

Starkey and Simon Schama. The chapter explores how they present historical information, what their historiographical position is, and how they conceive of themselves as educational vehicles. The following chapter then considers the most innovative and interesting phenomena of recent television programming, reality history. The impact of reality TV on historical documentary making, in particular the form's 'emphasis on the experiential, the personal and the emotional', is highly suggestive not just of the way that contemporary society watches television but also of the ways that it conceives of the past.<sup>2</sup> The impact of Reality TV has massively influenced our televisual landscape, to the extent that 'Documentary and factual TV now exist in a space that is neither wholly fictional nor wholly factual, both yet neither.'<sup>3</sup> New programmes are hybrids and the televisual grammar is constantly evolving: as Annette Hill argues, this is 'how television cannibalises itself in order to survive'.<sup>4</sup>

A key question to be kept to the forefront when looking at all this documentary material is to what extent it contributes to the seeming democratisation of history and the enfranchisement – bodily or imaginatively – into agency of the historical subject hinted at in the previous parts. Simon Schama, for instance, has argued that television has contributed to the downfall of the 'usual hierarchies of authority' and has provoked 'a democracy of knowledge'.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the digital revolution of which Reality TV is in many ways a part, offers to some critics the possibility of an 'implicitly politicized' form that through interactivity might 'revitalize citizen-based democracy'.<sup>6</sup> Mark Andrejevic, a key economic theorist of Reality Television, has on occasion argued for the revolutionary possibility of reality television, suggesting that 'the notion that collective participation in the creation of cultural commodities salvages their claim to authenticity invokes a critique of the top-down forms of control associated with the culture industry'.<sup>7</sup> This suggests that the inauthenticity of mass culture is due to the alienation of the audience from the production process itself, and Reality TV offers the possibility that 'including their participation might help cultural products reclaim an element of authenticity'.<sup>8</sup> In some ways, then, this model suggests a revolution whereby the consumers of the product become the producers, too. Andrejevic's analysis is more nuanced than this – indeed, he finally argues that being in Reality TV is more part of a culture of self-commodification – but his concepts are suggestive when applied to history programming. The involvement of the 'audience' in historical programming encourages a sense of common ownership of heritage and the history of nation rather than a history told to a passive audience.

## 10 Contemporary historical documentary

### Documentary as form: self-consciousness and diversion

Mainstream documentary theory and practice for decades have been concerned with self-consciousness. Theorists of documentary are well aware of the innate inability of the medium to present 'truth': 'Documentaries are constructs, yet they seek to reveal the real without mediation. Watching a documentary involves holding these two contrary beliefs at once, a process of disavowal which is not terribly unusual inhuman behaviour, but is inherently unstable.'<sup>1</sup> Within the form itself, critics argue is, an acknowledgement that truth is insubstantial.<sup>2</sup> It is difficult to square these claims – that history on television is not complex enough and presents simple truths, or that it is innately self-reflexive and self-conscious and so obviously cannot claim the status of 'truth'.

Indeed, the very falseness of the relationship between camera and subject has been instituted since the first full-length cinema documentary, *Nanook of the North* (1922). Director Robert Flaherty changed material and staged events, distorting his subject. The very insubstantiality of documentary seems to lie, like theatre, in the audience's acceptance of the bias of the presenter and the 'arrangement' of information. As Richard Kilborn and John Izod recount, 'The production of a documentary is not simply an act of chronicling; it is just as much an act of transformation.'<sup>3</sup> They quote film-maker and theorist John Grierson's (1946) mandate that documentary is 'the creative treatment of actuality'.<sup>4</sup> Grierson argued that documentary had educational value and was key to the improvement of society; it enabled active citizenship by giving the individual information. Before the 1960s, documentary tended to approach serious subjects in order to educate the audience. Yet since the 1960s the problems of representation associated with the documentary form have been uppermost in its discussion, debate and practice. This crisis of legitimacy has clear echoes with the shaking of authority felt by History as a subject, a movement from unquestioning inflexibility towards a more complex, dynamic sense of the issues involved in articulating a position; documentary practice in general seems a good analogue for history insofar as it tends towards factuality despite an awareness of its own incompleteness.

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backgrounds of members of the public; in the former Lorraine Kelly helped normal people to discover important things about their family make-up through DNA testing, from historic to paternity and relationships. Its very title demonstrates the thrust of *Gene Detectives*, a desire to discover the past. In the show DNA testing becomes the final arbiter of identity. The programme's trajectory was that of self-revelation and the discovery of new identities (a counsellor was on hand to aid the protagonists in their adjustment to new reality). *Secrets Revealed* has more of a revelatory quality, disclosing information in order to reconfigure the lives of the participants. *Secrets Revealed* presenter Lorraine Kelly claims that 'the results we will discover through the programme are potentially life-changing for those taking part, makes this series something quite special.'<sup>64</sup> Genealogy therefore becomes part of the revelatory reality genre here, with ordinary people being made extraordinary through the intervention of television (and science). Both series relied heavily on set-pieces, to the extent that *Secrets Revealed* had a repeated scene in which the individuals received their results. The fact that both of these shows are on daytime television and about 'ordinary' people suggests that they are part of a different genre to the more formal and prestige programming such as *Who Do You Think You Are?* The presenters are more associated with daytime programming, particularly Kelly as the face of Good Morning Television (GMTV). *Secrets Revealed* keys directly into a genre of confessional lifestyle programming similar to *Jerry Springer* and *Trisha*.

