Racialized Documentary Reception of Ken Burns’ *Jazz*

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This essay investigates the critical reception of the documentary *Jazz: The Story of America’s Music*, directed by Ken Burns and shown on PBS in 2001. Although studies on reception are now common regarding television, the reception of documentary is an underexplored area. Typically, documentary theory has placed an emphasis on truth and epistemology; only recently have there been inquiries on audiences. Expanding on the latter contributions, the author looks at critics’ reception of the documentary and the way identity and truth related to racialized interpretations of the text. The author’s analysis suggests that these viewers responded strongly to the documentary’s racial arguments. However, the responses were not determined by the viewer’s race. To reconcile this finding with an idea of race as determinant of reception, the author proposes that it is not the viewer’s racial identity but the function of race in the viewer’s life that determines modes of reception.

Keywords: race; reception; documentary; political identity; ethnicity

The national airing of Ken Burns’ documentary *Jazz: The Story of America’s Music*, on PBS from January 8 to January 31, 2001, was an event of civic magnitude in Louisiana, especially in New Orleans. Among the reasons for its civic importance was the long history of jazz music being identified with New Orleans. Considered by most New Orleaners to be the birthplace of jazz, the city’s racial and cultural identity is celebrated yearly with a prestigious jazz festival, and the city is pitched as a tourist destination to visitors interested in experiencing the cultural force of jazz music and African-American culture. It is common for tourists to visit the original places where the likes of Louis Armstrong and Sidney Bechet grew up and developed musically. Another reason the documentary drew a lot of attention locally was because the state government decided to partially fund the video. Arguing for the cultural importance of jazz music to New Orleans’ cultural identity and Louisiana’s tourist industry, the Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism contributed $1 million to the production costs of *Jazz*, counting on large returns for its investment sparking music-landmark tourism to New Orleans in the same way *The Civil War* (1991), another Burns project, boosted battlefield visits (Walker 2000).

The economic investment of the state was paralleled by emotional and economic investments of the general public. For instance, though *Jazz* was schedule to be aired on PBS in January of 2001, the anticipation in New Orleans was such that the first
of the ten parts was screened on October 18, 2000, during the New Orleans Film Festival. At the screening of the installment titled “Gumbo,” viewers saw how African American struggles in nineteenth century New Orleans turned into creative achievement. Louis Armstrong opened and closed the installment with soulful and vibrant music, and, in between, the audience witnessed the beginning years of the black musical genre that would change America (Walker 2000).

Race and locality were two important axes of identity that contributed to produce a set of expectations against which the documentary Jazz was measured. This suggests that, in the case of Jazz, the context of reception influenced the way the historical propositions of the text were understood, seen, and felt. Straightforward ideas about truth (was Jazz truthful to history?) helped little to illuminate the documentary’s reception. Considering that even before its airing, the documentary’s text was already being ‘mythologized,’ gaining meaning and structuring feelings of regional and racial identity, it seems prudent to withhold its critical assessment based on the documentary’s commitment to factuality or historical accuracy. Instead, I argue, the complex context of reception for the film in New Orleans is a strong suggestion that the “truths” embedded in its historical narrative can only be understood when placed within the specific and contingent ways in which people saw it, interpreted it, enjoyed it, or dreaded it.

Although ideas about the determining power of context and audiences to shape interpretation are seemingly common sensical, particularly to readers of cultural studies and media theory, understanding documentary in ways other than in its relationship to truth is still a relatively marginal research activity. In the following sections, I connect some of the concerns of documentary theory with those of reception studies. Typical research on documentary investigates the epistemological challenges of representation. This approach leaves out important areas of inquiry in epistemology. The most blatant elision has to do with the epistemology of the viewer, or the epistemological issues surrounding reception. Simply, much documentary research would sit uncomfortably beside classic research on television studies such as works by Ien Ang, David Morley, John Ellis, or Michael Curtin, to name a few, all of which place more emphasis on the medium as a social artifact than on whether the medium can represent the truth.

Recently, however, documentary theory has expanded to include issues of audiences. This research borrows from media studies and film reception theory, but is still limited and has been mostly concerned with normative reception processes. My contribution aims at expanding this scholarship by showing that documentary reception is much more complex. Indeed, I argue, the reception of Jazz shows a variety of hermeneutic tactics that ought to be accounted for if we are to understand the reception of documentary. Profiting from such insightful but limited research projects on documentary reception, and insights from television and film studies, I look at a variety of modes of reception that are often available to documentary audiences, in particular, to audiences of Burns’ Jazz. By mode of reception, I refer to the particular ways in which viewers
engage film and other media. More specifically, I follow Janet Staiger, who defines modes of reception as the “cognitive and affective activities of the spectators in relation to the event of interpretation” as well as “the interpretive strategies and tactics brought by spectators to the cinema” (Staiger 2002, 23, emphasis original).

In this study I apply methodological considerations from reception theory to the analysis of the documentary Jazz, concentrating on issues of racial identity and reception. It is important to remark that my methodology is not the only way of carrying on a reception analysis, not even the most common in television studies. Ethnographic methodologies, interviews, focus groups, and life histories (among others) are more commonly used to study reception. These methods are excellent at studying identifiable communities and have been applied to great success to researching reception by women (Radway 1984), black women (Bobo 1995), teenagers (Duke 2000), and lesbians (Ellsworth 1986), to name a few. With these empirical methodologies, researchers have shown how specific communities use discreet hermeneutic techniques to interpret texts. Most of these works, influenced by cultural studies and poststructuralism, embrace epistemologies that recognize that texts cannot represent reality (reality cannot be “encoded” into a semiotic system), that texts are ambiguous (polysemy, polyvalence, ambivalence, etc.), and that meaning is activated in the moment of reading (at the moment of “decoding”). Because of these axiomatic principles, truth has not been a central concern to reception analyses. Where would truth be located? In the real? In the text? Or in the reader?

