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Where the Past Comes Alive': Television, History and Popular Memory

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“Where the Past Comes Alive’: Television, History
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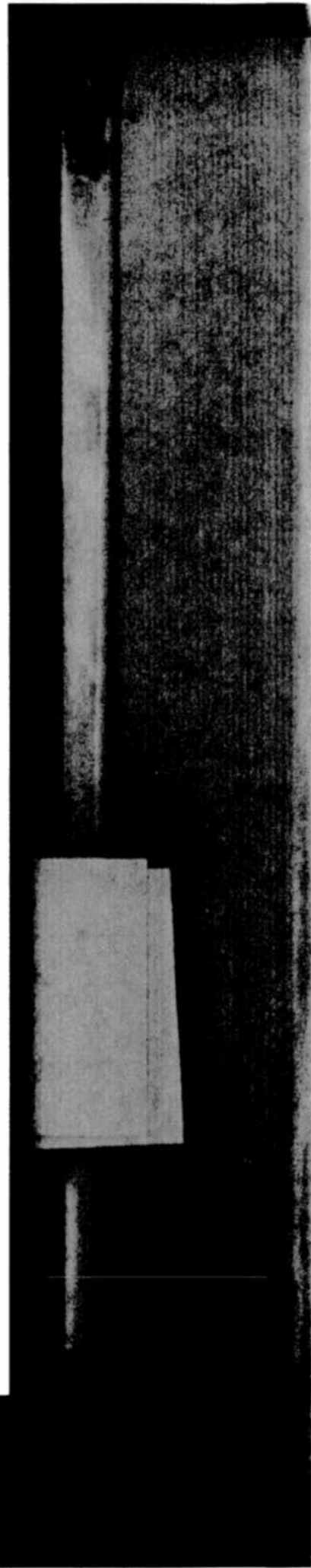


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A Companion to Television

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"Where the Past Comes Alive": Television, History, and Collective Memory

Gary R. Edgerton

A Different Kind of History Altogether

Those who don't understand history are doomed to repeat it.

Tony Soprano, 1999

Television specializes in odd juxtapositions. Take Anthony "Tony" Soprano (James Gandolfini), the lead character in the critically-acclaimed HBO hit, *The Sopranos* (1999-present), quoting George Santayana. Of course, Tony didn't utter his off-the-cuff version of this famous saying after having just read it in the philosopher's own writings (Santayana, 1905, p. 284). (The actual quotation is: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.") Rather, he heard it first as a recurring tag line on The History Channel, a network he often watches while unwinding in his upper-middle-class suburban New Jersey home. "It means we're in the mainstream," explains Artie Scheff, chief marketing officer of The History Channel, "We have become part of pop-culture. We're Tony Soprano's favorite channel. Letterman and Leno talk about us on a regular basis" ("Making History with History," 2001). He could have also added how much Ozzy Osbourne, the 53-year-old former Black Sabbath singer, loves The History Channel, as his bemused wife Sharon teases him by referring to her husband's network of choice as "The War Channel."

In the debut episode of MTV's *The Osbournes* (March 5, 2002), for instance, Ozzy becomes panic-stricken when he is unable to operate the remote control keypad and finds himself hopelessly stuck on The Weather Channel. He is rescued by 15-year-old Jack who quickly shows Dad how easy it is to use the device. They then bond together on the sofa—father and son—watching The

History Channel. Something altogether different is obviously going on at the Osbournes, as it is in households across the country. What do the fictional Tony in the east, Ozzy in Beverly Hills, and Dave and Jay coast-to-coast, all have in common? They fit the target profile of The History Channel's core audience – upscale men 25 to 54. This is a highly coveted demographic in the television industry since it is traditionally very hard to reach. This group used to only tune in to news and sports on a regular basis. Now historical programming is very much a part of this cohort's viewing agenda.

Made-for-TV history is currently a vast enterprise, spanning feature films and television series, commercial and public networks, corporate and independent producers. The last decade, in particular, has witnessed a dramatic rise in historical programming on television screens all around the world – particularly in the United States, the rest of North and South America, Europe, and parts of Asia – mostly in the form of biographies and quasi-biographical fictional narratives and documentaries, which coincides with a marked increase of interest in history among the general population. “I think we're living in a time when history has reemerged as one of the popular forms of entertainment, and that's great,” observes producer, director, and writer, Ric Burns. “It sort of slept for a couple of decades, in the '60s and '70s, and now it's really back, as it was before TV when historical novels and historical movies and historical poetry and history itself were mainstays of popular culture” (Flanagan, 1994).