The relatively low-level and populist deployment of DNA and population genetics in British popular programming is in contrast to the practice in the United States. In the major series *African American Lives* (PBS, 2007), eminent academic Henry Louis Gates, Jr. combined standard genealogy with DNA testing to investigate the backgrounds of a group of eight accomplished African Americans. In contrast to *Who Do You Think You Are?* or *You Don't Know You're Born* this group was not totally made up of cultural celebrities and indeed this diversity was pointed: they included well-known figures such as Oprah Winfrey, actor Chris Tucker, musician Quincy Jones and actress Whoopi Goldberg but also among their number were astronaut Mae Jemison, surgeon Ben Carson, Bishop T.D. Jakes and educationalist Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot. Celebrity here was leavened with measurable achievement and this range of ability was part of the series' celebration of excellence in the African-American community. The use of the heavyweight figure Gates as a presenter signalled that this was prestigious television. The narrative of self-revelation is even more pronounced in this kind of genealogical investigation, and the ability to define oneself through family history had a profound effect way beyond straightforward transformation of self. Actress Whoopi Goldberg expressed it well: 'We're the only ones who came against our will, so whole stories are gone, whole lives are gone, whole histories are gone.'<sup>65</sup> *African American Lives*, then, uses science and historical investigation in order to write back, to give those marginalised by the past a presence, a voice, and a resonance in the contemporary.

DNA genealogy inverts the family tree of mainstream genealogy – rather than being at the top of the structure, the contemporary individual is part of a mass, a

node in a model that traces itself back to an originator. The authority of scientific information privileges such ways of identification, suggesting a shift in the paradigm of popular kinship.<sup>66</sup> The genealogist using DNA investigation will find themselves quickly abstracted into a general set of values rather than emphasise their unique selfhood. This new direction in genealogical inquiry suggests a conflict with traditional text-based forms, and, as such, a replacing of one family-epistemology with another.

The documentary theorist Nichols argues that history television introduces a necessary dissonance in our viewing consciousness which demonstrates the insubstantiality of all televisual media:

Images, as we know, are always present tense. Their referent, what they represent, may be elsewhere, but this absent referent seems to be brought to life in the present moment of apprehension, over and over. Does this only further erase a fading sense of the historical in postmodernity, or does it leave open possibilities for historical representation beyond those of the written word? Something is clearly different. Historical consciousness requires the spectator's recognition of the double, or paradoxical, status of moving images that are present referring to events which are past.<sup>5</sup>

The fragmentary nature of the historical image in documentary leads to a certain absence and an unconscious but active appreciation as a viewer of the paradox of watching the past. The viewer is placed in a paradoxical situation which enables a more complex engagement with the past but similarly distances them from that past.

Writing of the Holocaust documentary *Shoah*, which consists mainly of eyewitness interviews, Thomas Elsaesser argues that:

After six hours of testimony in *Shoah* – a testimony that, in different ways, records only absence, one is left with the overwhelming thought that no history can contain, let alone signify or represent, the palpable reality of so many individual, physical deaths.<sup>6</sup>

Here it is not the format of the documentary but the event itself which creates the dissonance; the sheer weight of the past is uncontainable. *Shoah* for Elsaesser demonstrates the inability of understanding the past, no matter what medium it is communicated in. Indeed, the conflicting and reverberating accounts voiced in *Shoah* demonstrate far more efficiently than historical monographs the complexity of the chaotic past. The complexity ascribed here to documentary suggests that the discomfort of professional historians is due to a misunderstanding of the complications fundamentally inherent in the form itself.

### **'Neither wholly fictional nor wholly factual': history on television**

As long ago as 1976 historians were debating the problems of historical television documentary.<sup>7</sup> History on television is immensely powerful, and exerts a subtle influence on the way that the past is considered. For instance, Adrian Wood has argued that popular conception of WWII is deeply flawed because it is mainly based on black and white footage; colour film of events from the 1940s, although relatively widely available, is little used and when it is creates an uncanny effect that unsettles the viewer.<sup>8</sup> This is not always simply an effect of

argued that the BBC comedy series *Blackadder Goes Forth* perpetuates popular myths about the Western Front that have become deeply ingrained in contemporary consciousness of the war. Stephen Badsey points out, for instance, that in the BBC documentary *Timewatch: Haig – The Unknown Soldier* footage from *Blackadder* was intercut with interviews with historians in order to demonstrate the popular caricature of Haig.<sup>9</sup> The show was being used as evidence in an historiographical debate, demonstrating the increasing influence of popular culture on historiography.

