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Author(s): Laura Smith

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Making History: Post-Historical Commemorations of the Past in British Television

Laura Smith

The postmodernist re-evaluation of historical study has led to an awareness of the value of the moving image to the historian. Film can present us with glimpses of a past independent of discourse and its unique link with reality carries with it inevitable assumptions of authenticity. Yet the selection and manipulation of material by the filmmaker, and the dependence on causality or the establishment of ‘fact’, makes historical documentary as problematic as any other mode of historiography. National history is shaped as national identity, and, ultimately, acts of commemoration say as much about the present as the past.

Is history the graveyard of the past? The gulf between the ‘past’ – what has gone before – and ‘history’ – how it is recounted and recorded – can be a dark and treacherous terrain. In acts of commemoration ideas of history often descend into a futile negotiation with the dead, an endless *danse macabre*. The advent of postmodernism has brought with it a dismantling of established structures, and particularly a re-examination of the way history is legitimised. New ways of ‘figuring the past’ must emerge. Roland Barthes moved literary studies from an emphasis on the *context* of the work to the study of the *text* itself — from the external structures to the internal pre-figurations. This was the unavoidable transition from structuralism to post-structuralism: where structures were exposed not as universal ‘realities’, but as socially constructed discourses. In a

LAURA SMITH was born in Glasgow and graduated in June 2007 with a first class honours degree in of English Literature. She was the film columnist for the Glasgow University Guardian and a regular contributor to the film pages of The Skinny and STV online. This year she worked on the Glasgow Film Festival, sub-edited the daily newspaper of the Cambridge Film Festival and edited the website of the Edinburgh International Film Festival. She was awarded the Lorimer Bursary for excellence in English Literature and wrote her dissertation on the Noir thrillers of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett.

post-historical mode of history, the past is a text to be interpreted, and subsequently is plunged into the storm of conflicting literary criticism and linguistic analysis that has fuelled the postmodernist debate. Inevitably, we are led from a defence of a particular mode of history to a defence of history itself. Written history often fails to take into account, or put across, the reality of history as lived. Film as historiography or commemoration is itself a posthistorical way of making history: it is unique in its ability to *show* the past. This encounter between television documentary and history is the focus of this study.

The BBC's seminal television series *The World at War*, with its ambitious scope, energy and self-confidence, proclaimed itself as "the definitive story of the Second World War".¹ History as figured by postmodernism is, in contrast, characterised by a refutation of ultimate, final accounts of the past, as well as a dismantling of established ideas of historical scholarship, and a new focus on the individual. *The World at War* opens with shots of a ghost town, a village in France desecrated by the Nazis and never rebuilt. "Its ruins are a memorial," the voice-over tells us. Historical documentary, viewed through the fog of postmodernity, is a series of ruins, remnants of the past. Programmes such as *The World at War*, or the more recent *Auschwitz — The Nazis and the Final Solution*, present history as a monument to the past, as commemoration. "These fragments I have shored against my ruins," says T.S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*. This is the experience of the postmodernist historian, piecing together the kaleidoscopic view of a disunified past that exists only as crumbling vestiges.

In the first episode of the 26-part series, *A New Germany: 1933-1939*, we see leading Nazis such as Göring and Goebbels taking part in a charity street-collection, "for the benefit of the cameras, [showing] themselves as folk comrades". Motive and bias is explicitly underlined, but what of the rest of the images that we see: how much of what is seen is 'for the benefit of the cameras'? The danger of using film as evidence, is to lose sight of *how* such

1 Jeremy Isaacs, Exec. Prod., "Episode 1 and 2 Video sleeve-note", *The World at War* (BBC, Thames Television, 1973).

evidence came to be: why it was filmed and for whom. One example used in *The World at War* is a newsreel depicting German refugees, supposedly victims of Polish brutality: “Nazi propaganda,” the voice-over tells us, “filmed them greedily”. In another clip, soaring employment statistics are accompanied with the firm pronouncement, “All the Fuhrer’s work, that’s all you need to know”. And yet, is the message of the ‘definitive’ documentary not inevitably — this is all you need to know?