Ric's brother Ken is probably the most recognizable television producer specializing in historical programming, primarily because of the unprecedented success of *The Civil War* (PBS, 1990) as well as the consistently robust showings of his other TV specials. Ken Burns actually became one of public television's busiest and most celebrated producers during the 1980s, a decade when the historical documentary held little interest for most American TV viewers. Since 1990, however, 70 million Americans have now seen *The Civil War*; 50 million have watched *Baseball* (PBS, 1994); 30 million *Jazz* (PBS, 2001); and all of his other made-for-TV histories over the last decade have averaged around 15 million viewers during their debut telecasts. The cumulative popularity of Burns's television histories is striking by virtually any measure, and he – more than anyone – has emerged as the signature figure of this far larger programming trend (Edgerton, 2001).

Histories on TV encompass much more than just documentaries, however – irrespective of Ken Burns's extraordinary success and influence as a television producer and popular historian. Made-for-TV histories also employ a wide array of news, reality, and entertainment formats. Any constructive evaluation of historical programming also needs to begin with the understanding that it is an entirely new and different kind of history. Unlike written discourse, the language of television is highly stylized, elliptical (rather than linear) in structure, and associational or metaphoric in the ways in which it portrays images and ideas. Overall, then, this chapter explores the broader parameters of made-for-TV history, describing its stylistic preferences, and proposing ten general

assumptions about the nature of this widespread phenomenon. This chapter concludes with some preliminary observations concerning the enduring (if often uneasy) relationship between the proponents of popular and professional history and also the opportunities and challenges that this linkage poses for television producers and scholars alike.

Expand Globally, Program Locally

History is the new rock 'n' roll.

Henry Becton, Jr., President of WGBH Educational Foundation, 2001

Today, historical programming on TV is more popular than ever before. On October 19–22, 2001, WGBH in Boston hosted the first World Congress of History Producers, attracting nearly 400 participants from more than 20 countries to an event it cosponsored with BBC History. The four-day affair, nicknamed HISTORY 2001, and funded largely by the Banff Television Foundation, provided producers, commissioning agents, creative talent, broadcasters, and a few scholars with a wide-ranging lineup of plenary sessions, assorted panels (with titles such as “The Ethical Quagmire: Facing the Tough Questions,” “Where Does News End and History Begin?,” and “Biography: Hagiography or Hatchet Job?”), master classes conducted by leading producers of history and biography programs, screening opportunities, and plenty of informal networking and sales meetings. Held in the wake of September 11, most attendees agreed that “historical programming is needed more than ever” (Ramsey, 2001). In addition, they were generally upbeat about the future prospects of history on TV, especially since funding for such programming had increased 300 percent since 1993 (Stearn, 2002, p. 26).

Most conference participants enthusiastically welcomed Henry Becton, Jr.'s booster allusion comparing history to rock 'n' roll. After all, Becton is an experienced professional, having served in higher administration at WGBH since 1978, as well as twice being named a director of the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) – from 1987 to 1993 and again from 1995 to 2001. Attendees also wanted to hear his message because they could see that HISTORY 2001 was exceeding all expectations as a trade summit, laying the groundwork for what would eventually develop into an annual world congress devoted entirely to the promotion, cultivation, and assessment of television histories.

The international dimension of HISTORY 2001 (and its successors) is especially important to recognize since *history on TV is first and foremost a global phenomenon*. Another case in point is the worldwide expansion and positioning of the A&E Television Networks (AETN), a joint venture owned by The Hearst Corporation, ABC, and NBC. Launched in 1984, AETN is the parent corporation of A&E, The Biography Channel, The History Channel, and The History

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Channel International. The combined reach of AETN is currently 235 million homes telecasting in 20 languages across 70 countries. On both the domestic and international levels, "The History Channel is the fastest growing cable network ever" ("Making History with History," 2001).

Second, most television histories strongly affirm the local needs, concerns, and self-perceptions of those who are watching. Even though made-for-TV history is global in reach and popularity, it is typically produced and programmed to appeal to national, regional, and localized tastes and sensibilities – former Speaker of the House Thomas P. ("Tip") O'Neill is usually credited with the well-worn adage that "all politics is local." The same can be said of history on television. When The History Channel International was launched in November 1998, its penultimate goal was stated as being "to adapt programs to local needs, using dubbing or perhaps adding a new host" for any new affiliated region that chose to accept its signal (The History Channel, 1997). As the coverage of The History Channel International grew dramatically over the next five years, network executives also made a concerted effort to enter into a series of "joint ventures . . . acquir[ing] locally produced programs" from participating nations to "fill out the rest" of its 24-hour 7-day-a-week schedule (Grele, 2000; The History Channel, 1997; "Making History with History," 2001). This careful attention to the expectations and desires of its rapidly expanding audience base facilitated the quick adoption of The History Channel International on continents as widely diverse in cultural orientation as Europe, South America, Asia, and Australia.