By contrast, truth has been central to documentary theory. From Brian Winston’s (1993) assertions that documentary has always been linked to science, to Trin Minh-ha’s (1993) position that knowledge and truth can only exist in the negative potential of language, documentary theorists have grappled with the ability or inabilty of the documentary text to represent the real. Although most contemporary theory in documentary is, by now, poststructuralist (and thus closer to Minh-ha than to Winston), truth remains important to documentary research. This is so because it is in documentary’s claimed relationship to truth and the real that documentary establishes its genre specificity.

I am interested in continuing the conversation in which documentary theorists have engaged regarding truth. However, instead of making truth a problem of “encoding,” or a problem of the text, I want to make truth a problem of reception, an issue of “decoding,” and understand it in relationship to a mode of reception (Hall 1980). In doing so, truth becomes the effect of a set of hermeneutic conventions activated in the moment of viewership: it is contingent, divergent, and community specific. With this in mind, I have chosen to study the reception of Jazz by “experts,” who are more likely to relate to the text in terms of the text’s relationship to truth. My evidence is a set of newspaper reviews by television, history, or jazz experts printed from September of 2000 to June of 2001 in major U.S. newspapers. I am aware that many would be skeptical about using reviews as evidence of reception or evidence of historically situated viewers. However, I argue for the value and validity of this type
of evidence by contending that all evidence has limitations, including evidence gathered by the researcher in the presence of the subjects (interviews, ethnographies). Given the power of ideology to shape all (textual) reality, and the perennial need for self-definition that subjects and researchers experience, an interview and a review provide equally complex textual data that the researcher has to interpret. Moreover, both are evidence of historically situated individuals and require from the researcher a commitment to understanding this situatedness, the role institutions play in shaping it, and the type of inferences that the evidence can allow. I also understand that favoring newspaper reviews means favoring institutionally approved ways of interpreting documentary, film, and television. This is of importance principally when dealing with issues of race. However, the sample of one hundred reviews I used to perform the study showed a wide array of opinions in regards to race and the history of jazz. This array allows me to infer that the power of institutions to determine racial discourse in this topic is weak enough as to grant me the opportunity to talk about “individual” interpretations. Moreover, I recognize that these reviewers may not be a good sample of the general population. But since I am not making claims about the general population, I see no reason to avoid using this sample. Also, I have chosen to focus only on race in addressing identity. This decision is based on the relative relevance of race regarding the topic of jazz; however, I recognize that a complete analysis of the documentary’s reception would need to incorporate the analysis of other identity markers. Lastly, I am not trying to elucidate whether this television documentary did or did not a good job at (re)presenting the history of jazz. That would be a fascinating topic, but it is beyond the scope of this essay.

Truth in Documentary

Theorizing documentary has often meant analyzing the documentary text’s (and documentarian’s) ability or inability to capture reality, to tell the truth, to be objective. These approaches rely heavily on philosophical elaborations on subjects and on the ideological constitutions of documentary works, and use the documentary text as empirical evidence. Given the Althusserian axiom that the subject is produced by ideology and the poststructuralist axiom that texts are ideological, little else besides a text, a theory of the subject, and a theory of ideology have seemed necessary to investigate documentaries. During the 1980s and 1990s, however, there has been a resurgence of theories and methods that place historical audiences, viewers, spectators, and actors back into the equation of meaning and, specifically in documentary, back into the equation of truth.

From feminism, Ann Kaplan observes that little attention has been paid to the way subjects “receive” documentaries and to the way the contexts of production and reception affect how film documentaries are read. “We . . . need to know more about how actual, concrete individuals ‘read’ films” in concrete historical contexts (Kaplan, 1988, 99). Her
comments are insightful, but despite these early observations by Kaplan, only a small fraction of the work done on documentary has investigated actual interpretations by viewers; more attention has been paid to the way concrete historical contexts have engendered or could engender normative readings. This new direction is quite promising, but it leaves out other “improper” uses and readings of documentary.

Research on normative reception includes the work of Bill Nichols, who understands documentary as determined by social institutions, textual characteristics, and processes of interpretation. Conventions regiment the institutional, the textual, and the audience levels. Those within institutions commit to the tasks of representing the historical world, not the imaginary world. The narrative styles of nonfictional texts are conventionally structured to represent, or make a case or an argument about, the historical world (Nichols 1991, 14–25). And audiences agree to see the text as originating in the historical world (cf. Eitzen 1995; Plantinga 1997). This threefold set of conventions position documentaries apart from other types of texts and depend on the cultural competence of all of the participants.

To Nichols (1991), the mode of engagement of viewer and nonfictional text is one of ideology and reason. The documentary presents an argument, coded in terms of the sociological imaginary, about the historical world, and the viewer is asked to evaluate this argument. Similarly, Plantinga (1997) states “that nonfictions assert a belief that given objects, entities, states of affairs, events or situations actually occur(ed) or exist(ed) in the actual world as portrayed” (18). The assertions and the form of the assertions are cues to which the spectator responds. The relationship between spectator and nonfictional text is then determined by the evaluation the spectator performs on the truth claims of the text. Eitzen (1995) doubts that this rational engagement exhausts the ways in which viewers engage documentary. He illustrates his point by noting that Ken Burns’ The Civil War (1991), a quite successful documentary aired in PBS, was meaningful to viewers not only because of the historical arguments presented by the text, but also because of the profound sentiments that its melodramatic flavor elicited in audiences. Eitzen continues by arguing that, indeed, like Nichols proposes, documentaries invite the viewer to have a particular interpretive “frame.” In this frame, however, the viewer asks, “Might the text be lying?” According to Eitzen, in contrast to Nichols and Plantinga, the viewer engages documentary quite aware that the text may lie, and this awareness is what characterizes the mode of reception of documentary. For Eitzen, the mode of reception the viewer uses to engage documentary incorporates rational and nonrational evaluative processes of truth claims, underlying both the ideological import of the documentary narrative and of its truth effects.

