



Montgomery, Alabama. March 24, 1965. Freedom Marchers. Image by © Bettmann/CORBIS.

Watching *Eyes on the Prize*

The return of a 20-year old series, argues one of its producers, offers a chance to reevaluate how history is presented on screen.

BY SHEILA CURRAN BERNARD

This October, PBS will re-broadcast the first six hours of the landmark 14-hour documentary series *Eyes on the Prize*. (The rest will be made available at a later date.) Produced independently by Blackside, *Eyes* has been out of distribution for more than a decade due to the expiration of underlying rights. Its return promises to reinvigorate discussion of America's racial past and inspire new generations with its stories of individuals who brought about tremendous change. But the rebroadcast is also a chance to look critically at the state of television histories. Since *Eyes* premiered, a substantially larger market for historical films has emerged, along with digital technology to make their production and distribution easier. At the same time, commercial forces have driven costs up and schedules and budgets down. A look back at *Eyes* and the rules that governed its storytelling and use of evidence—the sights and sounds of history—offers a model for comparison to today.

The “stories” of history

Eyes on the Prize was created and broadcast in two parts. The first six hours, subtitled *America's Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965* (broadcast in 1987 and known informally as “Eyes I”), begin with the murder in Mississippi of Chicago teenager Emmett Till, and follow the southern-based civil rights movement through to passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The remaining eight hours, subtitled *America at the Racial Crossroads, 1965-mid-1980s* (broadcast in 1990 and known as “Eyes II”), take events beyond the South and explore a complex period of history that includes Malcolm X, the Black Panther Party, the uprising at Attica, the anti-busing violence in Boston, the assassination of Dr. King, the Black Arts movement and more. The series ends with the 1983 election of Harold Washington, Chicago's first African-American mayor.

Eyes was “conceived as a series of battlegrounds,” notes



Above: The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., center, the first defendant called to trial in the racial bus boycott, holds a press conference on March 19, 1956 on the steps of the Montgomery County courthouse where he and 92 others are on trial. They were charged with the violation of the anti-boycott law. King's wife, Coretta is by his side. (AP Photo/Gene Herrick) **Right:** Participants in the March on Washington, 1963. Library of Congress.



series writer Steve Fayer. "We knew we couldn't, and shouldn't, attempt to tell the whole history, and instead determined to carve stories out of the conflict, with their own inherent drama." *Eyes* broke each of the hours into two or three of these stories, which were linked thematically within an hour, and as a whole advanced the series' overarching chronology. The structure helps to engage viewers personally in the history on screen. "Our mission was not only to create an intellectual understanding of the events and the people of that time," Fayer adds, "but, perhaps even more important, a visceral understanding of what it was like to stand up in a courtroom [as Emmett Till's uncle, Mose Wright, did], and point your finger at the two men who had abducted and killed your great-nephew, knowing that at that moment you were a dead man if you stayed in the state of Mississippi."

The events of *Eyes* took place in the mid-to-late twentieth century, when photographs and motion picture coverage of events were readily available. Furthermore, those who'd made history were still around to be interviewed, allowing the creators of *Eyes* to limit on-camera storytellers to those who'd directly participated. This gives the series an immediacy that is enhanced by interviews in which people were asked to stay "in the moment" and reveal events as they unfolded, rather than talk from hindsight. For example, in *Ain't Scared of Your Jails* (hour three), interviewee Fred Leonard describes being among a group of Freedom Riders held in a Mississippi penitentiary. They sang freedom songs, drawing punishment from the guards, who took away their mattresses. "The next night they gave us our mattresses back," he says. "So, we start singing again. They threatened us again...I told Stokely [Carmichael], 'I'm not letting my mattress go.' They drug me out into the cellblock. I still had my mattress, I wouldn't turn it loose. They were using black inmates to come and get our

mattresses, and I mean the inmates. And there was this guy, Peewee they called him, short and muscular. They said, 'Peewee, get him.'"

One of many approaches

Eyes on the Prize was not the only successful historical series of its time, of course. In the fall of 1990, Florentine Films' *The Civil War* broke all previous PBS viewing records. The 11-hour series had its own rules for storytelling and use of visual imagery. The series is narrative, telling dramatic and compelling stories, but structurally it's more of an essay than a traditional drama. The history is made personal in part through the use of diaries and letters, left by a handful of historical characters whose records encompassed the war's span. These records were brought to life through voice-overs recorded by noted actors. (This stylistic approach was taken a step further in Middlemarch Films' *Liberty! The American Revolution*, which premiered on PBS in 1997. In that six-hour series, the diaries, letters and other writings of historical characters are actually spoken to camera, as if in modern-day interviews, by actors in period costume and surroundings.)