As a consequence of this influence, and due furthermore to a flawed perception that the medium is simplistic, television has always had a vexed relationship with history. Historians are suspicious of the superficiality of television, its inability to present complexity. Tom Stearn argues that 'Mainstream history programmes divorce history from sources and research – as from historiographical controversy – and rely on the pronouncements of an apparently omniscient presenter and on "reconstructions" by actors.'<sup>10</sup> The medium is populist, problematic, impressionistic rather than clear, too interested in narrative. Ian Kershaw recognises that 'while it is unquestionably powerful, it is of necessity superficial'.<sup>11</sup> Jerry Kuehl, producer of *The World at War*, long ago noted the problem of immediacy:

One characteristic of television as a communication medium is that it offers its audience virtually no time for reflections. It is a sequential medium, so to say, in which episode follows episode, without respite. This clearly means that the medium is ideally suited to telling stories and anecdotes, creating atmosphere and mood, giving diffuse impressions.<sup>12</sup>

Producer Jeremy Isaacs innocently reports the common practice of running still photographs together to create 'the illusion of living reality' from the late 1950s, and it is this imposing of (in this instance, false) linear visual narrative upon fundamentally chaotic events that for most historians is the key problem with television.<sup>13</sup> Dirk Eitzen more provocatively argues that 'popular audiences of historical documentaries are not particularly interested either in the complexity of the past or in explaining it. What they want more than anything ... is a powerful emotional "experience"'.<sup>14</sup> Those interested in the authenticity of historical truth have derided the perceived simplifying of historical knowledge, concentrating on errors and problems of interpretation. Richard J. Evans, for instance, argues that 'conveying history to a broad audience inevitably involves a degree of simplification or, in the case of Hollywood films, even downright distortion'.<sup>15</sup> 'Truth' is too complex to be communicated to a wide audience; the process of communicating to a 'broad' audience itself *inevitably* simplifies the message. Implicit in this view is a sense that real history should be left to the professionals. The issue such historians have with popular media is that they do not have the complexity to present an accurate view of the past, that they are necessarily circumscribed, simplified and straightforward. There is an underlying need to control the production and interpretation of the past (Evans claims a kind of

trickle-down effect where popular history 'rests on the foundation of detailed research').<sup>16</sup> Crucially, for Evans, the problem is that 'truth' is distorted through simplification.

It is clear, too, in the writings of practitioners of television history, that historiography often takes second place to coherence and a drive toward storytelling. Simon Schama discusses his programme in personal terms: 'essentially it is all in the relationship between me the storyteller and you the viewer'.<sup>17</sup> The presenter Tristram Hunt argues that 'the creation of coherent narratives is one of the lead virtues of television history'.<sup>18</sup> Hunt praises the achievement of, among others, Simon Schama's *A History of Britain* and Kenneth Clark's *Civilisation*: 'Whether one agreed or not with the ideological agenda, the programmes nonetheless constituted engaging, authored narratives which engrossed millions of viewers with their historic take'.<sup>19</sup> The passivity foisted upon the viewer in this instance demonstrates the problems innate in using television as an educative medium. Clark's teleological positivistic series presented the march of civilisation as a movement from one cultural canonical achievement to another in a kind of joint-dots history of western civilisation; Schama's series was more open to historical subjectivity but still presented a totalising, grand sweep version of history. These series present history as narrative, as progression, as progress. Crucial to Hunt's point is that television can enhance historical understanding – in a factual and possibly experiential sense – but he is still defending history as a definable discipline with rules and edges, a story to be told. All that television does is allow greater understanding of this story, and a certain empathy gained from that further understanding.

Television producer Taylor Downing asserts that 'a good history presenter takes the viewer through a slice of the past, by giving his own perspective on it and claims that "The Holmeses, Starkeys and Schamas are the storytellers of our age. They are the ones who bring the research out of the academy and offer it to the many."<sup>20</sup> This trope of the historian as storyteller is key to the way that the popular TV historian is viewed. Yet inscribed within his celebration of the storytelling aspect of TV history is a sense of historiography and an elitist notion of audience: 'for there are millions of intelligent and thinking people who are genuinely interested in how the past has helped to make us what we are'.<sup>21</sup> A sense of nation and shared history is only appealing to the intelligent, seemingly. Again the notion of 'storytelling' is linked explicitly to the story of the present nation; the key point of these programmes is to explain to us who 'we are'. Problematic in terms of audience demographic, this statement is exclusive and excluding. Downing also claims that the academy should interact with popular history:

Television historians should at their best be popular historians translating some of this [scholarly] work into narratives that will appeal to the many, millions of intelligent viewers who don't want to spend their valuable leisure time in front of *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*, or *The Weakest Link*, or watching another episode of *EastEnders*.<sup>22</sup>

The audience Downing imagines for TV history is separate and elite, non-populist. He strives to differentiate TV history from the populism of television programming. It is somehow more important, more interesting, more intelligent than soaps or game shows. This despite the fact that TV history is part of the programming landscape in much the same way as these shows, and the fact that it attracts a massive audience which was not a first time audience turning on simply to watch the history. The audience for TV history is quite happy to watch soap, games, documentary. Indeed, in later manifestations of TV history gameshow, soap, and documentary happily mix. While special as a genre and part of an educational element of the channel profile, TV history is an important element of a rich programming culture, not apart from it. Key also to the present discussion is Downing's notion that history is something consumed during 'valuable leisure time'. Somehow an interest in 'how the past has helped to make us who we are' is a free time activity; it is simultaneously educational and leisured.