Trevor Ponech (1999) defines nonfiction from a cognitive perspective. His definition recognizes the importance of the viewer in fulfilling that which documentary is meant to do. According to him, most viewers anticipate the work’s intention to communicate and make meaning accessible. Ponech recognizes that “spectators are not always or only concerned with apprehending the work’s objective meanings;
sometimes they become absorbed in their own or other viewers’ reactions to it, with little regard either to that which someone intended to communicate or to what this or that feature of the work necessarily indicate.” While insightful, the statement hints to Ponech’s limited scope concerning interpretation. His preference and interest on normative viewers’ actions is more evident when he continues, “However, such limit cases undermine neither the prevalence nor tenability which any given social group of commitment to specifically communicative interests” (Ponech 1999, 214). He gives preference, like Nichols, Plantinga, and Eitzen, to proper viewer’s actions and not to those “limit cases”: he investigates viewers invested in trying to ascertain the meaning of the work and the intention of the maker.

All this interest in normativity is a common, and often necessary, way of approaching research on cultural texts. That said, the normative tendency has a propensity to naturalize narrow definitions of audiences and spectatorship and often fails to take into account the semiotic and epistemological productivity of contexts and the audience’s identity axes like race, class, locality, nationality, gender, and sexual orientation. Commenting on the topic of normative descriptions of reception in film research, Staiger (2000) suggests several reasons why these descriptions fall short of the target. Two of these reasons are particularly applicable to documentary. “The normative description functions from a very limited set of reasons why spectators might watch a film. . . . The normative description assumes that spectators are knowledgeable and cooperative” (39). Nichols, Plantinga, Ponech, and Eitzen are interested in audiences that (apparently) have the same reasons to watch documentary, and on viewers who know how to make sense of documentaries.

Stepping beyond these two assumptions means, at the very least, arguing that not all viewers are competent documentary viewers, that not all viewers are unfamiliar with the piece of reality documentary is trying to represent, and that not all viewers are willing to accept the authority of documentary. Moreover, it means that truth effects may very well be quite different in different communities, and that this maybe the result of different communities using unexpected modes of reception.

**Emphasizing Audiences**

Attempting to draw pictures of what is outside the walls of normativity is a complex task. One way of starting this exercise is by using the two common tenets of text-based approaches to documentary and normative reception approaches to documentary: First, that the viewer has interiorized some basic principles of the documentary form. He or she is able to recognize textual conventions (such as direct address, use of experts, and argumentative claims) and their relationship to documentary. Second, that the event or reality depicted by the documentary is relatively unfamiliar to the viewer. These two tenets, which constitute the basis for “normative reception,” imply the existence of at least three other basic variations that must be considered when investigating documentary viewers: (a) “Duo-competent mode of reception”: some viewers may
have interiorized the documentary form yet they may have also interiorized the profilmic event. In these cases, the content of the documentary addresses a part of the history of the audience that is familiar to the audience and that the audiences uses as currency for identity formation. Such was the case, for instance, with some audiences in New Orleans who viewed Jazz, with audiences that are jazz aficionados, and with audiences familiar with African American history; (b) some viewers may have not interiorized the documentary form and may not have been capable of engaging it with the competence required by the didacticism implicit in documentary. In addition, in some cases, the profilmic event may be foreign to the viewer. Such would be the case with some American viewers not familiar with avant garde documentary trying to decipher what the film Letter from Siberia (Chris Marker, 1957) aims to teach; (c) Other viewers may have interiorized the profilmic event. Such would be the case with a Siberian watching the same documentary. These last two modes of reception will not be discussed in this essay.

These four types of viewership are not meant to exhaust all viewership variations. They are meant to illustrate some basic possibilities in which viewers may engage with documentary and thus engage with issues related to truth, validity, reality, and the profilmic event. In addition, each variant also signals a discreet mode of reception, particularly in relation to the identity formation of viewers. However, because modes of reception may be determined by identity, given that identity is overdetermined (i.e., race, nationality, sexual orientation, gender, class, age, education, etc.), and performative, it becomes quite difficult to understand the relationship between identity and documentary modes of reception without reference to specific cases and audiences. So, I will outline some ways in which to organize ideas regarding audiences and documentary.

Identity Axes, Modes of Reception, and Competences

As most of the previously mentioned research implies, textual characteristics, including content and form (style) of the documentary, are good indicators of the types of identity axes that audiences may activate as modes of reception. Competences and identities are community specific. Audiences are ideologically hailed by the documentary texts and respond to them in a dialogical fashion. Neither the audience nor the text determines this response. Assuming that the text determines the response would send us back to text-based explanations of the relationship between documentary and audiences (such as those described in the first part), something that I am trying to avoid, and would reinscribe normativity as the best way of explaining documentary reception. Assuming that audiences determine the way ideologies will be responded to assumes either of the following two propositions: One, that audiences can consciously or unconsciously manipulate the text’s signifiers and make sense of documentaries in random, if not free, ways; this is something not very likely to happen outside rare cases of demented audiences. Or, two, it assumes that
audiences are able to discern the full array and content of ideological interpellations. Though audiences may be aware of some levels on which the documentary text embodies ideologies, it is unlikely that all of the ideological elements of the text will be perceived and understood by audiences.