Included in *The World at War*’s variety of disparate sources are Eva Braun’s home movies, with the narrator careful to remind us that even this most innocent of genres is still staged and unreliable. We see “Adolf with children, Adolf with dogs, Adolf with a magnifying glass, Adolf with friends, out for a walk – like a good Bavarian bourgeoisie – on a Sunday”. Such a list of incidentals would be meaningless without illustrations and thus, with a suitably ironic ‘Ode to Adolf’ playing over the clips, the sequence is effective. Laurence Olivier’s clear, assured monologue, coupled with his reputation as a ‘serious’ actor, instils confidence in the viewer: we trust what he tells us. Despite the authoritative, contained narration of events, a note of – rather British – irony is often allowed to the fore: shades of a postmodernism that is characterised by irreverence and parody. We are informed that: “It was perfect weather for a late holiday... or invading Poland”, and “In Britain it was snowing too. The censorship tried to hush it up, but the people couldn’t help noticing”.² A catalogue of injustices and freedoms curtailed is narrated over footage of Christmas celebrations: giant swastikas dwarfing the crosses as a choir sing *Stille Nacht*. The assassination of Hitler’s enemies is depicted in a crudely animated firing squad, gunshots ringing over the soundtrack.

The difficulty here is that playing with archive footage in a way that is not explicitly acknowledged can later create unease and confusion. Film’s unique link with reality carries with it inevitable claims or assumptions of authenticity. Manipulation of this material calls into question all film evidence. But, of course, this kind of manipulation happens all the time. In Nazi Germany, Leni

2 Ibid.

Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1934) is an example of this kind of staged history on an enormous scale. Riefenstahl writes that "the event was organised in the manner of a theatrical performance, not only as a popular rally, but also to provide the *material* for a propaganda film... *everything was decided by reference to the camera*".³

The power of television to incite emotion was lost on neither Hitler nor the Allies. Of the hundreds of films made by the Germans, Americans and British, some were straightforward training films; others provided psychological preparation for troops going into battle, explaining who they were fighting and why. Still others were used to sustain civilian morale: stimulating fear, courage and more abstract notions like honour, patriotism and duty. In a similar way, *The World at War* uses the unique power of the image to provoke a response. German children are shown playing at soldiers and firing real guns: young, eager British soldiers are waved off by tearful sweethearts on their way to the front. We must watch these images with the burden of retrospect: the future seems somehow inevitable.

Another strand of postmodernism exerts the historian to, as it were, stop all the clocks. Frank Ankersmit expresses a widespread view when he declares that: "Historical time is a recent and highly artificial invention of Western civilization".⁴ History is no longer in search of lost time. Causality, in historical scholarship, is seen as reliant on a structuralist view of time as something regulated and established: imposing patterns and chains of events that are questionable. *The World at War* presents the period from 1933 onwards as a chronology of falling dominoes, a series of unfortunate events. There is often a temptation to depict the past as a series of stepping stones leading to this moment in time. History must be presented as teleologically convincing. It must flow and make sense. The narrativisation of historical discourse shapes the

3 Quoted in Paul Virilio. *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (London, New York: Verso, 1999), 59. (My italics).

4 Frank Ankersmit, *History and Tropology: The Rise and Fall of Metaphor* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1994), 33-4.

past into a consumable commodity that can be made sense of; enclosed in books and film canisters; reduced to dates and monuments. For the post-structuralist, such a view of time is controlling and restrictive, favouring Western ideology and legitimising hegemony. History is not just one damn thing after another, it is a mesh of centrifugal forces surrounding each event: past, present and future entangled. The ‘fact’ spreads concentric circles, rippling into a multiplicity of perspectives and interpretations.

