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Review of To Render a Life: Let us Now Praise Famous Men and the Documentary Vision. Reviewed by David R. Simon, U.C. Berkeley & San Diego State University

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Video Review Essay:

"To Render A Life: LET US NOW PRAISE FAMOUS MEN And The Documentary Vision" (1992) and "Long Shadows: The Legacy of the American Civil War" (1992). Both by the JAMES AGEЕ FILM PROJECT, 316 E. Main Street, Johnson City, TN 37601 Phone: (615) 926-8637.

Here are two first-rate videos that, while disparate, are nevertheless valuable classroom tools. "To Render A Life" is a 58 minute documentary on the career of author, poet, and critic James Agee. This work will interest scholars in a broad range of fields, including film and literary criticism, the sociology of culture, mass communications, and related endeavors.

The format includes interviews and narration, coupled with vivid images of Agee's boyhood surroundings, Harvard, New York in the 1930's, the conditions of southern sharecroppers, and Depression and World War II era Hollywood (where Agee and John Houston wrote the classic *THE AFRICAN QUEEN*).

What comes though more clearly than anything else is Agee's overpowering personality. Here was a literary genius who was so driven that he eschewed sleep in order to work. Agee was a man, as his second wife comments, that never took a full day off from his writing. A workaholic, Agee seemed to suffer from many of the same pathologies that plagued the writers of his day, excessive smoking, drinking, and incessant restlessness.

The sociological import of Agee's career probably lies in his investigation of Southern sharecroppers for *FORTUNE* Magazine in the 1930s. Agee's writings here alerted the nation to a previously undefined social problem. Agee recognized that this would happen even before setting foot in the South. In a letter to his father, Agee revealed his perception of the sharecropper assignment as a moral and sacred duty.

Agee also served as a film reviewer for *THE NATION*. There are small excerpts from a number of his reviews, and these gems are not to be missed. Agee's opinions of the young Liz Taylor, his honesty concerning films which he disliked, even though some had reached icon status with other reviewers, and the general tenor of his prose make this documentary well worth watching. If

you teach culture related courses, this documentary will stimulate your students to look into the culture of the era of their parents and grandparents. Otherwise, you will probably have a good deal more interest in the LONG SHADOWS effort.

LONG SHADOWS is a 58 minute video about the Civil War and, especially, the effects of that war on American culture and society. This is a first-rate effort to assess one of the most tragic episodes in American history. The Civil War marked one of the few periods in America's existence when its ruling elite failed to work out a compromise on an issue. The result was a war that killed more Americans than almost all other American wars combined.

More important, the legacy of the Civil War is still with us and manifests itself in a myriad of ways. The war reinforced the notion that violence is a solution to social problems, a remedy turned to often since 1865. In the South, the war was followed by decades of economic devastation, and the emergence of Southern stereotypes (rednecks, hillbillies, racist, authoritarians). So impugned was the South's reputation that no southern politician was elected president of the United States until 1976. Likewise, Reconstruction began an era of internal colonialism marked by brutal racial oppression of freed slaves. All of this, of course, set the stage for a prolonged civil rights struggle that continues to this day.

Another important offspring of the Civil War was the emergence of the oligopolistic corporation, and its robber baron founders. This is the one portion of the video in need of elongation. There is a brief interview with Studs Terkel, commenting on the robber barons and their selling defective weapons to the Army. There is also a few shots of some major corporate logos. Otherwise, scant attention is paid to the import of corporate social organization. Given the dominance of corporations in the American economy, and their influence at all levels of American political life,

Aside from these lingering effects, the video will be of interest to Civil War buffs as well. There are some interesting facts related about events such as the Battle of Gettysburg, the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln's support of General Sherman's scorched earth policy, and the importance of Stonewall Jackson

and Robert E. Lee to Southern culture. There is also some fascinating old news footage of Civil War veterans, the last one of whom died in the mid-1950s.

Above and beyond all else in this video, there is a valiant attempt to impart a sense of history as wisdom. Tom Wicker, himself a Southerner, says it well herein. Americans are not ignorant of history, but they are terribly unappreciated of its importance in shaping the nature of their character, culture, and institutions. It is not surprising that in this most individualistic of nations, few people are devotees of history and its impact on their lives. American individualism encourages the citizenry to eschew bonds of solidarity in favor of the pursuit of material ends. The historical imagination necessary for what C. Wright Mills described as the sociological imagination is lacking. This video is a valuable beginning in redressing this imbalance.

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