Instead, it is more fruitful to think of the response to ideological interpellations of documentary as instantiations of the subjectivity of the audiences and as performances of the audiences’ identity. Truth effects, which are an important category of the responses to ideological interpellation of documentary, are neither the effects of discourse nor determined by audiences. Truth effects are instantiations of ideology and performances of the audiences’ identity. This identity is, of course, partly shaped by textual competence and knowledge about the profilmic event. The moment of reception thus conceived results from the convergence in the present (or a present) of the text, with all its historical determinants, and of the viewer, with all of her or his historical determinations. The duality of the response to texts highlights the ongoing reconstitution of selfhood and subjectivity that occurs in the interaction of individual and world. By instantiation of subjectivity, I am referring to the manifestation, in the present, of the viewer’s subject formation. By performance of the audience’s identity I am referring to the fact that a de-essentialized identity, a culturally constructed identity, is maintained through the ongoing exercise of actions (by the individual) that perform the viewer identity’s cultural specificity (as they are marked by a community). For instance, writing about gender as identity, Judith Butler (1990) uses the examples of ‘drag’ and ‘butch-femmes’ as performances that denaturalize the coherence of gender in heterosexual systems. “That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality” (136). Similarly, other identity markers can be thought in a nonessentialist manner allowing the researcher to think of the ways in which these identities may be constituted by specific social actions.

In the case of the viewer’s relationship to the documentary text, the instantiation of subjectivity is the result of the activation by the text of processes of recognition and identification (self-recognition). Thus, the viewer may recognize formal aspects of the text (the direct address, a truth statement, a historical fact, a constative utterance), as well as the range of contents of the documentary. In the case of Jazz, reviewers recognized many formal aspects of the film. Dave Walker (January 7, 2001), writing for The Times-Picayune (New Orleans), carefully lays down numerous formal elements of the film: He mentions 2,400 still photos and 2,000 film clips as the types of visual evidence available to Burns. He has a list of voices used to narrate and acknowledges the narrative importance of having Wynton Marsalis commenting on the music. He is fully aware that the story is told chronologically, and the way in which this chronology is organized.

Viewers also recognized a wide variety of contents at both the denotative and connotative levels. For instance, besides being able to pinpoint many, if not most, elements of the denotative content—namely, elements of the history of jazz—many reviewers
commented that an ongoing theme, suggested at the denotative and connotative levels, was the idea that jazz was eminently American and that it embodied America’s most valued gift, improvisation (Kirk Silbee, *New Times Los Angeles*, January 4, 2001; Stanley Crouch, *Daily News*, New York, January 15, 2001; Jesse Hamlin, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, January 7, 2001).

Moreover, many reviewers understood that the history of jazz could not be told accurately or completely and that Burns’ work was, indeed, a well done attempt to do so and that, like other documentaries, it could not be perfect. Reviewers to this documentary acknowledge that *Jazz* was an instantiation of history, not “the” history of jazz. David Kronke, writing for *The Daily News* of Los Angeles (January 7, 2001), put it in the following words: “Still, when dealing with such a sprawling subject, Burns had tough choices when exploring the music’s minutiae. In addition to relating the overarching historical facts of the music, many anecdotal stories included for their humor or poignancy—an early one has Bessie Smith brashly facing down Klansmen outside her tent show before returning to her performance—and Burns still laments the many he had to excise. ‘There are thousands of stories not in there that I wish were in,’ he says.” Underlying his and other similar comments is the idea that historical documentary is just an instantiation of history.

While the previous aspects of recognition involve specific competences that determined the viewer’s ability to understand complex aspects of documentary texts, and these competences marked them as members of specific communities (film community, educated class, newspaper writers, documentary experts, jazz aficionados) and thus shaped their identities, other levels of recognition were at play when other identity axes were interpellated by the text. A very particular category of these axes was composed of identity markers that are considered (in specific cultural contexts) birth attributions such as gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, locality, and nationality (depending on the context, class may or not be one of these attributions.). These facets of identity elicit powerful emotional, and ideological responses to interpellations. They have the ability to reorder and rehierarchize narratives (Staiger 2000; Ellsworth 1986), as well as the ability to make audiences unaware of the documentary’s text ideological content. Moreover, these markers are culturally constructed and have to be maintained through specific actions or performances of identity.

Racial identities constitute us as racial beings. Therefore, these identities include hermeneutic techniques that help interpret our histories, bodies, ideas, and social positions as those constitutive of a race. Insofar as our identities are cocreated with the social, these hermeneutic techniques also render the world intelligible and allow us to see it as a racialized landscape, subject to evaluation, acceptance, or rejection. Because of this, racial identities serve, at times, to reorder textual hierarchies and, at other times, to naturalize a text’s ideological content. Reordering or naturalizing texts are hermeneutic activities that shape the way truth claims are understood, used, interpreted, and evaluated, and are thus epistemological actions. However, epistemology here does not refer only to knowledge. Having a racial identity means
acknowledging the plurality of races, the existence of the other, and, in the United States, awareness that our identity is also related to ethics and justice. That is, having a racial identity means knowing how to treat people from other races, how to see them, how to judge them, and knowing how others are likely to treat us, see us, judge us, because of our race. A racial identity provides an ethos of difference, an ethics, and an epistemology through which the social real is known.

Because racial identities assist us in the evaluation of truth claims, racial identities, and the hermeneutics they contain, are epistemological in nature; however, because these identities are also eminently ethical, a racial epistemology cannot assess truth claims without reference to ethics and justice. In America, only through the elision of race can a social actor claim to know the world independently of her or his ethical relationship to it. Paraphrasing Nelson (1998, 10), to be objective in America also means to be white. This duality that racial identities bring to the evaluation of truth claims likely plays a role in documentary reception. Given this, in the following section I explore how racial identity and racial epistemology relate to the evaluation of truth claims in documentary.

Modes of Reception and Race

Audiences that are competent viewers of the documentary genre have internalized different cognitive mechanisms that can be used to recognize and respond to the text’s truth claims. Audiences who, besides being familiar with the documentary genre, are also familiar with the event(s) the documentary text represents, use similar cognitive mechanisms to evaluate the system of truth claims by comparing their knowledge with the documentary claims. In the case of Jazz, depending on whether the viewers’ ideology and knowledge system matched the ideology and claims of the text, the viewer may have accepted or rejected (or partly accepted and partly rejected) the truth claims about race of the documentary as well as their ideological underpinnings (Staiger 2000, 34).