Third, television is the principal means by which most people learn about history today. TV must be understood (although it seldom is) as the primary way that children and adults form their understanding of the past. Just as television has profoundly affected and altered every aspect of contemporary life – from the family to education, government, business, and religion – the medium's fictional and non-fictional portrayals have similarly transformed the way tens of millions of viewers think about historical figures and events. Most people, for example, recall the first Persian Gulf War and the more recent War with Iraq through the lens of television, just as their frame of reference regarding slavery has been deeply influenced by TV mini-series, such as the fictional *Roots* (ABC, 1977) and the non-fictional *Africans in America* (PBS, 1998), along with cinematic portrayals, such as *Amistad* (1997), which characteristically has been seen by more people on TV than in movie theaters.

Fourth, history on television is now big business. There are over 250 broadcast and cable networks in America alone, and roughly 98 percent of these services resulted from the dramatic rise of cable and satellite TV over the last 25 years. Scores of cable networks have become closely identified with documentaries as a profitable staple of their weekly schedules. As one veteran producer, Kate Coe, explains, "[t]elevision today is awash in nonfiction programming. A&E, the Discovery Channel, the History Channel, Bravo, Oxygen, and dozens more present hours of documentary programs . . . [o]n any given day, as many as 2.5 million viewers tune into these [individual] shows" (Coe, 2003, p. C3). More-

over, ever since "Ken Burns's *The Civil War* proved that history on TV could be engaging — and attract millions of viewers," historical "documentaries [have been] all over the dial" (Gabler, 1997, p. 18). In 2002 *Variety* even reported that history "is now the preferred fare not just for pubcasters (i.e. public broadcasters) with a mission to educate, but also for commercial channels, and thematic cable and satellite outlets" (Johnson, 2002).

The proliferation of historical programming on TV is centered primarily on three fundamental business and economic reasons. To begin with, cable television's emphasis on "narrowcasting — specialized avenues for specialized tastes — is an area in which the documentary can thrive" (Natale, 1992). Next, non-fiction is relatively cost-effective to produce when compared to most fictional programming (according to the latest estimates, per-hour budgets for a dramatic TV episode now exceed \$1 million, while documentaries average \$500,000 for prestige productions, \$300,000 for reality-based programs and dramatic recreations, and \$150,000 for standard non-fictional fare at networks such as those owned by AETN). Even more significantly, though, many of these shows which have some historical dimension are just as popular with audiences as sitcoms, hour-long dramas, and movie reruns in syndication (Bellafante, 1997; Johnson, 2002; Katz, 1999; Mahler, 1997; Romano, 2003).

Fifteen biographical programs are currently thriving on US television, with a half-dozen more already in preparation (Poniewozik, 1999; Lafayette, 2003). Most of these existing series are also among the most watched shows on their respective networks. The forerunner and acknowledged prototype is A&E's *Biography* (1987–present) with an average nightly viewership of nearly 3 million, spawning videotapes, CDs, a magazine called *Biography* with a 2 million readership, and The Biography Channel. The *Biography* franchise celebrated its 15th anniversary with its 1,000th episode in 2002. The index of historical (and contemporary) individuals and couples featured on *Biography*, from Thomas Jefferson to Jackie Robinson to John Travolta and Condeleeza Rice, is sweeping and diverse. At the same time, this series typically relies on highly derivative stylistics which are a pastiche of techniques borrowed from TV news, prime-time dramatic storytelling, and PBS non-fiction *à la* Ken Burns. All told, A&E's *Biography* is a representative example of how history is often framed in highly conventional and melodramatic ways on TV, mainly to be marketed and sold directly to consumers around the world as a commodity.

Fifth, history on TV is also subject to the same kinds of generic influences that are affecting the rest of television at any given moment of time. For example, the first historical reality series, *The 1900 House*, was produced in Britain during the fall of 1999, during exactly the same television season that *Big Brother* debuted in Holland. This so-called "living history" program, a co-production of the UK's Channel 4 and PBS's Thirteen/WNET in New York, was based on the guilty pleasure of having viewers observe a contemporary family adapt to and interact in a setting that approximates the accommodations and furnishings of a turn-of-the-century home. The voyeuristic appeal of watching *The 1900 House* shared

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much in common with *Big Brother*, as did the soap opera nature of the action that ensued. *The 1900 House* was so successful on both sides of the Atlantic, in fact, that it spawned similar PBS telecasts, such as *Frontier House* (2002), *1940s House* (2002), *Manor House* (2003), and *Colonial House* (2004). Not surprisingly, objections to these “you are there” made-for-TV histories have appeared in both popular and scholarly journals. As one British scholar concluded, “[r]eality history’ may be entertainment, but it is neither reality nor history” (Stearn, 2002, p. 27).

Cable television also jumped on the “living history” bandwagon. *Variety* started referring to a “‘Survivor’ after-effect,” adding that “popular network reality shows have brought a new audience to ‘really real’ nonfiction programming on cable” (McDonald, 2001). The most recent example of this growing tendency is *Extreme History with Roger Daltrey*, which debuted on The History Channel in the fall of 2003. This half-hour series capitalizes on the strategy of marketing history alongside rock ‘n’ roll by casting of a well-known pop star as the show’s featured host. A network press release even describes “Roger Daltrey, [the] lead singer of the legendary rock band The Who . . . [as] an avid history buff, [who] goes on location to demonstrate the challenge of surviving history’s epic adventures, explorations, and battles” (The History Channel, 2003).

