: Verso, 1980) and William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995). See also other essays in this anthology, and also Michael Lewis, ed., *American Wilderness: A New History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Ted Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); J. R. McNeill, *An Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century World* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000); John McPhee, *The Control of Nature* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989); Richard White, *Land Use, Environment, and Social Change: The Shaping of Island County, Washington* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1980).

in each segment, as mentioned earlier. In representing Indians this way, Burns recalls the archaic vanishing Indian trope from more than a hundred years ago, exemplified in paintings such as Tompkins H. Matteson's 1847 "The Last of the Race." Of all the images Burns had at his disposal to illustrate his film, he chose historic photographs that confirm this stereotype instead of revising it, including ones of Blackfeet in full regalia greeting Glacier tourists, an aged Maria Lebrado To-tu-ya (ca. 1840–1931) who is known as the "last" surviving Ahwahneechee Yosemite Indian to have inhabited the valley, and a group of Inuits happily playing blanket toss in Denali.

In themselves the images are compelling representations of the resilience of Native peoples, but Burns presents them out of context of the harsher realities of the national park's impacts on Indian livelihoods. The film is without any view of Indians that counters the children-of-nature stereotype, including their ways of thinking about and using parklands and more generally their ways of life that conform to those of mainstream American society.⁴ Although the narrator does mention their disenfranchisement from these places at the parks' creation, Burns provides no pictures to instill this fact in viewers' memories. It is a pictorial history, after all. Under his camera lens, Indians' history and identities progress little from the romanticized visions of old.

American Indians are not the only ones Burns makes peripheral. You would hardly know from watching his documentary that women played such pivotal roles in spearheading American parks and wildlife protection. Juanita Greene, a journalist who fought to protect the Everglades in the 1960s, is the only woman we see working at a desk, compared to the dozens of men in this pose. Particularly irksome yet representative is the way Burns presents women in the bird-hat battles that led to the passage of the Lacey Act of 1900, the first national wildlife protection law to safeguard animal and plant species from extinction, including birds used in the millinery trade. If he had read Jenny Price's 1999 *Flight Maps*, he would have known that the women in the local Audubon Society chapters did the essential grassroots work that resulted in the legislation.⁵ Even the most male-centered written histories hardly reduce the role of women to frivolous fashion plates, yet Burns shows a sequence of photographs that begins with street and shop scenes of grinning women in

4. Karl Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves and the Hidden History of the American Conservation Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Peter Nabokov and Lawrence Loendorf, *Restoring a Presence: American Indians and Yellowstone National Park* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004); Philip J. Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places* (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 2004); and Philip J. Deloria and Neal Salisbury, eds., *A Companion to American Indian History* (Madison, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004). Other works that are helpful in thinking about these issues are Jake Kosek, *Understories: The Political Life of Forests in Northern New Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006) and Donald S. Moore, Jake Kosek, and Anand Pandian, eds., *Race, Nature, and the Politics of Difference* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

5. Jennifer Price, *Flight Maps: Adventures with Nature in Modern America* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

their outrageous bird hats, which cuts to a scene of men who voted on the act seated in Congress and finally to a photograph of Iowa Rep. John F. Lacey (whose overall role in the battle was actually quite marginal).

Finally, Burns presents dueling images of park visitors who have always been central to parks' mission and image making. Originally only accessible to the elite few who arrived by train in the early years of their development, the parks became a common vacation destination for the multitudes with the rise of auto ownership and tourism after World War II.⁶ On the one hand, Burns makes effective use of snapshots and photo albums to present Americans creating individual and collective memories and finding deep meanings in national parks during these annual vacations and weekend excursions. His use of these family photographs is one of the strongest features of the series because they communicate simply yet profoundly that these places have shaped ideas of identity and nation. In addition, the personal stories depicted in these photos complicate the religious salvation narrative. For example, we can see that for writer and primary commentator Dayton Duncan, visiting the great western parks created formative bonds with his wife and children. In addition, as we see photographs of Duncan and the other commentators as young children in the parks, we hear them describe their visits as the catalyst for their career choices and life's work. These family photographs give viewers a sense of how, as Cronon points out in the film, individual stories make up a national story about how Americans have forged a sense of identity in the parks.

On the other hand, Burns intersperses the documentary with photographs of traffic jams of automobiles clogging the park's main arteries, and people camping cheek by jowl and cavorting in ways that seem to defy the sanctity of the park's natural setting. Burns does not reconcile how and when individual families on trips of discovery in the parks turn into insensitive hordes that debase these places. This tension points back not only to the conundrum of the National Park mission both to preserve these places and to offer them as sites of recreation, but also to the documentary's primary flaws.

Burns offers viewers no picture of how Americans actually live with these places, how passion for them means thinking not just in terms of annual pilgrimages of self-discovery but also about the practicalities of what it takes to maintain them when they are back at home. Burns had a vast trove of scholarship and images to draw on—a trove that is by no definition hidden or obscure.⁷ Roger Minick's 1980 "Woman at Inspiration Point, Yosemite Park," which depicts a woman wearing a Yosemite souvenir scarf gazing out over Yosemite

6. Marguerite S. Shaffer, *See America First: Tourism and National Identity, 1880–1940* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 2001), and Paul Sutter, *Driven Wild: How the Fight Against Automobiles Launched the Modern Wilderness Movement* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002).

7. Besides the scholarship cited in footnote 2, works on new visual representations of the West include Amy Scott, ed., *Art of An American Icon: Yosemite* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Mark Klett, Rebecca Solnit, and Byron Wolf, *Yosemite in Time: Ice Ages, Tree*

valley, and Richard Misrach's 1988 "Burnt Forest and Half Dome, Yosemite," which portrays standing dead timber from the devastating Yosemite fires, are cases in point. Both celebrate the grandeur of the park while at the same time provoking people to contemplate the impacts of consumerism and the meaning of "natural" disasters. It would have been a "better idea" for Burns to turn to them and help viewers reconceive national parks as common but no less precious landscapes instead of giving us a film that in content and images could have been made forty years ago. Burns's mission to encourage Americans to love their national parks is an important one, especially in an era of federal budget cuts, but these financial realities make it all the more imperative for him to inform viewers how they can help maintain the parks, too.⁸

CINDY OTT is an assistant professor in the American Studies department at Saint Louis University. She has published articles and reviews in scholarly journals and been a regular public speaker on topics relating to U.S. environmental history, public history, American food and culture, and American Indian cultures. Besides her academic positions, she has worked for the Smithsonian Institution, the National Park Service, and the Museum of the Rockies at Montana State University. Her book *Squashed Myths: The Cultural History of the Pumpkin in North America*, is forthcoming from the Weyerhaeuser Environmental Books series at the University of Washington Press.

Clocks, Ghost Rivers (San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press, 2005); Rebecca Solnit, *As Eve Said to the Serpent: On Landscape, Gender and Art* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003); and William L. Fox, *View Finder: Mark Klett, Photography, and the Reinvention of Landscape* (Albuquerque: University of Mexico Press, 2001).

8. Karl Jacoby explores the political climate in which Burns produced the documentary in insightful detail in his article in this roundtable.