The most important racial themes of Jazz were those that linked this cultural form to the transformation of the racial conditions of African Americans during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The documentary presented the viewer many occasions to listen and see how jazz helped desegregation and fostered racial equality. It was an insistence implicit in commentaries about the “genius” of black musicians such as Armstrong (“genius” perceived and understood by white audiences), as well as in the way white musicians like Benny Goodman risked social criticism by integrating their successful bands.

These racial themes were accepted by a great number of reviewers of all races and served to legitimate their agreement with the documentary textual claims. Alan Pergament, writing in The Buffalo News (January 8, 2001), candidly declared that he is not a jazz expert; however, he commented on the important lessons about racial relations he found in Jazz. He wrote, “And then there are the sorry history lessons
which remind us that our so-called most trusted and respected institutions can make mistakes that take decades to rectify. Take the Supreme Court, which by virtue of one case ended up segregating the South for decades even as the music was trying to bring races together. Then there are newspapers, another institution that seemed determined to maintain the status quo and, in hindsight, look incredibly backward and even reprehensible at times.” He accepted the documentary’s lessons not simply because they were well argued, but also because they were romantically framed by ideas of contemporary racial equality and of the desegregating force of jazz in America. An equivalence of sorts was then at play in Pergament’s interpretations: if jazz is eminently American and jazz desegregated, there must be something eminently American in desegregation. This idea was also central to the editors of The Baltimore Sun (January 12, 2001) who wrote:

To those who have lived and loved jazz, it’s as much faith as music: a belief that life’s a lot more bearable if you slip your tribulations a few “blue notes.” Born from the spirituals and work songs of African-Americans, jazz was brought up in bordellos and mellowed at late-night loft sessions in places like Chicago and New York. It gave a young Louis Armstrong an escape from the inner city, Billie Holiday a voice for unspeakable pain, and it wrote the score for the Great Migration of blacks to Northern cities. Along the way, something else happened: In highly segregated America, jazz slid into the imaginations of blacks and whites alike and drew them into a dance across the American racial divide. And this is what lies at the heart of Ken Burns’ television documentary, “Jazz.”

From an African-American perspective, Stanley Crouch, a cultural commentator that participated in the making of the documentary, wrote, “That is the essence of the story Burns tells. He came to understand the overwhelming genius of Louis Armstrong and how this black man from New Orleans so liberated American music that musicians across the color line and around the world were able to discover their own individuality in a new artistic language” (Daily News, New York, January 15, 2001).

In agreement with the documentary, the preview reviews romanticized the role jazz played in desegregation. While many of the facts supporting this argument were not untrue, these racial claims came to be regarded as the core of the American “drama” that Jazz tried to construct. This type of emphasis is not surprising; however, it maybe seen as deeply ideological and problematic. Researchers like Artz (1998) and Gray (1995) have commented on different fantasies of racial equality that are perturbingly common in American racialized texts. By overplaying equality within representations of African American success, Artz and Gray argue, these texts undermine the importance of locating racial stratification at the institutional and structural levels. While the documentary indicated how institutions were involved in segregation, it is possible to argue that these criticisms were done, using Pergament’s words, “in hind-sight” and promoted the idea that today’s institutions are not invested in segregation.

Most racialized viewers who accepted the validity of Jazz’s racial arguments identified with this racial fantasy, but not all. Echoing the previous reviewers, but
with quite a different result, Tony Norman used the documentary’s commentaries on racial desegregation to comment on contemporary general racial issues. Norman, writing for *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* (January 12, 2001), proposes: “Ken Burns’ earnest 18-hour PBS documentary *Jazz* couldn’t have come at a worse time for those who enjoy whining about how bad a hand they’ve been dealt in life. *Jazz* is the story of how poor black men, once the most despised on Earth, became avatars of grace, beauty and dignity in America despite systematic racism.” Lending support to Artz’s and Gray’s ideas about the danger of such fantasies, Norman organized an attack on the “whining” black, poor, women, and other unable individuals who are missing the chance to become avatars of success in a racist, classist, and sexist society.

Another important aspect of identity that worked, in the case of *Jazz*, to promote agreement with the racial ideological aspects of the film, was the audience’s sense of location or local identity. The clearest example is found in Louisiana, where many people had invested themselves affectively in Ken Burns’ *Jazz* documentary months before it was even shown. As mentioned before, they paid in October for what it was going to be free in January. They went to benefits to catch a glimpse or get the autograph of Burns weeks before *Jazz* was aired. They bought the music, they bought the book; they read reviews of both. The city of New Orleans saw the documentary as a revival of jazz, an homage to Armstrong. By the time the documentary was aired, *Jazz* had meanings clustered to it, most of which were strong and positive because they exulted the city of New Orleans and African American culture. People writing about the documentary in New Orleans responded to the documentary in ways ranging from a proud acceptance of its historical value—Danny Heitman *The Advocate*, Baton Rouge, LA, (January 8, 2001)—to a skeptical review of its historical sources—Dave Walker, *The Times-Picayune* (New Orleans, January 7, 2001). However, questions about the validity of the documentary’s arguments about race or the racial ideologies were surprisingly absent from critical reviews. Either these were nonissues, or the importance of the historical accuracy overrode the necessity to evaluate the documentary’s racial elements. Regardless, locality seemed to have framed the reception of *Jazz* and activated identity axes that responded to the text in terms of content competences and that questioned the documentary in terms of historical accuracy.