Episodes include Daltrey scaling the Montana Rockies like Lewis and Clark in 1805; driving steers through the Chisholm Trail of Texas and Oklahoma; and shooting the Colorado rapids in a wooden rowboat much like John Wesley Powell did in 1869. Daltrey’s exploits as a celebrity surrogate reenacting a pre-fabricated historical narrative epitomizes The History Channel’s branding claim that it is the niche network — “Where the Past Comes Alive.” Reality histories such as *Extreme History with Roger Daltrey* also illustrate the ongoing negotiation between popular generic trends, commercial imperatives, and historicity that is always a part of producing historical programming on TV.

Sixth, the technical and stylistic features of television as a medium strongly influence the kinds of historical representations that are produced. History on TV tends to stress the twin dictates of narrative and biography which ideally expresses television’s penchant toward personalizing all social, cultural, and, for our purposes, historical matters within the highly controlled and viewer involving confines of a well-constructed plot structure. The scholarly literature on television has established intimacy and immediacy (among other aesthetics) as intrinsic properties of the medium (Adler, 1981; Allen, 1987; Bianculli, 1992; Fiske and Hartley, 1978; Newcomb, 1974; Newcomb, 2000). In the case of intimacy, for instance, the confines of the relatively smaller TV screen which is typically watched within the privacy of the home environment have long ago resulted in an evident preference for intimate shot types (i.e. primarily close-ups and medium shots), fashioning most fictional and non-fictional historical portrayals in the style of personal dramas or melodramas played out between a manageable number of protagonists and antagonists. When successful, audiences closely identify with

the historical "actors" and stories being presented, and, likewise, respond in intimate ways in the privacy of their own homes.

Television's immediacy usually works in tandem with this tendency toward intimacy. Both TV and film are incapable of rendering temporal dimensions with much precision. They have no grammatical analogs for the past and future tenses of written language and, thus, amplify the present sense of immediacy out of proportion. The illusion created in television watching is often suggested by the cliché, "being there," which is exactly what David Grubin, celebrated producer of such presidential documentaries as *LBJ* (1992), *FDR* (1994), *TR, The Story of Theodore Roosevelt* (1996), *Truman* (1997), and *Abraham and Mary Lincoln: A House Divided* (2001), is talking about when he says, "you are not learning about history when you are watching . . . you feel like you're experiencing it" (Grubin, 1999). Made-for-television histories, in this regard, are best understood as personifying Marshall McLuhan's eminently useful – though often misunderstood – metaphor, "the medium is the message."

Seventh, the improbable rise and immense popularity of history on TV is also the result of its affinity and ability to embody current concerns and priorities within the stories it telecasts about the past. Television's unwavering allegiance to the present tense is not only one of the medium's grammatical imperatives, it is also an implicit challenge to one of the traditional touchstones of academic history. Professional historians have customarily employed the rigors of their craft to avoid presentism as much as possible, which is the assumption that the past is being judged largely by the standards of the present. The revisionist work of postmodernist historians like Hayden White (1975) has challenged this principle in academic circles. White and others have argued that historiography is much more about telling stories inspired by contemporary perspectives, than it is concerned with recapturing and conveying any kind of objective truth about the past (Ermarth, 1992; Hutcheon, 1988; White, 1985). This alternative scholarly outlook has gained increased momentum in some quarters over the last generation, even calling into question whether or not there is an authentic, knowable history at all beyond the subjectivity of the present. Most popular historians for their part, such as television producers and filmmakers, take this postmodernist viewpoint one step further. They tacitly embrace presentism through the back door by concentrating only on those people, events, and issues that are most relevant to themselves and their target audiences.

The mid-1990s revising of the "prime-time Indian," ranging from fictions (e.g. CBS's *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*, 1993–98) to docudramas (e.g. TNT's *Crazy Horse*, 1996) to documentaries (e.g. Kevin Costner's *500 Nations*, 1995; Ric Burns's *The Way West*, 1995; Ken Burns and Stephen Ives's *The West*, 1996), along with literally dozens of other programming examples, is a telling case in point. Televised (and filmic) representations from a decade ago largely employed Native American characters as emblems for a wide assortment of mainstream multicultural, environmental, and New Age spiritual concerns, rather

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than reconstructing the old small-screen stereotypes primarily on the basis of the existing historical record (Bird, 1996; Rollins and O'Connor, 1998). Television histories, in general, are less committed to rendering a factually accurate depiction as their highest priority, than animating the past for millions by accentuating those matters that are most relevant and engaging to audiences in the present. This preference, on the most elementary level, is commercially motivated, often resulting in an increasing number of viewers. In a deeper vein, though, the goal of most popular historians is also to utilize aspects of the historical account as their way of making better sense out of current social and cultural conditions.

