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Epilogue

Sense and perspective

John Corner

University of Liverpool

In different ways, all the articles brought together here testify to the complexity of the processes by which television provides for its viewers a 'sense' of the past. This is, first of all, a sense working through the eyes and the ears to produce an encounter with the *physicality* of the past as places, people, objects and actions and then, on the basis of this, a more deeply cognitive and affective engagement with its meanings and implications (a sensing and then a making sense, one might say, playing on the richness of the relations between the two meanings of the word).

It is this sensory engagement that makes watching television history, whatever its format, so different from reading history. For however rich in detail the accounts of historians, and whatever the pictorial illustration, the words of the writer are always there, necessarily managing the flow of the narrative and the terms of explanation. This literate control of the discourse is a strength of historical scholarship, one that has been subject to a wide variety of alternatives and subversions as well as steady continuity. Many television programmes have needed to think carefully about how to adopt a version of it, most obviously through commentary and expert interview. However, television's distinctive way of 'doing' history, the basis of its popularity and impact is, with few exceptions, by offering a more phenomenological encounter with the past, by conjuring the past up (whether by dramatization, archive film, voiced contemporary accounts or just a steady contemplation of the places and spaces of past events). A good example of this is provided in the article by Emma Hanna when she notes the powerful impact of the image of the staring soldier in the opening sequences of episodes of *The Great War*. A mute, visual encounter of a tightly localized and personalized kind works to condense a whole range of feelings and transforms itself, for many viewers, into a moment of summarizing emotional knowledge.

It is through similar approaches to achieving what we can call 'the shock of the old' that television makes its distinctive contribution to popular historical sense at the same time as it becomes controversial, even scandalous. For at best, the priority it may give variously to the textures



of past events and experiences is only likely to have a partial fit with the priorities of historical scholarship. And although imagination is a requirement both of television production and historiography, television is by its very commitment to staging 'encounters' likely to exercise a wider and looser imaginative licence than most historians would allow (although the record here is by no means only one of disciplined self-restraint).

Thus there is raised the problem of the 'integrity' of television history, tackled in the preceding articles by the use of illuminatingly varied instances and the application of rather different, if sometimes only implied, systems of historical value. Can we point confidently to examples of 'bad television history' and identify with some precision the causes of its badness? Are we confident in the criteria by which we want to acclaim 'good television history' and to encourage its further development? Of course, precise analysis of how television history is put together, works textually and is received by audiences, is the first requirement of the scholarship gathered here. However, as all the authors indicate, the question of value permeates and complicates this project quite apart from deserving its own attention. David Cannadine's recent edited collection *History and the Media* (2004) offered some useful markers for plotting the key positions from which value is contested, cited by Erin Bell and Ann Gray in their attempt to take some of the arguments further.

Media and cultural studies was once in the habit of displaying strong views about how popular knowledge should be assembled and presented. The level of 'concession' made to the idea of entertainment and to the existing commercially-produced markers of popular taste varied. Now things have become more complicated, partly as a result of a stronger recognition of the discursive and aesthetic achievement of factual television, and partly as a retreat from the political and finally epistemological protocols that seemed to make 'judgement' less hazardous in the past. In this respect, the opening up of studies in television history will provide a further, rich, site for dispute about cultural integrity and cultural quality. Less categorical assertiveness in declarations of public value is, I think, to be welcomed, but a continuing engagement with, and argument about, value and judgement is essential.

I use the word 'perspective' in my title because one of the ways in which historical television resources us is by providing us precisely with various perspectives (apparent relations of distance, size and importance) on the past and then, crucially if indirectly, on the present and future. The central importance of the historical to the broad Enlightenment view of society and politics, part of a tougher, more secular questioning of the conditions of social being and social order, is still a project in continuation. Often, television's accounts of the world have been seen to pose a threat, if only by way of diversion (but sometimes by way of disinformation), to the fuller achievement of this project. More recently, of course, fundamental challenges to the 'uses of history', to its present scholastic practice and even



to its underlying philosophical assumptions, have presented themselves. These much larger play-offs of value, as well as the more local and often specifically national struggles around 'television' and the 'popular', are still being worked through, as some of the articles show.

On the matter of where television 'goes wrong', Tobias Ebbrecht makes a useful point in his comparative study of German and British docudrama when he quotes Welzer et al.'s (2002) comment about the move to the 'clear and definite' away from the 'controversial and inconsistent' in the transformations worked by television. This links with Ebbrecht's own observations about 'closed narration'. A recurrent criticism of television's historical treatments, rivalling those about its displacing concern for 'character' and 'action', is a perceived tendency towards reduction of the complex to the simple, and the multiple to the single. Clearly, television's conventional dramatic energies relate best to strong narrative definition and resolution (enigma is good but best when sharply posed against clear alternatives), whereas the actual record and available secondary sources may suggest something less satisfyingly tellable.

There is no doubt that this tension between, on the one hand, television's search for historical subjects as in part commodity materials, and on the other, a sense of the 'true' uncertainty surrounding an issue, is a troublesome one and likely to remain so. If anything, the influence of postmodernist thinking in the study of television has made it more obvious, further emphasizing contingency and problems of authority. My own judgement on this is that, indeed, television history does fail regularly in offering its audience a strong enough sense of contingency and uncertainty. We should be disturbed, puzzled and provoked to think further (not only about the past but the real limits on our knowledge of it) a good deal more than we are, even allowing for the reflexive qualities of the best work. Moreover, I think that audiences would accept and enjoy, rather than reject, a greater measure of complexity, and that ways of accomplishing this through speech and images present an important professional challenge to television production, a challenge which clearly some producers, directors and presenters have taken up but others are still inclined to ignore. Both Sonja de Leeuw, in her comments on the recent use of more complex narrative formats deriving from modernist fiction and Erin Bell and Ann Gray, in their illuminating final contrast of the styles of Simon Schama and Michael Wood (where Wood's more open, questing, involving approach is appraised), engage with some of the available possibilities.

