The Signature Lecture Series: Ken Burns

Hot on the heels of the College of Arts and Letters expanding its graduate and undergraduate Film Studies programs with a Fiction Film Production specialization and a concentration in Film Studies in fall 2009, the College hosted Emmy-Award-winning documentary filmmaker Ken Burns in the College’s Signature Lecture Series in early December.
HELD IN THE COBB GREAT HALL at Wharton Center, the lecture followed a two-hour Q&A session on documentary filmmaking with film students at the MSU Union Building. Burns noted that the new film program offerings will help prepare graduates for success in the state’s burgeoning film industry.

The Department of English houses Film Studies in the College of Arts and Letters. Its film programs include a concentration in Film Studies for English majors, a minor in Film Studies for any MSU undergraduates, and a Fiction Film Production specialization, offered jointly with the Department of Telecommunications, Information Studies and Media. The minor and the specialization were added in 2009 in response to increased student demand.

The College of Arts and Letters and the College of Communication Arts and Sciences also developed a Documentary Studies specialization in 2009 that, like the Fiction Film specialization, integrates production and analysis. It, too, is administered jointly with the Department of Telecommunications, Information Studies and Media.

All of which may translate into good future job prospects for MSU film students who met with Burns in the MSU Union Ballroom during his stay. Prior to answering questions, Burns set the tone for the standing-room-only crowd with a story about working on his film “The Statue of Liberty.”

WHAT ‘LIBERTY’ MEANS “The third film I made was ‘Statue of Liberty’ in 1985,” said Burns. “It was one of the first commissioned works I received, and was definitely a film that I wanted to make. So, I decided that I wouldn’t just focus on the building of the Statue of Liberty, but on the century of response to its existence, and explore what the word ‘liberty’ meant.”

Burns said that he interviewed a lot of notable Americans – nearly all of them immigrants because “most Americans don’t have a direct appreciation for liberty.” He said that there were a few exceptions, including the writer James Baldwin and the politician Barbara Jordan, who did speak compellingly in the film and were native-born Americans.

“As for construction of the Statue of Liberty,” Burns said, “the statue was designed by a sculptor named Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi, a Frenchman, who went to a factory – a fabricator in Paris – and built the statue there first. Then it was disassembled and shipped to the U.S. where we built the pedestal, and it was raised on top.
“And I think that speaks volumes about what we are interested in. I feel that I have made the same film over and over again. Each film asks the deceptively simple question, ‘Who are we?’ Who are those strange and complicated people who like to call themselves Americans? What does an investigation of the past tell us about not only where we have been, but where we are and where we are going? That’s history. And you can never answer that question; you can only deepen it.”

“Just a few months before his death, a venerable French poet of democracy, Victor Hugo, came to look at the statue that was rising improbably out of the shadows of those four- or five-story classic Parisian buildings that you know and have seen in every single movie about Paris. Except, here is this gigantic statue of a woman growing out of the workshop of Gaget & Gauthier at 25 Rue de Chazelles in Paris.

“And this old man who is literally on his last legs,” Burns continued, “comes up and he looks at Bartholdi, and he looks up at the statue, looks back at Bartholdi and looks around at the people who gather in his presence all the time, and he said: ‘The idea; it is everything.’

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In response to a student question about creating “story,” Burns also brought the discussion down to a personal level. The answer itself began with a story punctuated with laughter from the crowd.

“You know when you come home and your wife says, ‘Honey, how was your day?’ You don’t go, ‘I backed slowly down the driveway, avoiding the garbage can at the curb, pulled into the street and then drove up to the stop sign, put my blinker on, and turned right.’ You never say that! (Unless you get hit by a car that day, and, then, you drag that out.) What do you do? You cut to the chase:

“You form dramas, and as you do that, you immediately ask people to participate in what we all do. The universe is chaos; random chaos, and what we do is we superimpose – in every single conversation we have – order on that chaos. Every course you have ever taken is an attempt to superimpose order on that chaos. Every piece of art; every movie you’ve ever seen; every piece of music you’ve ever listened to; every conversation you’ve ever had – is an attempt to superimpose some sort of order on chaos.

“It is the way that we deal with the fact that we really would go crazy if we did perceive the chaos. So, we find ourselves continually suspending those laws of chaos in order to subscribe to laws that are more ordered. And that,” Burns said, “is what we call ‘story.’

Informed by Burns’ long and brilliant career, those in attendance smiled and nodded in response; the words of the master documentary filmmaker seemingly lifting the crowd to a higher plane of understanding.
ABOUT KEN BURNS
Ken Burns has been making films for more than 30 years. Since the Academy Award-nominated "Brooklyn Bridge" in 1981, Burns has gone on to direct and produce some of the most acclaimed historical documentaries ever made. The historian Stephen Ambrose has said of his films, "More Americans get their history from Ken Burns than any other source." A December 2002 poll conducted by "Real Screen Magazine" listed "The Civil War" as second only to Robert Flaherty’s "Nanook of the North" as the "most influential documentary of all time," and named Ken Burns and Robert Flaherty as the "most influential documentary makers" of all time.

His three most recent films, "The Tenth Inning," a two-part, four-hour documentary film directed by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, that updates "Baseball," their landmark 1994 series; "The National Parks: America’s Best Idea," released in September 2009; and "The War," which was released in September 2007, all aired on PBS. The latter is an epic account of World War II as seen through the eyes of typical American citizens from four quintessential American towns. It sheds new light on the experiences of soldiers and their families during the war. "The National Parks" is a six-part series on the history of America’s national parks.

Ken Burns was the director, producer, co-writer, chief cinematographer, music director and executive producer of the 1994 Public Television series "Baseball." Four and a half years in the making and 18 and a half hours in length, this nine-part film covers the history of baseball from the 1840s to 1994. It became the most watched series in PBS history, attracting more than 45 million viewers, as it eclipsed the 40 million viewers who had tuned in for Ken Burns’ landmark television series "The Civil War" in 1990.

The New York Times called "The Civil War" a masterpiece and said that Ken Burns "takes his place as the most accomplished documentary filmmaker of his generation." Tom Shales of The Washington Post said, "This is not just good television, nor even just great television. This is heroic television." The columnist George Will said, "If better use has ever been made of television, I have not seen it and do not expect to see better until Ken Burns turns his prodigious talents to his next project."

Born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1953, Burns graduated from Hampshire College in Amherst, MA, in 1975, and is one of the co-founders of Florentine Films.

ABOUT THE SIGNATURE LECTURE SERIES
Formerly the John Eadie Celebrity Lecture Series, the College of Arts and Letters Signature Lecture series was founded in 2007. Since then, the series has provided numerous opportunities for noted figures to interact with faculty, students and the greater Michigan State University community. Previous guests have included Nobel Prize winning author Orhan Pamuk; Academy Award winning film maker Oliver Stone; two-time Pulitzer Prize winning author Norman Mailer; Pulitzer Finalist and National Book Award winning author E.L. Doctorow; and Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award winning playwright Arthur Miller.

College of Arts and Letters Film Studies faculty Swarnavel Pillai, Jeff Wray, Jennifer Fay (now at Vanderbilt University) and Associate Dean Janet Swenson chat with Ken Burns before the film students forum at the Union.