In the more recent BBC docu-drama series *Auschwitz — The Nazis and the Final Solution*, dramatic reconstructions are used, not only to illustrate narration, but to “tell their own story through dialogue”. Historical documents such as official memoranda, minutes from meetings, autobiographical accounts, and even audio recordings and transcripts of speeches, are ‘brought to life’ by German-speaking actors in meticulously re-created sets. This is history as experience, and film is the only medium that can hope to place us *in medias res* — the television as time-machine. The series’ drama director, Detlef Siebert, claims that this way of figuring the past provides “insights into [the Nazis’] motives and decision-making — insights that no interviewee could provide”.⁵ Yet often the dialogue is constructed from a number of documents written at the time to “reflect the thinking of those present at the meeting”. Here, the gap between fact and fiction seems increasingly tenuous and claims of accuracy are misleading. Siebert goes on to distinguish *Auschwitz* from fictional representations of World War Two – *Schindler’s List* and *Conspiracy* – claiming that the aim to tell a story dominates these works, “at the expense of factual accuracy”. But is the Holocaust not, essentially, an imagined construction? Not, of course, the atrocity itself, but the way it is understood and commemorated. Our attempts to name it – Holocaust, Final Solution, Shoah, Churban, German genocide of the Jews – are always an effort to represent the unrepresentable, and contain within the limitations of history or language what history has not prepared us for; what is beyond comprehension.

5 Detlef Siebert, “Historical Accuracy and the Making of ‘Auschwitz’”; available from http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/war/history_drama_01.shtml; internet; accessed 30 May 2007.

The programme-makers of *The World at War*, and particularly the associate producer Jerome Kuehl, wanted the programme to serve as a demonstration of the value of film to the historian.⁶ Consequently the overriding concern was accuracy: every scrap of footage was treated as a document to be scrutinised. While Simon Schama, a historian with a greater debt to postmodernism, presents himself as an enthusiastic, entertaining storyteller; *The World at War* offers a more sober, expository version of film historiography: the emphasis is on accuracy and authenticity. The programme often seems at pains to assert its objectivity: stating without defence that Britain was “the first democracy to sign a pact with the Nazis”, and documenting as many failures and blunders as successes. Of course, *The World at War* invites criticism in its confidence — proudly packaged as the ‘definitive’ account of World War Two. As postmodernism rightly argues, no historian can cover the totality of past events, there can be no ultimate version of the past. For Keith Jenkins, history is merely a manifestation of perspective, entirely alienated from the events that build the past.⁷ Often the historian would have us believe that he is merely the oracle of the past. But in the construction of a history, or in any act of commemoration, the historian unavoidably fashions a creation in his own image. “History”, Winston Churchill said, “will be kind to me for I intend to write it”. These programmes, like any film, say as much about their filmmakers, and the context in which they were aired, as they do about the events they seek to present.

An interpretation of Plato’s ‘Allegory of the Cave’ as an antecedent of film and television, could infer that society, through the ubiquity of images, would become entirely divorced from reality. For Jean Baudrillard this severance has in fact occurred, and we now see the world through its representation. The media, in Baudrillard’s view, has created a hyper-reality, where images take the place of events and memories. The television shapes a national consciousness.

6 According to Penelope Houston in her *Keeper of the Frame: The Film Archives* (London: British Film Institute, 1994).

7 See Keith Jenkins, “What History Is” in *Re-Thinking History*, Keith Jenkins, ed. (London: Routledge, 1991), 5-26.

The representation, and by extension, the commemoration, kills the reality. The media, then, *makes* history. In this way Baudrillard can declare that the Gulf War never occurred, because it existed for the majority of the world in a virtual reality, a mass hallucination. Thus film and television can be seen as perpetuating the postmodernist view of history as an infinitely interpretable discourse, without discernible facts. The simulation is so convincing, the past as reality is swallowed up. At this stage of Baudrillard's vision, the historian Alan Munslow has suggested that: "there no longer remains a foundational standard by which we judge the-past-as-history".⁸ Structureless-ness thereby becomes a quality of our understanding of the past and of our present.