It is worth noting here, since several of the pieces touch on questions of 'memory' (de Leeuw and Alexander Dhoest with emphasis), that 'memory' might not be a mode that is particularly amenable to cognitive volatility, contradiction or even complexity, being psychodynamically inclined towards the 'settled down' account. Of course, television is a massive public agency for 'settling down', for sedimenting national accounts into perceived



historical bedrock, even if occasionally it can be quite good at stirring (or digging) things up. More conceptual attention to the television–history–memory–knowledge linkage would be helpful, certainly.

I find it interesting that four of the contributions concern themselves with historical work on war. There are a number of reasons why wars present themselves as attractive subjects both for television and its audiences, of which two are worth mentioning here. First, they are often moments of severe national or international dislocation, routinely subject to different kinds of ‘memory work’ (including, of course, commemoration) and often they are returned to with obsessive energy as the focus of sharply-conflicting emotions, assessments and reassessments. Second, they usually have at their centre an intensity of action, suffering and sacrifice, which gives their accounts both strong dramatic shape and the attractions of appalling magnitude – of the scale of death and destruction, the machinery of violence, the horrific timescales often involved.¹ Television, like Hollywood, is caught at one of its more morally ambivalent moments in mediating this kind of event and experience, as several of the articles show. Its approach cannot but be heavily guided, when not entirely framed, by the possibilities for attracting audiences that are unthinkable for many other factual topics. Television’s historical work on wars and conflicts will continue to be a major area of dispute and – as the articles also indicate – of innovation. We can see this clearly when we look at the way in which the medium is now ‘historicizing’ early moments of the War on Terror, locating within this frame, both retrospective and often implicitly predictive, the events of September 2001.

Given the achievements of this special issue, to what kind of agenda for future inquiry does it point? First, in addition to the continuing need to have accounts from the production side, established here by example in the article by Bell and Gray, I think it provokes questions about the terms of engagement, understanding and use by audiences. Inquiry might benefit by working outwards from a quite tightly cognitive agenda about local textual understanding. This agenda became unfashionable and even judged as ‘naive’ within some quarters of cultural studies when the imperative towards broader ethnographic depth established itself. However, allowing both for the sociological desirability of a wider picture and the methodological pitfalls of going too ‘tight’ on text–audience relations, some close-up work on specific encounters of viewers with programmes could be hugely productive.

Second, cross-generic comparisons that include both fictional and factual historical narratives would be illuminating. Dhoest’s article on how popular series drama worked to produce such a powerful constitutive impact upon Flemish identity shows how important it is to bring fictions fully into any general survey. ‘Fictional’ history and ‘factual’ history, with their varying combinations of projected goodness and badness, are being continually superimposed upon each other in our heads, whatever



sense of category distinctions we try to maintain (perhaps foolishly in the opinion of some, although I am on the side of keeping up a critical sense of varying truth values here). Both the forms of knowledge of television representation and the *form of knowing through television* are at issue, in ways that remain underexplored. The manner in which drama-documentary comes into the picture, often controversially, at several points in the preceding articles (providing for the historical topic what Ebbrecht calls 'emotional space') indicates the centrality of these kinds of questions. James Chapman shows how this space can be also that in which kinds of narrative 'closure' work to give quiet moral lessons to the viewer (in his example, the idea of 'Dresden as payback for London' in Second World War firebombing, or the use of a contemporary 'shock and awe' frame to describe these events) in a way which may deserve scepticism both as to its historiographic and its normative integrity.

Third, there is no doubt that comparative work involving studies in other countries would help us to understand better the national cultural specificities of the relationship between history and popular culture at the same time as pointing us more precisely towards that which is international. Here, we have work looking at British, Dutch, Flemish and German examples, and the interconnections but also the differences from this sample alone could be the subject of a further article.

Finally, we can note how one of the many strengths of this collection is the questioning not only of current television formats but also those of the past. For the 'history of history' is certainly a useful interpretative context for understanding television history today. Moreover, there is every reason to suppose that the cultural dynamics which have made historical programmes so popular will continue to drive innovation in form and content. There will be work to admire and we can hope for at least a fair measure of programmes that make a real contribution to public historical awareness. But it would be idle to ignore the probability that much of what is produced will rightly provoke critical responses both as to its aims and methods. In helping to sustain such criticism, and to extend the terms of its expression, it is easy to agree with Bell and Gray that academic work about history *on* television that knows something about the history *of* television will be stronger and wiser.

Note

1. A recent and remarkable example here would be Niall Ferguson's six-part series for Channel 4, *The War of the World* (2006). Grounded firmly in a personal interpretation ('signature history'), the series was innovative in visual design, including the screening of archive film onto the surfaces of structures (e.g. buildings, bridges) in the locations to which the account referred. It thus played historical time and historical space off against the present. I have discussed recently how 'archive aesthetics' can introduce provocative relationships of value between past and present (Corner, 2006).



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Biographical note

John Corner is Professor in the School of Politics and Communication Studies, University of Liverpool. He has written widely in books and journals on television and, more recently, media–political relations. A book with colleagues on the history of the current affairs series *World in Action* is in press and currently he is writing on shifts in political communication and on documentary aesthetics. ADDRESS: School of Politics and Communication Studies, University of Liverpool, Roxby Building, Liverpool L69 7ZT, UK. [email: Corner@liv.ac.uk]