Horace Newcomb recognized this tendency 30 years ago in his seminal article, "Toward a Television Aesthetic," when he identified a special sense of history as one of the representative characteristics of TV programming. Newcomb wrote that the "television formula requires that we use our contemporary historical concerns as subject matter . . . we [then] tak[e these] concern[s] and place [them], for very specific reasons, in an earlier time [when] values and issues are more clearly defined [and] certain modes of behavior . . . more permissible" (Newcomb, 1974, pp. 258-9). In contrast, professional historians regularly take issue with TV's application of presentism as a guiding principle. What is lost, they argue, is the fuller historical picture, or that part of the past that is most unlike the present, but is nonetheless a vital component of the way things actually were.

Eighth, TV producers and audiences are similarly preoccupied with creating a "useable past," a long-standing tenet of popular history, where stories involving historical figures and events are used to clarify the present and discover the future. There is a method behind the societal self-absorption implied by presentism. Ken Burns's *The Civil War*, for example, attracted nearly 40 million viewers during its initial telecast in September 1990. Much of this documentary's success must be equated with the way in which Burns's version of this nineteenth-century conflict, stressing the personal ramifications of the hostilities, makes the war comprehensible to a large contemporary audience.

Overall, this series addresses a number of current controversies which reflect the shifting faultlines in the country's underlying sense of itself as a national culture, including the questions of slavery, race relations, and continuing discrimination; the rapidly changing roles of women and men in society; the place of federal versus local government in civic affairs; and the individual struggle for meaning and conviction in modern life. In this way, *The Civil War* as useable past is an artistic attempt to better understand these enduring public issues and form a new consensus around them, serving also as a validation for the members of its principal audience (which skewed older, white, male, and upscale in the ratings) of the importance of their past in an era of unprecedented multicultural redefinition (Statistical Research Incorporated, 1990).

Ninth, collective memory is the site of mediation where professional history must ultimately share space with popular history. Interdisciplinary work in memory studies now boasts adherents in American studies, anthropology, communication, cultural studies, English, history, psychology, and sociology (Fussell, 1989;

Kammen, 1993; Le Goff, 1996; Lewis, 1975; Lipsitz, 1990; Schudson, 1992; Zelizer, 1992, 1998). The contemporary preoccupation with memory dates back to Freud, although recent scholarship focuses more on the shared, collective nature of remembering, rather than the individual act of recalling the past which is the customary realm of psychological inquiry into this topic area. Researchers today, most importantly, emphasize how collective memory "exists in the world rather than in a person's head, and so is embodied in different cultural forms" (Zelizer, 1995, p. 232). It "is, above all, archival," explains Pierre Nora, "[i]t relies on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image" (1989, p. 13).

For their part, professional historians "have traditionally been concerned above all else with the accuracy of a memory, with how correctly it describes what actually occurred at some point in the past" (Thelen, 1989, p. 119). "Less traditional historians have [recently] allowed for a more complex relationship, arguing that history and collective memory can be complimentary, identical, oppositional, or antithetical at different times" (Zelizer, 1995, p. 216). According to this way of thinking, more popular uses of memory have less to do with accuracy per se, than using the past as a kind of communal, mythic response to current controversies, issues, and challenges. The proponents of memory studies, therefore, are most concerned with how and why a remembered version is being constructed at a particular time, such as the aforementioned *The Civil War* in 1990, than whether a specific rendition of the past is historically correct and reliable above all else.

Rather than think of professional and popular history as diametrically opposed traditions (i.e. one more reliable and true; the other unsophisticated and false), it is perhaps more helpful to consider them as two ends of the same continuum. In his 1984 book, *Culture as History*, the late Warren Susman first championed this more sympathetic appreciation of the popular historical tradition. Susman noted that myth and history are intimately linked to each other. One supplies the drama; the other the understanding. The popular heritage holds the potential to connect people passionately to their pasts; the scholarly camp maps out the processes for comprehending what actually happened with richness and depth. Susman's fundamental premise was that popular history and professional history need not always clash at cross-purposes. Together they enrich the historical enterprise of a culture, and the strengths of one can serve to check the excesses of the other.

Many subsequent scholars from a wide variety of disciplines have concurred with Susman's basic thesis and continued to deepen his arguments in the intervening years. In his widely acclaimed book, *The Noble Dream* (1988), Peter Novick has skillfully examined the controversies that have fundamentally affected history as a field of study over the last generation. Current debates continue in the literature and at conferences concerning the relative merits of narrative versus analytic history, synthetic versus fragmentary history, and consensus versus multicultural history (Novick, 1988). Within this context, popular history

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and professional history are seen less as discrete traditions, and more as overlapping parts of the same whole, despite the many tensions which still persist. For instance, popular histories can nowadays be recognized for their analytical insights, while professional histories can similarly be valued for their expressive possibilities. Susman succinctly summed up this more inclusive vision with his often quoted affirmation: "History, I am convinced, is not just something to be left to historians" (1984, p. 5). He, of course, wrote this belief while also taking for granted that scholars were already essential to historical activity and would continue to be so in the future.