Structuralism, it seems, is often characterised as a denial of agency to individuals in history and an imposition of a unity that does not exist. Many post-structuralists seek to re-centre the individual as a focus for study. "Above all", proclaims the video blurb of *The World at War*, "[this series] brings to the screen the experiences of ordinary men and women". The filmmakers are careful to delineate the distinction between the experts who write history, the politicians who 'made history', and the 'ordinary people' who *lived* that history. Contributors are given titles such as 'Businessman,' 'Law Student,' 'Printer's Son,' 'Army Officer,' 'Farmer's Daughter.' There is an emphasis on the authenticity of the accounts, these people *were there*. The memories of those who were children at the time of the events recounted would perhaps have been devalued in traditional history. But for contemporary documentarismakers, survivors of the Second World War are increasingly scarce. There is a sense of urgency in the BBC's *Auschwitz*, a cry to 'never forget'. Here commemoration and identity converge. Television fosters what Thomas Elsaesser calls a "sense of sociability, of coming together around shared feelings".⁹ In episode fifteen of *The World at War (Home Fires: Britain 1940-*

8 Alan Munslow, "Introduction" in *The Postmodern History Reader*, Keith Jenkins, ed. (London: Routledge, 1997).

9 Thomas Elsaesser, "'One train may be hiding another': private history, memory and national identity"; available from <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepast/classics/r0499/terr6b.htm>; internet; accessed 30 May 2007.

1944), Londoners sit in a pub recollecting their experiences. The series exploits a sense of the past as a *shared* experience: this is the people's war, a collective memory. National history is shaped as national identity.

As history is called into question, the value of memory increases. We are all historians. We collate and interpret our memories, we invent ourselves through our pasts: all that has gone before has brought us to this moment, here, now, this thought, these words. The historian is knocked down from his watchtower over the past into the crowds of 'post-historians' – the 'ordinary people' – and the omniscient narrator is joined by a clamour of innumerable voices. History is people, not dates in books or animated arrows speeding across maps of Europe. With this aspect of postmodernist inquiry, the individual is raised to a place of prominence. Those who have been conspicuous only by their silence through history – women, the working-class, the defeated, the downtrodden, the losers – finally are given the floor. History becomes democratic. The meek really do inherit the earth.

In the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz, some Jewish prisoners secretly wrote eyewitness accounts of the atrocities of the gas chambers and hid them in bottles or metal containers buried in the ground. A number of these accounts were discovered after the war. The past, it would seem, is buried deep in broken vessels. Yet it did occur, even if all we are left with is fragments to shore against our own ruins. Keith Jenkins sees history as one discourse – among many – that gives meaning to the world.¹⁰ For the postmodernist, meaning or truth is something that does not exist until it is articulated. Even if we do not subscribe to this view, it must be recognised that the historian's asymptotic pursuit of truth ultimately fails to recognise the inevitable limitations of historical scholarship and, in this case, of the moving image itself.¹¹ There can be no Final Solution to history. Buried in theorisation, the historical fact disappears from view. Hayden White argues that there is no single correct view of an event,

10 Jenkins, *What History Is*, 5-26.

11 The mathematical asymptote is a line that draws increasingly nearer to a curve without ever actually meeting it.

“...there are no grounds to be found in the [historical] record itself for preferring one way of construing its meaning rather than another...”¹² Thus, the postmodernist would have it, arguments of objectivity are pointless since anything that anyone says is equally valid.

Doubt is necessary for historical, indeed for any kind of, scholarship. But doubt should not be a dead end: it can be the path to truth, or at least to understanding. The twelfth century philosopher Peter Abelard declared that “doubt leads to inquiry, inquiry leads to truth”. But in a postmodernist, poststructuralist method of history, inquiry leads right back to doubt. The postmodernist historian delights in this whirlpool of incomprehension, the certainty that we can know nothing for certain. So should the historian and the filmmaker surrender to the impossibility of concrete fact or fundamentals, not drowning but waving? In a criticism of evaluative, interpretative history we should not lose sight of the fact (dangerous word) that the past *has been*. Even if every person involved in an event saw it differently, the truth of its occurrence does not change. Documentaries such as *The World at War* may be just ghosttrains speeding past us, but they commemorate a past independent of discourse, a past of people. Historians have the privilege and the burden of hindsight, and this, in effect, is the value of history: to be able to look at any event, no matter how little evidence there exists, and see it with the eyes of the future. For we can know one thing: that the past has brought us – inevitably or not – to this, here, *now*.

12 Hayden White, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality” in *On Narrative*, W.J.T. Mitchell, ed. (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 1-23.

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