When the viewers’ ideology and knowledge system do not match the ideology and claims of the text, the viewer may reject (or partly accept and partly reject) the truth claims of the documentary as well as its ideological underpinnings. For example, Preston Love, an African American jazz musician writing in the *Omaha World-Herald* (January 21, 2001), commented on the fact that Burns’ documentary emphasized the role jazz played in desegregating the music world and the dance world as a way of making the documentary palatable to white audiences. Disagreeing with the text’s racialized content, Love wrote, “Of course, jazz was regarded as exclusively black music in that era, as was blues, but not every black person was involved with or interested in jazz. Most whites of that era looked upon black music as something rather exotic or even humorous. So the frequent use of
footage of whites in the series rang a bit insincere to me. I was old enough in the 1920s and ’30s to observe the nature of white people’s participation in jazz, so I viewed much of that footage as something Burns used simply to attract a larger white audience.” Love’s unusual position as a witness to jazz’s history and as a black man allowed him to challenge the historical contributions of the documentary (by contesting most of them) as well as to question the ideology of the film by noting that Burns’ target audience was white, jazz-novice individuals. Love is a type of viewer that has interiorized the documentary form but who has also interiorized the profilmic event. He uses his knowledge about the profilmic event, which is an important way of “performing” his racial formation, to produce an unusual set of hierarchies of racial postulates. To him, the text’s cognitive assertions and the text’s ideological foundations are suspect. The racial ethics of the film are intrinsic to his evaluation of truth claims.

Black reviewers were not the only ones that used their racial identities to rehierarchize the documentary’s set of racial postulates. Mirroring Love’s dislike for Jazz’s assertions about racial relations, but from a different racial perspective, Jonathan Yardley of The Washington Post expressed twice his disappointment with the documentary. In January 15, 2001, he wrote that “Jazz so obsessively places race at the center of the tale that it manages to politicize it.” After receiving an “avalanche” of e-mails from readers (and viewers) who supported his views (“mostly white readers”), and others who opposed them (“mostly black”), he wrote a second article (February 5, 2001) where he tried to “clarify” his views. He commented that it is practically impossible to talk about jazz without referring to race. After all, jazz is mostly a black creation. Or is it? In an appalling counterargument to this idea, he writes, “If jazz would not exist without black Americans, by the same token it would not exist had black Africans not been brought (forcibly) to America.” Mr. Yardley is just short of implying that the system of slavery may also be credited with having created jazz. After all, it did create the cultural conditions that “nurtured” black Africans to create the blues, jazz, and work songs. Besides this profoundly racial view of the historical genesis of jazz, Mr. Yardley is of interest here because he manages to dismiss a nineteen hour documentary based on two important (racial) claims: that it failed to present the discrimination white musicians experienced in the black world of jazz, and, at the same time, that it politicized the history of jazz by making reference to issues of race. The fact that these claims were contradictory is of no importance; what is necessary to notice is the way in which the documentary’s many claims about history and race are dismissed based on two counterclaims. Moreover, Yardley’s desire to see a less racialized history of jazz can also be read as a desire to see a less biased history of jazz and a more objective depiction of our past. In so doing, he replicates a white standpoint where knowledge claims about the social can be stated outside evaluations of justice. Of course, he uses a racial epistemology when he complains about injustices to white musicians.
Some Findings About Racialized Reception

The importance given to claims about race in Ken Burns’ ambitious project was not part of every review nor was race the only significant system of claims that made Jazz palatable or unpalatable to reviewers. For instance, the way the documentary used certain musicians to illustrate historical moments became also a controversial system of claims. However, even when those that criticized the selection of musicians were indeed disappointed, most of them agreed with the overall value of the documentary and deemed it proper to introduce laypeople to the world and history of jazz. That was not the case with those that centered their reviews on Jazz’s racial claims. It was significant that these claims managed to either make the documentary worthwhile or completely unsatisfactory. Moreover, racialized readings criticizing Jazz’s racial ideology, like those of Yardley and Love, “rehierarchized” the narrative of the documentary, reorganizing the text’s system of claims and its structure of feeling around the identity axis of race. These reviewers did so by “performing” their racial identities in a similar way, antagonizing the text’s racial claims, though these viewers clearly were subjects to different racial ideologies. What do I exactly mean by “rehierachizing the narrative of the documentary?”

It is important here to remember that modes of reception include hermeneutic processes such as the recognition of compositional elements, narrative styles, and genre characteristics. Nevertheless, more relevant here, modes of reception also comprise evaluative processes that help viewers determine the validity of truth claims as well as the ideological tone of these claims (see Ponech 1999, 225). If the truth effects of the documentary include cognitive, emotional, and ethical agreement with its perceived textual claims, the processes of recognition of the compositional elements tend to replicate the perceived hierarchies of the documentary text. For instance, positive reviews of Jazz included in the body of their reviews a description of the goal of the documentary, as understood by the reviewers, and proceeded to state different sets of claims in a hierarchy such that explained the documentary text as logical and rational discursive system. Jason Berry, writing for the Los Angeles Times (January 21, 2001) commented, in expert voice, that the underlying meaning of Jazz is that jazz music “is a metaphor for democracy.” He then proceeded to support this agreeable interpretation by commenting on the experts on which Burns relied. From Stanley Crouch (a cultural critic and jazz historian that worked as consultant for Burns), he borrowed the idea that “jazz is an art in which improvisation declares an aesthetic rejection of the preconceptions that stifle individual and collective invention.” Lastly, Berry elaborated on how improvisation is seminal to both democracy and jazz by using examples such as President Bill Clinton’s ability to respond, repeatedly, to the political challenges of his presidency. His ability to respond is seen as ability to improvise. Berry crowns this interpretation as follows: “[Maybe] all those years playing saxophone as a kid in Arkansas taught him to turn on a dime.” Berry’s hierarchy of arguments was one that attempted to justify Jazz’s underlying
meanings by identifying a type of logical harmony. Indeed, to order different levels of statements, he used the deductive method: he hypothesized, brought experts, borrowed some of their ideas, and sought for examples that illustrated the original hypothesis. Each level supported the other levels’ claim. In producing his interpretation of Jazz, Berry tried to replicate what he perceived Burns’ semiotic, logical, and ethical goals were.