Finally, the flip side of presentism is pastism (a term coined by historian, Joseph Ellis) which refers to the "scholarly tendency to declare the past off limits to nonscholars" (Ellis, 1997, p. 22). Robert Sklar perfectly captured this long-standing bias in the context of "film and history" with his metaphor, "historian-cop," which alludes to the tone of policing that usually emerges whenever professional historians apply the standards they reserve for scholarly books and articles to motion pictures. In this specific instance, Sklar calls for a greater awareness of both the production and reception processes of filmmaking as a way of better appreciating how these more encompassing frameworks influence what audiences actually see and understand as history on the screen (Sklar, 1997).

Made-for-TV history is an even more tempting and incendiary target than film and history for the proponents of pastism, especially since its impact and popularity with the general public far outstrips anything that can ever be achieved in theaters. As a result, television histories are sometimes rejected out of hand for either being too biographical or quasi-biographical in approach, or too stylized and unrealistic in their plot structures and imagery. Occasionally, these criticisms are well-founded; historical programming certainly furnishes its share of honest "failures" or downright irresponsible and trashy depictions of the past. Other times, though, history on TV delivers ably on its potential as popular history, having even gained a degree of support in academe and increasing interest in the scholarly literature since the 1980s, no doubt reflecting the growing desire among many professional and popular historians to finally reconcile each other's traditions in a mutually respectful, if still cautious working relationship (Edgerton and Rollins, 2001; Ludvigsson, 2003; McArthur, 1978; O'Connor, 1983, 1988, 1990; Sobchack, 1996; Toplin, 1996).

Memory Makes for Strange Bedfellows

History is stuck with television as the primary mediator of memory.

Andrew Hoskins (2001, p. 345)

The mutual skepticism that sometimes surfaces between professional and popular historians is both understandable and unfortunate. Each usually works with

different media (although some scholars do produce historical TV programs, videos, and films); each tends to place a dissimilar stress on the respective roles of analysis versus storytelling in relaying history; and each tailors a version of the past which is designed for disparate – though overlapping – kinds of audiences. These distinctions are real enough. Still the scholar and the artist, the expert and the amateur, can complement each other more than is sometimes evident in the expressions of suspicion, defensiveness, and even, on occasion, contempt, that too often arise on both sides.

The popular history tradition is actually as old as the historical impulse itself. The first historians, dating back to the ancient Hebrews and Greeks, were poets and storytellers; and their original approach to the past was to marshal whatever evidence and first-person stories they could into an all-inclusive historical epic. This master narrative was typically populated by heroes and villains who allegorically personified certain virtues and vices in the national character which most members of the general population recognized and responded to immediately. Television as popular history still adopts facets of this strategy at its most rudimentary level, although our small-screen morality tales about the past are far more seamless and sophisticated in their construction, thus rendering these formulaic elements invisible to most contemporary viewers.

Popular history is essentially artistic and ceremonial in nature. In the case of television histories, the act of producing, telecasting, and viewing historical programming becomes a large-scale cultural ritual in and of itself. This process, in turn, completes a number of important functions: it organizes together various viewing constituencies into a web of understandable relations which are defined mostly by their differing identities and positions of power; it loosely affirms majoritarian standards, values, and beliefs; and it facilitates a society's ongoing negotiation with its past by portraying those parts of the collective memory that are most relevant at any given time to the producers of these programs as well as the millions of individuals who tune them in.

Professional history, in contrast, is resolutely scientific and empirical in orientation. It developed gradually over the second half of the nineteenth century, mainly in reaction to the 2,500-year legacy of popular history. This new scholarly tradition recast the study of history inside the increasingly respectable and rigorous mold of science with its principal attachments to systematic inquiry, objectivity, and the pursuit of new knowledge. In effect, professional history rejected the obvious mythmaking of popular history and adopted a more modern and disciplined method of gathering historical facts and then testing and cross-checking them for validity and reliability.

By the turn of the twentieth century, history had become institutionalized as a full-fledged occupation in colleges and universities. Professional historians pioneered a wide array of specialty areas which they examined as impartially as they could, aspiring for a detached and truthful rendering of their subjects, independent of all personal tastes and biases. The ideal of objectivity has been modified considerably since the 1960s to take into account the inevitability that both

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scholars and their facts always come with very definite points of view. From the vantage point of a new century, moreover, the subjective excesses of popular history appear less like a difference in kind than a matter of degree, when compared against the ideological exuberance of contemporary scholarship.