Postmodern theorists of history might suggest that documentary history-as-narrative is simply an explicit version of professional or institutional practice. Hayden White has argued persuasively for historians to recognise the narrative impulse and strategies within their own work.<sup>23</sup> Contemporary historiographical work emphasises the fact that engagement with the past is impressionistic, at best: 'Since "the past", by definition, does not exist, surely we can "know" it only by way of representations'.<sup>24</sup> As Keith Jenkins argues, 'All histories are inevitably troped, emplotted, figured-out and argued for from the historian's own position ... [this is] history not as an epistemology but as an aesthetic'.<sup>25</sup> Historical documentary is acutely aware that it cannot reconstruct a true past and as a consequence presents a necessarily indeterminate and incomplete picture; similarly, it self-consciously presents the past as a series of narratives and stories. The very act of watching historical documentary is to engage with a set of tropes, formal concepts and technical elements that foreground the insubstantiality of historical knowledge. The epistemology of television history is *de facto* incomplete, biased, influenced by narrative and storytelling, biographical or mythmaking; it demonstrates the ability of an audience to deal with complexity.

Furthermore television documentary is a hybrid genre, importing audience expectation and technical practices from a variety of other forms and deploying a variety of systems of signification. The televisual grammar of historical documentary is complicated and can include among other things re-enactment and reconstruction, CGI, authorial presentation, archival documentation, archival footage and stills, eyewitness testimony, literary source, letters, diaries, recordings, diegetic and antidiegetic sound, audience participation in a variety of ways, location shots and interviews with professionals. Similarly, the practice of creating historical programmes demands a new set of skills encouraging different intellectual choices to be made by the presenter or producer: location; editing; music; sound mixing; script. The documentary is a work of collaboration between all parts of the production team, and it is also something developed within clear boundaries which are far from the standard limits of academia. Indeed, the very formal complexity of historical documentary challenges the blithe assertion that television

history is overly simplistic. As Steven Johnson has argued, the non-linear and complexity of popular culture have a cognitive effect and turn the viewer into a more sophisticated consumer of information than has been hitherto conceived of.<sup>26</sup> The multivalent format of contemporary historical documentary demands a sophistication of response.

### 'Contemporary, lively and egalitarian': Schama and Starkey

To consider this complex format it is necessary to turn to the premier exponents of television documentary history over the past decade, Simon Schama and David Starkey. Both produced epic personality-led, populist narrative histories aimed at wide audiences and global markets, and deploying the full palette of televisual tropes and techniques in order to divert and attract the viewer. The key domestic television documentary tradition that is being drawn upon in their practice is that of the epic series. Initially the BBC was the channel for big documentary series, and established the template with *The Great War* (1964), *The Last Peace* (1966), *Grand Strategy of World War II* (1972).<sup>27</sup> These series were self-consciously grand in scale, distilling the complexity of the war event into digestible chunks. They used footage mainly from the Imperial War Museum's collections (despite the makers of *The Great War* falling out over historiographical issues with the then director Noble Frankland) but also used reconstructed scenes, stills, and interviews with witnesses, literary sources and commentary.<sup>28</sup>

*The World at War* (1973, Thames TV) was the first commercial series to employ this grand, wide-ranging style.<sup>29</sup> It was a series that intentionally changed the BBC's documentary practice, mainly through the emphasising of 'ordinary' stories, and the use of oral testimony and footage. Jerome Kuehl, the associate producer of the series, claims that they were trying to avoid official 'mandarin history', although they did deploy the gravitas of Laurence Olivier as voiceover for international sales. The series also moved away from a British-centric presentation of the war to encompass the experience of Germany, Russia and Japan – indeed, it was one of the first programmes to deal with the Holocaust in prime time, and the episode 'Genocide' received many press and public complaints due to its explicitness.

The second key tradition that contemporary documentary makers draw upon is the presented or authored documentary. The key analogues here are Kenneth Clark's art history series *Civilisation* (BBC, 1969) and Jacob Bronowski's anthropological series *The Ascent of Man* (BBC, 1973). These were unashamedly grand series, both in scale and chronology, and they presented teleological (although personalised) narratives. Robert Kee's *Ireland: A Television History* (BBC, 1980) introduced the more overtly interpretative style that Schama particularly deploys. These 'epic' documentaries have analogues in other disciplines, such as natural history or economics. They are sold on the personality of the presenter; as Schama warns: 'Note the careful use of the indefinite article in this series ... it's a history because it's shamelessly my own version.'<sup>30</sup> These shows did not just have lives onscreen, though; they produced influential popular books to accompany

the series. The most famous historian presenter before Schama was E. H. Carr. Taylor, whose programmes during the period 1957–67 and then from 1976 through to 1984 consisted of an unscripted lecture given in a studio to camera.<sup>31</sup> Taylor's history was narrative and populist, and his lectures were 'driven by stories and anecdotes', 'biased towards the biographical' and 'virtually all lent themselves to narrative and story'.<sup>32</sup> The shows were mainly on the fledgling commercial channel ATV rather than the mainstream BBC. Taylor's lecturing led to a profitable number of tie-in books on a variety of subjects.