There was only a limited photographic record for *The Civil War*. "There's not one photograph of action or battle...and yet nearly 40 percent of the series takes place while guns are actually going off," director Ken Burns said at a conference in Boston in 1993, explaining that with two exceptions, none of the photographs used is a literal illustration of events being described. But the series' use of images reflects artistic as well as practical considerations. In an essay he contributed to editor Robert Brent Toplin's compilation of historians' responses to the series (Oxford University Press, 1996), Burns describes a process of creation in which words preceded visuals and a literal notion of "illustration" was rejected in order to "tell



Left: Firefighters turn their hoses full force on civil rights demonstrators July 15, 1963 in Birmingham, Ala., one of the focal points of the desegregation movement. (AP Photo/Bill Hudson) **Above:** Four students at the previously segregated lunch counter of the Post House Restaurant in the Greyhound Bus terminal, c. 1960. This marked the first time since the start of the sit-in that African Americans were served at previously all-white counters in Nashville. From left: Matthew Walker, Peggy Alexander, Diane Nash, Stanley Hemphill. ©The Tennessean/Gerald Holly.

the story of what happened during the war in a new and, for many people, vivid way, where the past, at rare but surprising dramatic moments, came alive." The series also uses evocative present-day footage, including spectacular landscapes and recreations that evoke but do not dramatize the past. (In contrast, again, *Liberty's* historical imagery involves feature-style dramatization of encampments, battles, etc.)

Evidence of the past

The availability of period imagery does not necessarily mandate its use, nor does its use automatically make a historical film more authentic or truthful. Whether antique or new, stills and motion pictures are as subjective as any form of communication, in that someone has made choices about what to include, what to exclude, how to frame a subject and more. To compensate for this, producers at *Eyes* adopted guidelines established during production of the PBS series *Vietnam: A Television History*, which premiered in 1983. Rather than rely on the limited viewpoint of one or even a few sources, a range of archival materials was sought and authenticated to ensure more complete and accurate coverage of an event. Footage was carefully logged and used; if the narrative told viewers they were seeing a specific event on a specific day, the images had to be of that event and day, with no substitutions.

For *Vietnam*, this rigor was necessitated by the raw passion the war still evoked when production began in 1979—just four years after the fall of Saigon, notes Judith Vecchione, a producer on *Vietnam* before becoming series senior producer at *Eyes*. The filmmakers wanted their craft to be as transparent as possible to avoid feeding distrust of the media, government, or military. Vecchione says she discussed this approach with the late Henry Hampton, creator and executive producer of *Eyes*, during the series' development. He "really connected

with the idea that the archival material had its own power, and that the role of the filmmakers was to get out of the way and let that power come through."

Roughly sixty percent of *Eyes on the Prize* consists of period images, including footage, photographs, and headlines. This material was assembled according to time and place, and edited into visual sequences that advanced the storytelling even before interviews and narration were added. This kind of visual storytelling depends on the availability of footage; *Eyes I*, in particular, benefited from the in-depth coverage that characterized network news in the 1950s and '60s.

For both series, care was also taken with music and sound effects, which can alter the emotional impact of footage. Sound effects were added only when the source of the sound could be seen on screen. For *Vietnam*, producers added music only in the opening and closing credit sequences to avoid the appearance of editorializing. (Any other music viewers hear is ambient sound recorded with the original footage.) In contrast, *Eyes* is filled with period music, captured not only in old footage but also added by Blackside's editors. In addition to traditional songs that fall under the public domain, they used about 130 pieces of copyrighted music in the series, including original recordings by popular artists of the day, such as Aretha Franklin and James Brown. This was an expensive decision that reflected the critical role music played in the history. "I don't know that you could have had a movement in the way that we had the movement without the music," says Judy Richardson, an activist with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) before she joined Blackside in the late 1970s. "You can't replicate that with composed music," she notes, or with modern-day performances of old songs. "It has to be the real music. Because *that* music was coming out of struggle. That music was coming after somebody had been beaten bloody on a voter registration march."