Yardley and Love’s modes of reception were similar to each other, but given their different evaluative frameworks, signaled by their different racial ideologies and different subject formations, their interpretations differed substantially. Nonetheless, they both reordered hierarchies of truth claims in significant ways, and they did so by following similar techniques. In fact, their reviews contained similar elements that are worth considering: First, they both referred to other viewers that thought like them. Love wrote about “several musicians from the earlier years of jazz” who agreed with him. Yardley commented on the e-mails sharing his points of view. In doing so, they were likely trying to avoid accusations of subjectivism. Second, they both identified underlying messages hidden within the text. For Yardley, it was the text’s politicization of jazz. For Love, the underlying issue was the distortion of jazz history to attract white viewers. Third, they both used these underlying meanings of jazz to expose lacunae about key issues such as the discrimination of white musicians, or the discrimination of black musicians. Fourth, they used their key criticisms to undermine the role Winton Marsalis, the documentary’s main jazz commentator, played. According to Love, Marsalis is not the ideal spokesperson for jazz, partly because he is a technical player and way too young. For Yardley, Marsalis reproduced a toned-down version of the black musician as Noble Savage and also used the documentary as self-glorification. Fifth and final, they commented on hierarchies of truth claims as being disharmonious. Marsalis (as the person representing a whole level of truth claims) could not be trusted nor speak on behalf of the musicians that were featured (a different level of truth claims and narrative elements) such as Armstrong, Bechet, Ellington, or Basie. Moreover, this break between hierarchies could not be solved because it replicated the contradictions of Burns’ ideas about jazz and about race.

In addition to the way hierarchies of claims were used by viewers to show agreement or disagreement with the documentary, these examples shed light on issues that illuminate other aspects about identity, truth effects, and the two modes of reception I set to investigate:

while textual characteristics are good indicators of the types of identity axes that audiences activate as modes of receptions, an overreliance on textuality hinders research projects. In part this is because of the fact that the “dialogue” between documentary and audiences does not start with the beginning nor finishes with the end of the film or TV program. As suggested by Jazz, the dialogue between audiences and documentary can start at many points and for many reasons: it can be the result of advertising, or other promotional activities carried on by the production team—Burns visited New Orleans several times before the airing of Jazz. It can be the result of fan activities such as those performed by fans of the film The Lord of the Rings,
who attended web sites and opened chat rooms to discuss the film months before its release. Moreover, the dialogue between the text and audiences does not end with the end of the narrative. Long after Jazz ended, Yardley was writing about the documentary’s meanings, shortcomings, and biases. It is possible to hypothesize that each interpretation of a text recreates the text’s meanings and revises the documentary’s ability or inability to depict historical reality. The truth effects are then mutable; they are ongoing activities likely to be modified each time that the viewer remembers.

In addition to the impropriety of understanding the dialogue between text and audience as determined by the text’s beginning and end, it is also necessary to consider the content of the documentary text as part of ongoing social discourses and contexts that, when race is involved, include an array of discourses on justice and hope. When audiences “recognize” contents, this recognition is continuing a social dialogue, and, depending on the identity of the audiences, this dialogue may be a fundamental feature of the everyday life of viewers. Jazz musicians and African American viewers, for instance, were hailed by the text in a very different way than, let’s say, I was. I am a Hispanic male who only until very recently discovered the beauty and richness of jazz. I became interested in the documentary series because I did not know much about jazz. Since I deeply empathize with the struggles of African Americans in this nation, I became particularly interested in the assertions about race that the text stated. This system of assertions built an interpretative paradigm that I used to augment my aesthetic sensitivity to jazz form and jazz performers.

However, the social dialogue that the documentary continued was, for jazz musicians and African American reviewers, one in which these viewers participated in on a daily basis. The issues of historicizing jazz or discussing racial relations in the U.S. were, likely, quite common and important to these audiences who likely saw the documentary as a documentary about them; they, or their identities, were the content of the text, as Preston Love informs us in his review. In a postcolonial fashion, these audiences could not afford to be naïve, nor simply accept the authority of the text. Yet, having internalized the documentary’s profilmic event, or being black and aware of racial history, did not mean that the viewer opposed the documentary text. For instance, Crouch and most reviewers in New Orleans agreed with the core of the documentary’s racial claims, however romanticized these may had been. Which lead us to the following proposition: Viewers who accept the documentary’s textual claims do so for very different reasons (Pergament and Crouch). And it follows that not accepting the authority of the text does not mean that the viewer will oppose the text.

Understanding modes of reception help us understand that grouping audiences by race, gender, class, or sexual orientation may not be enough to investigate how reception works in communities. The examples used show significant commonalities between viewers from different races who had similar attitudes in regard to race compared to viewers from the same race with different attitudes about race. Love and Yardley used a similar mode of reception regardless of their race. They arrived to some different interpretations of the text, yet they both emphasized only a very
narrow aspect of the nineteen-hour documentary, produced an original hierarchy of textual claims, and agreed on *Jazz*’s inability to represent the racial divide between musicians and audiences. Their techniques of viewing, which included antagonism against the text perceived racial ideology, were similar even when their subject positions were quite different.

It could be argued that, in the cases I examined, race was not a good predictor of the mode of reception. Of course, there is always the possibility that other identity markers such as class (middle class or wealthy viewers may be more likely to hold similar views about race) or profession (Love and Yardley seem to be talking in behalf of musicians) may be better determinants for the mode of reception in these particular examples. If that is the case, then it is necessary to address reception from a multiaxial identity perspective. However, given the complexity and demanding task of performing multiaxial identity research, a second provision may give some research projects a solid footing.