Such personality-led programme-making fell out of favour during the 1980s. As suggested in Chapter 1, the revival of the form in the documentary *Simon Schama's A History of Britain* was the catalyst for the explosion in high-profile popular history in the early 2000s (and it is interesting that the pioneer for this movement was a series whose format had such ancestry yet was created anew within celebrity culture). Fifteen hour-long episodes were broadcast on BBC1 from 2000 to 2002. The series took an intentionally cinematic and epic approach to national history, progressing from earliest origins to the 1960s in an attempt to account for the emergence of a British identity. It always claimed to be a relatively subjective narrative, telling important stories in an attempt to have a contemporary audience. Schama's impetus was centralised on his four communicative tenets: immediacy, imaginative empathy, moral engagement, poetic connection. These ideas formulated his approach to making 'serious television history'.<sup>33</sup> Schama saw himself as the 'interlocutor between audience and protagonists', and, as Justin Champion points out, presented the historian as moral leader, guide, and continual presence in the narrative.<sup>34</sup> Schama says of Bede:

[He] was not just the founding father of English history, arguably he was the most consummate storyteller in all of English literature ... it was this masterful grip on narrative that made Bede not just an authentic historian but also a brilliant propagandist for the early Church.<sup>35</sup>

Clearly Schama's own history is both keenly narrative and, in his 'unambiguous commitment to the moral function of history', subtly propagandist for a particular type of humanist History.<sup>36</sup>

Each programme took a period – around 130 years at times, as little as 40 at others – and used a particular set of primary motifs to read the particular stories: 'Dynasty'; 'Nation'; 'The Empire of Good Intentions'. Schama's script is interested in the repetition of image and idea in order to suggest a history rich in resonance. The use of the same cutaway shots to underline different points or the same clichés to describe events emphasises a history of Britain in which the same things keep on happening. It is also keen to emphasise that the past is present in the contemporary, shaping and influencing events. This is particularly striking in the episode 'Revolutions', in which Schama wears a yarmulke in a synagogue to emphasise his personal connection with Jewish history post-Cromwell; the episode ends with a description of the Battle of the Boyne overlaid with a contemporary mural commemorating the battle and soundtracked by both Unionist and

Republican speeches.<sup>37</sup> History is not something that is simply in the past, the programme suggests; it is full of repetition, resonance and echo. You cannot escape it, and those who do usually make a mistake. So the keynote is the educative power of history, the example that it holds up to us – a programme made in 2000 gave an opportunity to take stock and learn the value of the lessons of history. It was educative and exemplary, both in form and content.

Schama's appearance in the synagogue is an extraordinary moment of personalisation. Throughout the series, he speaks of 'our' history, emphasising a connection between audience, content and himself. However, the moment in the yarmulke creates an odd dissonance – this is Schama's personal history, a history he can specifically relate to. So it involves the audience, constructs an historiography of empathy. At the same time, however, the majority of the audience aren't Jewish, so the personalisation of history here is also an inscription of difference – the kind of polyvocal, hybrid difference that is key to Schama's view of multicultural Britain and Britishness. He is at once 'us' and other, the history he presents is complex but all part of us, tending toward this final moment almost teleologically.

Repetition is used to historiographical effect in the various visual images that the series deployed, suggesting, for instance, relationships between Charles, Cromwell and William III by the use of overlaying pictures and wiping between them – so Charles 'becomes' Cromwell as does William, emphasising visually connections (which are there anyway, iconographically, as those unfamiliar with portraiture the audience just has to be directed to them). Schama describes people using the same phrase ('his alpha and his omega' is a favourite; 'a public relations disaster' is another). This again emphasises connections and distills broad historical developments into understandable, cyclical entities. Schama's much derided use of demotic cliché, too, is part of this process – the placing of history into the familiar, creating a narrative of tropes that are recognisable and repetitive. These othered historical characters, all noble portraits and huge houses, are inserted into a familiar set of linguistic models – the threat of the Napoleonic armies meant 'it was sweaty hand time'; various Elizabethan nobles have 'sex appeal'. This slangy presentation of history annoyed purists, but, as with David Starkey's similar practice, it signals a familiarisation of history. Source, music, image, word, all work together to create a televisual experience that is finely wrought and well thought out as television first, then history second.

Of course, all this presentational material impacts on the historiography. One of the points of *A History of Britain* is that the development of the nation is a set of cycles and progressive events. Dynasties, empires, monarchs are all part of a process of accumulation toward 'Britain' and the present. Hence the proprietorial 'our' and 'we' that Schama peppers the narrative with – both involving the viewer in the narrative of nation but also emphasising the connection between then and now. Essentially, the programme presented history as a revolving cycle of religious violence, Celtic rebellion, anti-European feeling and political expediency, all intersecting with the abilities and characters of a set of key personnel – Henry, Anne Boleyn, Elizabeth, Mary Queen of Scots, Charles II, Victoria. Key was a

sense of the growth of liberal democracy in England, the union between the countries and the creation of 'Britain', religious conflict and the rise of capitalism. Schama traces his themes through the ages. Britain veers from battle to battle: from Marsden Moor to Culloden to Waterloo. The nation is reflected – even represented metonymically – by a series of major figures: Cromwell, Pitt, Wordsworth, Wollstonecraft, Walpole, Cobbett. There is very little about the common people, the day-to-day life of the nation, or the social, economic and cultural shifts undergone. Instead Schama knits together a history of personality, from Cromwell as half pious visionary, half ruthless politician through the romanticised image of Bonnie Prince Charlie, to port-drinking Walpole's gregariousness and Charles II's 'reason'. In between there are 'human' elements – the keepsakes left by mothers for their children at Thomas Coram's foundling hospital, for instance, are considered at length as a way of demonstrating the social ills of the early 1700s. These artefacts allow Schama to personalise history, in the same way that using one 'ordinary' figure such as Mary Wollstonecraft to commentate and experience key events gives those events individualised resonance and allows the viewer to connect and empathise. The important issue here is of recognition, of understanding the experiences of the past. Yet ultimately this history is one of important figures doing particular things – Clive in India, Wolfe in Canada, Pitt's 'Empire of Liberty', Victoria's 'Sisters'. It is narrative history, a story with human elements but a clear plotline nonetheless.