Rights renewal

It can take many months to clear permission to use copyrighted material, both images and music. Rights holders set their own terms, including not only price but also limits on how long and in which markets (broadcast, educational, home, the Web) material can be used. Eventually, sometimes within a few years, these rights begin to expire, which is what happened with *Eyes on the Prize*. That the series is returning is due to significant public outcry and sizeable grants—\$665,000 from the Ford Foundation and \$250,000 from New York philanthropist Richard Gilder—that enabled Blackside to renegotiate and renew contracts. The return of this one series, while exciting, shines a bright and sad light on the many other worthy programs that will never be renewed, even as digital technology opens up new and broader markets in which the work might be received.

As creative individuals with their own works to protect, few filmmakers are opposed to the idea of copyright. Framers of the Constitution intended it to “promote the progress of science and useful arts, by securing for limited times to authors and inventors the exclusive right to their respective writings and discoveries.” But the weight of enforcement seems to have shifted toward the financial interests of rights holders, even when they’re far removed from the original creators. The resulting costs and difficulty of securing permission are having a chilling effect on filmmakers. Some shy away from using copyrighted material at all, instead recreating the past with modern-day actors, treating new footage to look old, or hiring composers to create original scores. When these are creative or content-driven decisions, that’s not a problem. But when they’re driven by the marketplace or fear of litigation, then filmmakers and audiences are being deprived of a chance to explore and enjoy their own cultural heritage.

Guidelines for use

Beyond copyright, however, *Eyes* offers a standard for the use of historical evidence that is somewhat unusual today. Filmmakers who choose to include period visuals in their work may let generic or substitute images serve as “wallpaper,” keeping eyes busy as content and story are carried by a narrator and interviewees. Footage of an individual at 60 years of age, for example, is used to cover discussion of her activities as a much younger woman. A nineteenth-century portrait of an anonymous group of elderly white men illustrates the 1869 Cleveland School Board or the directors of a railroad in 1891, whether or not the age, race, and gender of the actual group is known. And in some cases, historical images are used as visual evidence of something they’re not. In *Mighty Times: The Children’s March*, the 2005 Academy Award-winning documentary short produced by Tell the Truth Pictures, an archival shot of white police beating a black man during rioting in Watts, Los Angeles, in 1965 (that I used in *Eyes*) is included as witnesses describe conditions facing African Americans

in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963. Some might argue that it doesn’t matter, if the overall film tells an essentially truthful story. But when an image is offered as visual evidence, its credibility is key. At *Eyes*, such a substitution wouldn’t have been allowed.

Documentary literacy

Documentary filmmaking contains elements of both art and journalism. It has been described as the “creative arrangement” of factual materials, the creation of a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. Documentaries are *authored*, meaning that there is a storyteller (or storytellers) involved, with a right to interpret events. One of the strengths of documentary histories, in fact, is the diversity of these interpretations and their differences in style, point of view, and more. But viewers also expect, rightly, that a documentary—no matter how creative the form—should also be truthful. This doesn’t mean that every film needs to be balanced, impartial, or all-inclusive. Filmmaking is about making choices, and one of those choices may be the decision to be determinedly subjective. Such was the case with Errol Morris’s Academy Award-winning *The Fog of War*, which offers a platform for the fascinating if self-serving views of its subject, Robert McNamara, leaving viewers to accept or discredit what they hear.

History itself is subjective, open to interpretation and revision. Given all of these parameters, how are viewers to weigh the relative merits of a project, not only as entertainment but also as information? Perhaps historical media should come with annotation, not on screen but in supporting materials. Who are the filmmakers? What books and scholars were consulted in the creation of this work, if any? What is the source of the period footage and music used, if any? Filmmakers keep lists of outside source materials because broadcasters require them, to ensure that necessary rights have been secured. Why not make these lists available? (Some filmmakers worry that their research will be appropriated by other filmmakers, but more openness might also motivate new filmmakers to dig deeper or cast a wider net.)

To make this information public is not to undermine or minimize the creative work of historical storytelling. Facts and footage alone don’t keep viewers engaged, fuel controversy or motivate action. But for curious viewers who want to learn more about the history portrayed, or about the craft and choices involved in the portrayal, such information would be useful. In addition, greater understanding of and appreciation for the documentary form could help to advance general media literacy—a necessity in this media-saturated age.

The rebroadcast of *Eyes on the Prize*, first and foremost, is likely to drive discussions about civil rights. But I hope that historians, filmmakers, educators, and members of the public will also take the opportunity to learn more about, demand more from, and increase support for the historical programming of today, and yesterday. ■



Little Rock, Arkansas—Sept. 6, 1957. Elizabeth Eckford is one of the nine black students whose admission to Little Rock's Central High School was ordered by a federal court following legal action by NAACP legal defense fund attorneys. Image by © Bettmann/CORBIS.