Most surprisingly, America's pre-eminent examples of popular history currently originate on prime-time television, encompassing the full spectrum of actual and fictionalized presentations. Live "media events," such as TV coverage of the Kennedy assassination, Vietnam, Watergate, the Challenger disaster, the fall of the Berlin Wall, Desert Storm, the O. J. Simpson trial, the funeral of Princess Diana, the Clinton scandal, and the recent War in Iraq, "are in competition with the writing of history in defining the contents of collective memory" (Dayan and Katz, 1992, p. 213). "Early in the [twentieth] century, we thought history was something that happened temporally 'before' and was represented temporally 'after' us and our personal and immediate experience," recounts Vivian Sobchack. "Today, history seems to happen right now – is transmitted, reflected upon, shown play-by-play, taken up as the stuff of multiple stories and significance, given all sorts of 'coverage' in the temporal dimension of the present as we live it" (1996, p. 5).

The collective memory of 9/11, to cite yet another obvious example, is indistinguishably linked with the way in which this event and its aftermath was telecast continuously over four straight days to worldwide audiences numbered in the hundreds of millions. Viewer attention was effectively channeled into familiar narrative patterns featuring heroic public servants and villainous foreign terrorists. These slowly unfolding storylines were further enhanced by the shocking repetitive power of seeing the two World Trade Center towers burning and finally collapsing time and again. TV, therefore, transformed 9/11 into "instant history" by taking what was essentially a localized New York City catastrophe and turning it into a global media event with the whole world bearing witness (Dayan and Katz, 1998).

"In this sense, television act[ed] as an agent of history and memory, recording and preserving representations to be referenced in the future" (White and Schwoch, 1997, p. 771). In subsequent months and years, real-life footage from 9/11 has been regularly incorporated into numerous network documentaries produced both here and abroad, while fictionalized scenes of domestic terrorism have appeared on such widely diverse entertainment programs as *Law & Order* (NBC, 1990–present), *7 IG* (CBS, 1995–present), *The West Wing* (NBC, 1999–present), *Third Watch* (NBC, 1999–present), and *Star Trek: Enterprise* (UPN, 2001–present), among many other series. "As historians who focus on popular memory have [long] insisted, we experience the present through the lens of the past – and we shape our understanding of the past through the lens of the present" (Rosenberg, 2003, p. B13).

Just as TV sometimes pre-empts the authority of professional historians in determining what exactly should be considered historic, scholars are likewise crossing over into the public sphere of popular history more than ever before.

Academics were well established as expert commentators on The History Channel starting from the network's first season in 1995. Today scholars are even finding themselves cast as featured players. PBS, for instance, premiered *History Detectives* in the summer of 2003 with four leads – two independent appraisers and two Ivy League professors – who all work independently on his or her own 20-minute case study to uncover the hidden history behind a found or purchased cultural artifact (e.g. Did Mark Twain once own the gold pocket watch that now belongs to Jack Mills of Portland, Oregon?); or a legend passed down about a famous historical figure (e.g. Did Ulysses S. Grant really sign the firehouse guestbook in Morristown, New Jersey, on the country's centennial, July 4, 1876?); or a city landmark named after a one-time founding father who is now all but forgotten (e.g. Why was the baseball stadium in Atlantic City named after Pop Lloyd?). *History Detectives* is an amalgam of dramatic and investigative techniques gleaned from shows as popular and different as *Antique Roadshow* (PBS, 1997–present), *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (CBS, 2000–present), and *60 Minutes* (CBS, 1968–present). The intent of this series is to go well beyond The History Channel's usual preoccupation with war, adventure, and politics by emphasizing the value and relevance of a bottom-up view of the past in the daily lives of the program's viewing audience.

As cooperation between professional and popular historians has increased over the last decade, a few select scholars have even emerged as modest television stars who are able to influence programming decisions in their own right. A case in point is Simon Schama, an art history and history professor at Columbia University, who wrote and presented the 16-part mini-series, *A History of Britain* (2000–2), based on his bestselling trilogy of books of the same name (Schama, 2000, 2001, 2002a). *A History of Britain*, co-produced by BBC Television and The History Channel, exhibits both Schama's exceptional dramatic talents at being able to design extended historical narratives for TV as well as his lively on-screen presence as a learned guide setting the appropriate context and sharing colorful anecdotes and asides with the viewer. This particular mini-series was such a success in the international media marketplace that Schama signed a "\$4.6 million book and TV deal" in the summer of 2002 for his next three works: The first "'Rough Crossings' will examine Anglo-American relations; the second, 'Brushes with Death,' will deal with art when the artist is in crisis; and the third will focus on Hawaii and the notion of a tropical paradise" (Johnson, 2002).

Schama's approach to made-for-TV history combines the storytelling accessibility of the popular historian with the detailed rigor of his scholarly training and background as a professional historian. His most recent television history, entitled *Murder at Harvard* (2003), and produced under the auspices of PBS's flagship series *American Experience*, once again illustrates his unique ability to bridge both historical traditions without shortchanging either one. Based on the second half of his 1991 book, *Dead Certainties: Unwarranted Speculations*, *Murder at Harvard* retells the notorious tale of one of the most sensational murder trials in American history. In 1850 a Harvard chemistry professor, John White Webster,

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was tried and eventually hanged for supposedly killing Dr. George Parkman, a Boston Brahman from whom he had borrowed money but to whom he was unable to repay the loan. Schama fleshes out these two historical figures, along with several others, by re-evaluating all the known facts, the trial transcripts, the newspaper reports, and the mixed motives of each principal character to see if he can finally solve the still controversial homicide some 150 years later.