History is enshrined in the guidelines set out by Ofcom for public service broadcasting. It is part of a public service broadcaster's (PSB) educational remit, and history programming is presented by both Channel 4 and the BBC as evidence that they satisfy their duty to programme content of an educational nature and educational value. Therefore the channels conceive of history as part of an educative portfolio. Channel 4 uses the style of its history programming to further its institutional profile as an alternative view, quoting a number of respondents in its annual review:

Viewers recognised Channel 4 had a different approach to history, more contemporary, lively and egalitarian. 'It makes it more accessible ... it's not sort of stiff upper lip history programmes' (Female 50–69); 'The war on Channel 4 would be from a soldier's point of view. On 2, it would be the politician's' (Male 30–49).<sup>38</sup>

The channel's flagship documentaries are made by David Starkey, and they emphasise this liveliness. His series *Elizabeth* (2000), *Henry VIII* (1997) and *The Six Wives of Henry VIII* (2003) presented Tudor history and his *Monarchy* (2004–) approached that institution through the ages. The series are monarch-based, interested in personality politics, and their use of multiple problematic fictionalising devices make them more like essays than documentaries. The approach of this work, striving to be 'contemporary, lively and egalitarian' in many ways demonstrates Corner's point about 'diversion' in postdocumentary work (see Chapter 11). Starkey's series use multiple types of evidence and present their

information in multiple styles – from docu-drama to lecture to music to textual evidence – all striving to keep the attention of – to ‘divert’ – the viewer.

*Elizabeth* opens with a summing up of the importance and appeal of his subject that is terse and pointed:

In January 1559, Elizabeth I was crowned Queen of England. She was the last of the great Tudor dynasty, a bright star who dazzled both the nation and the world.

The achievement of most stars fades quickly, but Elizabeth’s has lasted for nearly four centuries – and it is easy to see why. She reigned for 45 tumultuous years, her ships defeated the Spanish Armada and sailed around the globe. In her time Shakespeare wrote plays and Spenser wrote poems. English noblemen and foreign princes wooed her but she, the virgin Queen, made love to that loyalist of audiences, the English people.<sup>39</sup>

In his trademark brisk and clipped style Starkey conflates the achievement of the monarch with that of her armies and population, and immediately presents us with at least three of the key cliché facts about Elizabeth: her virginity, the Spanish Armada, the time of Shakespeare (no matter that Shakespeare’s career outlived her). It is a bravura passage in a direct, clear style, and as such it provides the framework for the series as a whole. *Elizabeth* is gripping docu-history, both personalised narrative and grand sweeping history. Starkey balances the personal and the wider political issues. He seeks to understand Elizabeth’s ‘achievement’. Further, he suggests here that he is simply filling in the gaps of a story already well known, four hundred years later – her reputation precedes him.

Starkey’s presentational manner is in great contrast to that of Schama. He wears a suit and tie, and is generally pictured in distanced full body shot rather than the more intimate close-up shots that Schama favours. He is not the audience’s friend, is not their guide (not for him the inclusive elements of *A History of Britain*, no ‘us’ or shared history). There are few jokes in Starkey’s script, and the seriousness he brings to the subject is key to his projected gravitas. Starkey isn’t part of the scenery in the way that Schama often is. Indeed, he strides around country houses lecturing the camera with great if distancing authority. He is a serious academic historian on television, rather than a presenter who happens to be an historian.

Yet his historiography is as much, if not more subjective as Schama’s, and his work is more populist in trajectory. The series is on the experimental Channel 4 rather than the establishment BBC; Schama has the reputation of a British institution behind him, whereas Starkey has to ground his work lest it be accused of superficial flashiness. While he avoids Schama’s insertion of himself into the historical narrative (and therefore attends to a different type of historiography with the historian as independent recounter of truth rather than subjective interpreter), Starkey’s series does emphasise the importance of connecting the past and the present in the choice of talking heads. Again eschewing the academic documentary approach, *Elizabeth* comments on particular key personalities by

having them reconstructed – a descendant of William Cecil, gives us the benefit of her insight into his thoughts during the 1550s; the current Dean of St Paul’s reads the sermon of Dean John Noel and conjectures on the effect it may have had; a Catholic priest considers the destruction of the monasteries and the character of Mary Tudor’s Catholicism. The heirs of Bedingfield and Seymour wander around their country seats and discuss their (in the former case not so illustrious) ancestors. Disarmingly unacademic, refreshingly familiar with their forbears (using their forenames, confidently ascribing their motives), these talking heads give Starkey’s series a sense of witnessing absent from Schama’s, a collective account rather than his particularised reading. Their accounts personalise political and distanced events, dovetailing with the acted sequences to knit together a performance of history which is then focussed through Starkey’s authoritative narration. In some ways the involvement of these figures demonstrates the massive historical shifts that have taken place – where once Cecil was Secretary of State, his descendant is irrelevant to the country; where the Dean of St. Paul’s once affected political policy, his descendant has no national role. Yet the use of such ‘experts’ also suggests that personality is key – and in particular religious and aristocratic personality. Their subjective and conjectural opinion is as informed, the series suggests, as that of the academic expert. Indeed, these people may at least claim some kind of sympathy with the historical figure, an empathy the professional leaves at the door.