It can be argued that a better predictor of the mode of reception a viewer may use is the viewer’s attitude toward racial relationships and ideas of existing racial equality and progress, regardless of race. From the point of view of modes of reception, Stanley Crouch and Alan Pergament may be closer to each other than Crouch is to Love or Yardley to Pergament. What is similar in both set of cases is the way specific discourse served to explain social reality. For Crouch and Pergament, jazz can at least partly explain racial relations. For Love and Yardley, race can explain jazz. The hermeneutic strategy used by both set of viewers appears dependent on the viewer’s style of politicization.

From the previous finding, it can be inferred that at times it is not race, but the function of race in the viewer’s life, that determines the way racial aspects of the text may be understood. The strong rejection of Love and Yardley indicates that, for both, race is an important aspect of their self-image and an aspect that has been a site of struggle and that requires to be “performed” in an antagonistic fashion. Given the contestatory character of their interpretations and the care with which they produced counterarguments to *Jazz*, it can be inferred that race is an important part of their political identities, and not surprisingly, both find some aspects of *Jazz* racist. Also, they both tried to vindicate their communities by reminding readers of the “real” processes of discrimination present in the history of jazz.

**Conclusion**

People from New Orleans had very particular reasons to evaluate, interrogate, and embrace or reject Ken Burns’ *Jazz*. Absolute truth was not one of them. Their concerns had to do with the accuracy of sources and the emphasis of some events and musicians over others, but overall, they accepted *Jazz* for it sent to prominence the city, its history, and the cultural history of African Americans. People all around the nation had other
sets of reasons to evaluate *Jazz*. I examined a few of them that were centered on race. Some rejected *Jazz*’s propositions about race altogether and rejected thus the validity of the documentary. Others embraced *Jazz*’s main ideas about race and complimented the ethical validity of the text. These two sets of viewers were not grouped by race, though they judged *Jazz* based on its racial elements. The variety of interpretations within the black community was consistent with previous research. Moreover, similar interpretations of this documentary did not neatly fall within racial boundaries. This is also consistent with findings by other researchers including Cornwell and Orbe (2002) and Means Coleman (2002).

To understand this plurality, I looked at the predicting power of identity axes to determine modes of reception, which had the following results: Textual characteristics are good indicators of the types of identity axes that audiences may activate as modes of receptions. However, an overreliance on textuality hinders research projects. This is partly because the dialogue between audiences and text does not start nor does it end at the same time that the documentary work. But it is also because documentary work is part of ongoing social discourses and contexts and these discourses and contexts may actually be the ones determining modes of reception. This determining power was significant in the case of *Jazz*. Indeed, politicized visions of racial relationships in America were also good predictors of the type of mode of reception that were used. This finding suggests that racial identity may not be enough to investigate how reception works in racialized communities of viewers. Thus, I argued that it is not race, but the function of race in the viewer’s life what determines the way racial aspects of the text may be understood. It is quite probable that the same holds true for other types of identity axes.

**Notes**

1. Other uses of printed text include web sites, listserv dialogue, and chat lines. One such example is the Nancy Cornwell and Mark Orbe study on the African American reception of *Boondocks*, where evidence is gathered from the comic strip web site (Cornwell and Orbe 2002).

2. The same criticism is used by Eitzen on Carl Plantinga. Plantinga argues that an assertive stance about a certain state of affairs is what characterizes the documentary stance (Eitzen, 1995, 85).

3. Plantinga’s rebuttal to Eitzen was published in *Cinema Journal* in 1996. The core of the argument rests on the following: “However, in the absence of truth claims, one cannot sensibly ask whether a film is lying” (Plantinga, 1996, 94).

4. Staiger’s point is only partly applicable. According to Nichols, normative approaches to documentary depend on an audience knowledgeable on documentary form, but ignorant on the topic the documentary is meant to elucidate.

5. For more variants of reception and their relation to intertextuality, see Staiger (2000), particularly chapters 10 and 11.

6. I cannot think of a better way of addressing the multiple ways in which documentary may be ideological than by making reference to the long tradition of documentary theory that I acknowledged in previous sections. Moreover, textual based approaches (Minh-ha, Scheibler, Renov, Winston, etc.) complement the cognitive approaches of Ponech, Eitzen, and Plantinga. The former explain ideology, the latter cultural mechanics of interpellation.
8. Plantinga, Nichols, Eitzen, and Ponech would likely characterize these abilities as cognitive abilities. Cognitive approaches to documentary, such as Ponech, Plantinga, and Eitzen’s, have refined methods of inquiry and provided powerful theoretical basis for investigating this category of relationships between viewers and documentary.
9. I include ethnicity, locality, and nationality because even if these markers of identity have certain fluidity, in our culture it is common to think of them as defined by birth. Not surprisingly, one may “adopt” an ethnicity, a locality, or a nationality, but one normally does not “adopt” a cultural expertise such as a trade.
11. Martinot (2003, 2–8) has elaborated on this property of racialization in reference to judicial truth claims regarding affirmative action. He calls this property a double bind that precludes objective justice to be applied in cases when whites claim reverse discrimination. In these cases, the abstract truth claim that all discrimination is bad is placed against the historical goals of affirmative action of eroding white supremacy. This double bind is irresolvable without disregarding one important element of justice: history or equality.
12. See others like Danny Heitman (The Advocate, January 8, 2001), Nicholas Makann (The San Francisco Chronicle, February 20, 2001).
13. Other reviewers responded similarly to Jazz’s racial commentaries and accepted them as they were. See Mary A. Mitchell’s (Chicago Sun-Times, February 06, 2001) brief commentaries on race, and the more thorough review by Gene Hyde (The Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, January 07, 2001) where he praises the documentaries insistence on the black roots of jazz.
14. Preston Love is a veteran saxophonist that played with Count Basie and Lucky Millinder, heading the West Coast Motown Band. At the time of this review he was 79 years old (Omaha World-Herald, August 18, 2000).
15. For another review of the documentary that emphasizes the problematic racialization of the text, see Stephen Thompson writing in The Tampa Tribune (February 25, 2001).

References


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