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TV history - history on TV? by Michael Wood

Michael Wood (filmmaker)

I will begin this session on 'The Media, Heritage, Museums and Education' by taking a look at the subject from the point of view of the media. I started off as a medievalist, so I was especially interested in Mr Clarke's remarks last year, and I still have a small involvement in things medieval. However, my point of view is that of a professional filmmaker. For more than twenty-five years my job has been making documentaries about history on TV for the four main British channels. For the last fifteen years, I have been a partner in [Maya Vision International](#), a small independent film company, put in the position of having to pitch these ideas to controllers - an interesting exercise in seeing which ideas interest them and which do not. (1) Our company has not only a constant involvement with the machinery of television, the commissioning process and the big channels, but also with the general public. We are constantly talking to the general public, through lectures and meetings, through the Internet, through contact with schools, through the letters that come after programs, and so forth. We create websites and inevitably we talk to museums, archives and libraries. We deal with heritage organisations, [The National Trust](#), [English Heritage](#) and places like the [British Museum](#), if only to negotiate filming in what is an increasingly expensive climate for filmmakers.

Last week there were several shows on TV about history. Lawrence Rees's show on [Auschwitz](#) had 3.7 million viewers - a very large audience for history on television. Even our programmes *In Search of Myths and Heroes*, which was history as travel, adventure, geography and storytelling rolled into one, got an audience of 3.5 million. TV stations can be funny about the way they categorise history: a couple of years ago our series *In Search of Shakespeare* was firmly categorised as 'arts' despite the fact that it was based on historical documents which told of a Tudor life. The word 'Shakespeare' immediately had those in the history department cowering, saying 'Well, it has got to be arts because it won't get as big an audience as history'. But viewing figures of 3.5-4 million are highly respectably-sized audiences. The programmes on Auschwitz and on myths and heroes were shows on foreign themes, which is interesting when TV committees often believe that a million viewers are lost as soon as you leave Great Britain; British history, of course, is what 'they' want most. Our show last week took us to lost civilisations in places like Assam and Marib and wove in bits of the Qur'an, the Bible and the Ethiopian Book of Kings - and it got 3.5 million viewers on BBC1, an indicator of the public response that history programmes have. The BBC series on genealogy *Who Do You Think You Are?*, which was a kind of history programme, got even bigger audiences. The key thing here was the fascination with the idea of personal history. In my experience over twenty-five years, ratings have remained pretty constant. They are slightly higher now because of the amazing diversification of channels - even dedicated history channels such as UK History, Discovery and the History Channel. These figures show that the interest has always been there, but only now are commissioners starting to recognise it fully.

However, there is a lot of formulaic, often poor, filmmaking. On some channels it is so formalised with very simple dramatised tableaux that when you sit in a commissioning meeting, you are told exactly how long your pans should be, what proportion of music should be in the show, what you are allowed - and not allowed - to say, and, of course, that you must include dramatisation. A TV commissioner once said to me: 'These dramatisations are really great. I look forward to the day when history documentaries can be completely dramatised.' I replied, 'Isn't that drama?' But that is sometimes how it is - nothing is left to the imagination. The great filmmaker Billy Wilder's ten tips on how to make a great film included at number ten: let the audience put two and two together and they will love you forever. This should be happening in TV history, you should be able to construct an historical narrative dramatically on television, where the audience is engaged in the drama of the events, and where two and two can be put together.

Despite these caveats, my impression is that there is a real crossover between what happens on TV history and what happens in history in schools and universities. I remember after the first series of *In Search of the Dark Ages*, the largest proportion of letters we received was from people already involved in raising families, many of them women who had stopped their education at a certain level and who wanted to know how to find out more, where to discover more, how to access sources of history in local libraries and in local institutions. I have lost count of the number of letters we have received from people saying they started studying because of a television programme they had seen. There are many faults with TV history, but it can genuinely inspire people, from children to adults, to find out more. (2)

A few years ago I found out a surprising fact: the biggest leisure time activity in Britain is not sport or angling, it is history. Taken together, [The National Trust](#) (the biggest single membership organisation in Britain), [English Heritage](#), museum visits, the myriad history groups around the country comprise the biggest leisure activity in Britain. Bringing past lives back to life, historical imagination, these are the most basic drives in us, personally, locally, and nationally. It may be self-taught; or the impetus may come from family, from school or from TV, but it is there nevertheless.

There are dangers in formulae and dramatisation, but one which particularly resonates with teachers of history is that the complexity of history can be reduced too far. TV is a simple medium driven by narrative to the exclusion of all else; it is not very good at analysis, argument or complexity, or representing the chaos of interacting connections of even one person's life, let alone of great events. TV likes a simple line - but history is not like that. If you reduce history to a simple line, to tableaux and simple stories, there is a danger that you will take the life out of history. I sometimes think that when TV history shows get poor ratings, it is because the audience feels cheated by the shallowness of the programme. But putting ambiguity and shades of meaning into TV programmes, without just plonking in two experts who disagree, is a task for the filmmaker, not the telly don.

For all the emphasis on narrative history at the moment, I think there are as many ways of doing history on TV as there are of teaching it. Fernand Braudel's method might be a rather interesting way of making TV history programmes. Braudel's books on the Mediterranean, on France and on nature of civilisation seem to be at the core of what the humanities are about: the big picture, the micro stories, the imaginative use of documents. Braudel shows the realities as shaped by geography, landscape, culture and living continuities. It would be interesting to see a talented programme maker and a gifted and imaginative historian combine to do something like the Roman Empire in a Braudelian way, showing the Mediterranean world through that period, instead of a narrative of what the Caesars got up to in their bathrooms. It makes me wonder whether we compartmentalise history too much in the curriculum too - we should be mixing documents, geography, culture, continuities and literature.

The ultimate goal is to stimulate the historical imagination, to inspire young and old to learn more, to give the audience an impression of the complexities and ambiguities of the past, and not to patronise the dead or reduce their experience to a single thread. We often read that there is a feeling that history is not valued in schools. I feel that the government needs to get out of its mechanistic treatment of education as something to prepare people for work to feed the economy. History is a discipline of mind that teaches judgement, but also empathy with peoples of the past and peoples of other cultures, different races and creeds. It is truly a humane subject - in fact, I would argue, the humane subject - when it is taught well. I wonder whether there are signs that the government is waking up to the fact that the humanities play a key role in shaping a person, as was known in previous eras. History is just like great literature: it humanises. All the current talk about citizenship is an acknowledgement that identity, history, a sense of a shared past actually are really important in creating an

'allegiance'.

I would like to offer one final practical thought relating to everybody on the panel here today. It seems to me that all of us in the humanities, in our different ways, who are fighting this battle should learn to cooperate. We need to learn that connective thinking is the key to winning. We all need to connect but, in the end, I think it comes down to passion and commitment to the subject, and to respect and love for the subject.

Notes

1. To contact Maya Vision International, please email info@mayavisionint.com . [Back to \(1\)](#).
2. Each of Michael Wood's television series mentioned here - and those which are not - is accompanied by a book, published by [BBC Books](#). [Back to \(2\)](#).

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