This notion of empathy is key to each series’ historiographical impetus. Both want to use the medium to instigate a history of sympathy. Why alienate the audience from their historical past through jargon, footnotes and intensive detail, when the tools of television can be used to create a connection? This is the reason for the slangy script, the use of music and televisual trope. By presenting using the tools of familiarity, and by putting history into recognisable formats – drama, documentary, cliché – the series familiarise rather than alienate. While both invest in a Whiggish ‘great men’ methodology, they are interested in drawing the audience into a relationship with their history. Formally and generically, while both are recognisably ‘narrative’ personality-driven documentaries, they are complex entities. They use talking-head, witness (or relative of witness) testimony, text, metonymic footage, reconstruction, music and a range of camera techniques to inflect and package their central intellectual message. This complexity points towards the new typology of factual programming, the drive towards Corner’s ‘diversion’.

Schama and Starkey were massively successful, in terms of raw numbers. The first episode of *A History of Britain* was BBC2’s top rated programme of that day, with some 4.3m viewers.<sup>40</sup> To put that into perspective, it would not have broken into BBC1’s top 30; but it would have been third after *Brookside* (Friday/Wednesday) on Channel 4 and first by some distance on Channel Five. *Monarchy* was viewed by around 2m regularly, a really quite impressive reach and a substantial audience figure for Channel 4. As suggested in Chapter 1, they became part of British cultural life in an unprecedented way. Their programmes demonstrated that

personality-led narrative history was marketable in the UK and the USA. The popularity of these narrative series meant that they were followed by Niall Ferguson's *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (Channel 4, 2003) and Tristram Hunt's *The English Civil War* (BBC2, 2002), among a tranche of individual documentaries.

Dedicated history programming has gained a relatively good market share, for a minority lifestyle interest. There are a number of major channels: UKTV History (a branch of UKTV, part-owned by the BBC); the History Channel; Discovery Civilisations (a branch of Discovery); and this is notwithstanding specialist channels such as Simply Nostalgia (part of Simply TV) which is essentially an archival service. These channels represent a significant market portion, and there are few other 'lifestyle' programming strands that command three separate channels (other than shopping and travel). In late June 2005 these channels' share of weekly viewing time was as follows: History Channel (HC) 0.2 per cent; UKTV History 0.4 per cent (the equal best performance by a UKTV channel); Discovery Civilisations 0.1 per cent.<sup>41</sup> These share figures are about equal to those garnered by Sky Sports Extra (0.1 per cent) or CBBC (0.4 per cent). They translate into reach – and therefore number of viewers – as HC: 5.2 per cent (2,131,000); UKTVH: 9 per cent (3,472,000); DC: 2.7 per cent (1,030,000). In total, then, the reach/figures (despite their acknowledged vagueness as data) approximately equate all dedicated historical viewing (some 6,633,000) with that of all Sky movie channels taken together (18 per cent, 6,942,000). However, with the exponential growth in the numbers of homes with Freeview, and the developing of web- and mobile-based platforms for viewing television, the reach numbers will only go up, if the percentage of the viewing population probably will stay relatively static.

### History on international television

Before moving on to consider Reality History it is instructive to compare the historical documentary on French, German, Canadian and American television.<sup>42</sup> In France, television history was initially used as a means of political debate in a rigorously controlled public television system.<sup>43</sup> Between 1953 and 1965, historical drama (there were 47) was used in this way: 'at a time when political discussion was avoided on French television, debates between Danton and Robespierre during the French Revolution were particularly appreciated by the audience'.<sup>44</sup> Historical documentary, when it was shown, was often used as the impetus for studio discussion, although continuing censorship meant that certain issues went unconsidered, such as the Dreyfus affair or the Vichy period. During the late 1970s and 1980s, entertainment became increasingly key, to the extent that now 'historical programming is no more a must for programme planners. These programmes are now considered as being at best a kind of cultural duty, a civic obligation that private channels will not endorse'.<sup>45</sup> The trajectory of French television history, then, mimics that of British in some ways – the doldrums of the 1980s, and the move towards entertainment – but they lack the authoritative element and

programmes were initially more concerned with wider issues and debate than the epic sweep and the academic style of British series. It is noticeable that French television has not imported the types of reality history common in the UK and the USA, possibly due to a residual commitment to propriety.<sup>46</sup>

German television has understandably found problems representing the immediate past. The screening in 1978 of the American NBC fictionalist mini-series *Holocaust* provoked a massive public debate breaking what Judith Doneson terms 'a thirty-five-year taboo on discussing Nazi atrocities' and led directly to political changes in the then West Germany.<sup>47</sup> While *Holocaust* was criticised in the USA for its sensationalist approach and its fictionalising, the effect of the series in Europe was to force the Swiss, French and Germans to 'confront the process of the destruction of European Jewry in all its enormity'; this process was painful and public.<sup>48</sup> Tobias Ebbrecht's survey of contemporary German drama and docudramas about the WWII argues that techniques such as dramatisation and the use of digital regeneration have been deployed by German producers in a particular fashion. In contrast to what he sees as the more conventionally objective British docudramas about the same period, German films 'use a combination of documentary and fictional modes of representation to create a special kind of tension and magical aura in order to offer the German audience a sensual and emotional space to empathize with the perpetrators'.<sup>49</sup> The programmes 'emotionalize history for a mass audience' in a style quite clearly at odds with British approaches.<sup>50</sup>