In raising the matter (and the dead) in *Murder at Harvard*, Schama and his collaborators, producers Melissa Banta and Eric Stange, recreate a number of key scenes complete with invented dialogue and presumed interactions between the major players. "I knew I was crossing a line historians don't usually cross," confides Schama who speaks often and directly to the audience throughout the docudrama, "the line that separates history from fiction. I felt free to let my imagination work to get me closer to the truth." Besides the murder mystery, moreover, this film also becomes an exploration into how historical methods are utilized and the past reconstructed. As Schama reveals at a later point in *Murder at Harvard*: "Maybe I thought what I was after was not a literal documentary truth, but a poetic truth – an imaginative truth – and for that I was going to have to become my own Resurrection man, I was going to have to make these characters live again."

No matter how enriched and tempered by scholarly knowledge and expertise, taking such poetic license is clearly more the province of popular rather than professional history. Schama, Banta, and Stange openly enlist the on-screen opinions of five distinguished historians – Pauline Maier, Ronald Story, Karen Haltunen, James Goodman, and Natalie Zemon Davis – to examine the historiographic implications of their approach in *Murder at Harvard*. Toward the beginning of the docudrama, for instance, Pauline Maier argues that "[h]e [Schama] is not writing a whodunit. He's trying to deal with a more philosophical issue, and that is how do we know about the past." As part of the film's conclusion, Natalie Zemon Davis adds:

The historians' fictionalizing can help him or her ask new questions about his evidence, questions that might never have come up before. When you're trying to put yourself fully in the mind of your actors and see them moving through the streets of Boston, for instance, or moving through a trial, you suddenly think about things that never occurred to you before. You might even then be able to go back to the evidence and find the answers.

Such self-reflexivity in a made-for-television history suggests the increasing depth and potential of this programming genre and also the growing sophistication of the audiences it attracts. Even as historical films and TV series are becoming more accepted by the historical establishment, residual resistance still remains in the more traditional wing of the discipline. One published critique of *Murder at Harvard*, for instance, reflects this ongoing bias: "[F]or the film to have succeeded as a meditation on historical truth, it would have needed a third

plot line: a discussion by the filmmakers of how to present the double stories of murder and history. They might have, for example, interspersed footage of applying for grants, writing a script, auditioning actors, or deciding what material to cut" (Masur, 2003). In response to such impractical criticisms, Simon Schama asserts that "[u]nderlying many of these complaints against the possibility of serious television history, given that the subject is to be left to bungling (as it is implied) 'amateurs'. 'Real' history is, apparently, the monopoly of the academy" (Schama, 2002b). Robert Toplin concurs that "[a] great deal of ink and airtime are wasted on angry indictments of cinematic history for engaging in practices of the genre or for inventing and manipulating evidence. These criticisms would not seem irrelevant if they were framed with an understanding of the way Hollywood drama works" (Toplin, 2002, pp. 201-2).

Despite these lingering tensions, the highly dynamic relationship between scholars and television producers these days feature three principal patterns of interaction: First of all, television histories are built upon the foundation of academic scholarship. They are essentially synthetic in nature and should not be judged on whether or not they generate new knowledge, as much as on how creatively and responsibly they shed additional light on the existing historical record. According to David Grubin in describing his own Emmy Award-winning work: "Historical documentary is a kind of poetry resting on a foundation of fact" (Grubin, 1997, p. 14). Second, professional historians are more involved than ever in the production processes of many television histories. They characteristically influence, but rarely control the end products of such programming. Third and lastly, television histories frequently provide professional historians with opportunities to introduce their scholarly ideas and insights to much larger audiences. Too often, made-for-TV histories are hastily misperceived as the last word on any given topic, simply because of the unprecedented power and influence of television as a medium. Rather than being definitive, television histories are probably best understood as dramatic alternatives to the many published histories that exist within a general subject area.

Overall, television producers as historians typically reverse the usual academic hierarchy, trusting first the lessons found in art (i.e. storytelling, video aesthetics, film clips, photography, period music, etc.), before turning to the scholarly record to fill in the details of their more public visions of history. This is admittedly a speculative approach; but then again, popular and professional historians alike are all amateurs when it comes to detecting the human traces of lives once lived among the emotional resonances of the past. In the final analysis, made-for-television histories enable unprecedentedly large audiences to become increasingly aware of and intrigued by the stories and figures of the past, spurring some viewers to pursue their newfound historical interests beyond the screen and into other forms of popular and professional history.

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