The most important – or influential – historical documentaries in the USA are those made by Ken Burns. He makes long 'event' television documentaries, as in the case of the 12-hour *The American Civil War* which was screened by PBS over five consecutive nights in 1990; the audience figures (14 million for the initial broadcast, many more projected millions for the rebroadcast and video release) ensure that it is probably 'the most popular history ever written or produced'.<sup>51</sup> Burns' approach is relatively hybrid. He uses a range of sources: footage of veterans from 1930, 1934, 1938, talking heads including Shelby Foote and various other historians, archive images, live cinematography footage of the battle sites, music, voiceover, newspaper accounts, lithographs. His aesthetic is kinetic and stately: the camera mimics movement – panning up, across, around; images are strung together to form a visual narrative. A key issue is that of the voiceovers – many contemporary sources are read out from Douglass to Lincoln, voiced by a range of famous names from Jason Robards to Studs Terkel – which lends credence but also celebrity and 'quality' to the whole event. The films begin with small, individual stories and widen their perspective; the epic sweep is the point. He claims a sort of historical empathy and gripping narrative innate in the materials:

At a number of moments in this film, you suspend your belief that this is a photograph taken three weeks after the Battle of Gettysburg. You actually have the sensation of being there. When that happens, history is running on all cylinders. We have accomplished what we set out to do; to let the material tell its own story.<sup>52</sup>



explorations of race in America driven by memory and witness testimony. Burns' films ensure that American historical documentaries achieve an epic range, speak to a sense of (albeit conflicted) nationhood, and are 'quality' events.<sup>53</sup>

Canadian documentary has spent a long time recovering from the controversy surrounding the 1992 CBC 3-film series *The Valour and the Horror* which considered the war in Europe and Southeast Asia. The series alleged incompetence at command level, suggested that unprosecuted war crimes had been perpetrated by Canadian soldiers in Normandy in 1944, and emphasised the Canadian Air Forces' involvement in the bloodthirsty and vengeful firebombings of Dresden and Munich. Canadian veterans societies sued the series producers, Brian and Terrance McKenna for libel.<sup>54</sup> The Canadian Senate sub-committee on veteran affairs consequently held hearings about the programmes (it was critical of two of the films), and the CBC Ombudsman produced a report claiming that the series was deeply flawed. In 1996, the Supreme Court ruled that the veterans' libel suit could not be pursued.<sup>55</sup> The series used re-enactment (scripted by diaries and letters) to highlight several events and these particular sequences were specifically attacked by the complaining veterans. The films sparked a lasting controversy which raged within contexts of memorialisation, public broadcasting responsibility, and investigative journalism. The incident suggested that revisionist film-making might be attacked extremely publicly, and, in particular, that techniques which seem familiar and unproblematic in a British context could be attacked for their lack of historical veracity and accuracy.

## 11 Reality History

### Empathy, authenticity and identity

At odds with the formal austerity intertwined with a more or less explicit self-consciousness of the mainstream documentary are the various new forms and techniques being imported as a consequence of cultural and generic change. John Corner has argued that *Big Brother* in particular has had an aesthetic and a social impact on the genre of documentary, the shift towards what he calls 'diversion': 'a performative, playful element has developed strongly within new kinds of factual production'.<sup>1</sup> This influential analysis attempts to account for the 'imperative for playfulness and the erosion of the distinctions between the public and the private sphere, between the private citizen and the celebrity and between media and social space'.<sup>2</sup> Theorists of the classical documentary such as Bill Nichols suggest that Reality TV signals the death of the documentary and therefore the end of modes that encourage and mobilise the viewer to 'act in the world, with a greater sense of knowledge or even a more fully elaborated conception of social structure and historical process'.<sup>3</sup> Contemporary documentary has, in his view, eschewed this impetus toward education and citizenship. Linda Williams similarly argues that the weakening of historical specificity and the rise of populism mean that society has 'plunged into a permanent state of the self-reflexive crisis of representation'.<sup>4</sup>

Documentary, a form which in many ways (particularly in its British manifestation) relies on an underlying sense of sobriety, not to say educational seriousness, begins to fracture in the face of the new pressures. Corner suggests a state of 'postdocumentary' and argues that the form is undergoing a 'relocation as a set of practices, forms, and functions' as 'the aesthetic, political, and cultural coordinates that helped hold it together have both reduced in strength and shifted apart'.<sup>5</sup> He calls it the 'new ecology of the factual', and argues that 'when a piece of work in documentary format is entirely designed in relation to its capacity to deliver entertainment, quite radical changes occur both to the forms of representation and to viewing relations'.<sup>6</sup> In conjunction with these formal shifts, television channels began to eschew an academic approach to documentary and history in favour of an emotive, experiential-based approach. In 2002, the company Simply Television launched the Simply Nostalgia channel