

Canadian (A) History
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2 Television and the Trouble with History

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It could, of course, have been the other way round, couldn't it: 'History and the Trouble with Television'? The usual moan of the Common Room and the opinion columns that 'serious television' (in the words of Neil Postman's polemic, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*) is a 'contradiction in terms'; that the subtlety of history is too elusive, too fine and slippery to be caught in television's big, hammy fist; that try as it might, television can't help but simplify the complications; personalise the abstract; sentimentalise the ideological and just forget about the deep structures – all of which are assumed to be at the heart of what my colleagues (on that side of the fence) like to call real history. Which always puts me in mind of another aside overheard by its target: 'oh he's not really a historian, he's a writer'. Which makes me, I suppose, doubly unreal; being not just a writer but a television presenter, I want to try and refute all of the above prejudices. You didn't seriously expect me to promote the usual dialogue of the deaf whereby scholars berate the vulgarity of the medium for failing to understand the nature of historical debates, and producers return the compliment by charging that print historians are no more capable of telling stories in images than they are cooking a soufflé or changing a tyre (probably less).

What we – and from the beginning it's really been a collective enterprise – have tried to make of *A History of Britain* has been a project that would make those ingrained prejudices a thing, if you'll excuse the phrase, of the past. Our producers have all been, in whatever terms you want to cast it, real historians, and I certainly hope that they think their writer and presenter has become at least in working outline form, a filmmaker. Which is not to say it's always been easy. There were times, especially shooting in the far west of Ireland in February, or in Skara Brae in July in what seemed to be light sleet, or in Jura in December, when I've

prayed for the intervention of the Angel of History. What's more I'd know him when I saw him because Walter Benjamin, the German-Jewish critic, described what he looked like in one of his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' (don't worry they're only a paragraph long); the last thing he wrote in 1940 before his suicide. This *Angelus Novus*, the new angel, was what Paul Klee called the figure he'd painted as a watercolour, a picture Benjamin had owned since 1921. The angel eyes, Benjamin wrote

are staring; his mouth is open, his wings are spread. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, to awaken the dead and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise. It has got caught in his wings with such violence that he cannot close them. The storm blows him irresistibly into the future on which he has turned his back, while the pile of debris mounts to the skies.

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Not much help, then, to be expected from this angel after all; a decidedly weak and wasted creature; less the master than the victim of history; the demoralised opposite of the 'real' historian's presumption that he can order the chaos; make whole the fragments; make sense of the mess; impose music on the cacophony. But then, of course, this was Benjamin's point; this indeed was why he projected on to Klee's painting, a self-portrait of the thinker on the verge of paralysed despair, thunderstruck by a vision of disasters he had been impotent to set right and a calamity to which he was being helplessly pushed; in Benjamin's case, backwards right off the cliff. For, in September 1940, denied the exit visa to make the crossing from Vichy France to Spain, Benjamin killed himself.

There are calamities and then there are mere predicaments. Does that description – the unnaturally staring eyes; the always open mouth; the pointlessly gesticulating arms; the pose which pretends to poise but which actually often verges on controlled panic – remind you of anyone? Are there any other writer-presenters out there? Not to make light of Benjamin's predicament, but you know the feeling; never quite having the luxury of enough time (especially edit time) to be able to consider the careful thought; to give utterance to the finely tuned epigram that happens to be true as well as stylish. Why? Because of the law of the 57-minute programme. And because a storm is blowing in from



Paradise, otherwise known as the Channel Controller's office, which pushes us into the future to which our back is turned - the next schedule; the next budget round; the next seasonal schedule; the next way to be one-up on the opposition.

On the other hand, it would be a bit rich or, as we say on this side of the pond, unseemly, for someone who was, in the end, given four whole years to complete our fifteen programmes, to whine about this. Graduate students are always making the same complaint; and the longer they are allowed extensions, the longer they say they need - until some magical moment of critical mass is reached when they know they have arrived at the definitive truth. This is the scholar's mirage, certain to disappear the closer one approaches it. So the line between invigorating urgency and panic-stricken haste - the line all of us in television choose to live with - is often very fine.

For that matter, Benjamin should not be read as someone who pined nostalgically for the leisurely coherence of the old master texts of history. Just the reverse in fact. For good or ill, the chopped-up, speed-driven, flickeringly restless quality of modern communication, he thought, was here to stay. It was the way the mass of people led their lives. They received information serially, in columns not pages; their picture of the world was scrambled; cubist not classical (look at *Guernica*); rhetoric passed through fields of sonic distortion; topography (we might add since Benjamin, predictably, was neither much of a walker nor driver) glimpsed through the flickering flash of car-windows; each one the equivalent of a celuloïd frame.

Now all this might be regrettable, but there it was. If writers whose vocation was the moral rescue of humanity turned their backs on it, then they also turned their backs on modern life. They became mere Brahmins closeted with their refinement, incapable of anything except the mutual exchange of muttered regrets and lamentations. And that would leave the field to the manipulators, whether in the tabloids or the film studios; the likes of Leni Riefenstahl, German film-maker of the Nazi era, and Mosfilm, the Soviet movie company. It was precisely at moments of danger Benjamin thought - and so do I - that history's call to capture memory was itself most pressing. For, not to put too fine a point on it, on that 'capture' by the good guys (as distinct, say, from Al Jazeera) depend all the ancient causes for which the keepers of memory - us - have staked something ultimately more important than faculty tenure - freedom, empathy, community.

Big words, I know; the kind of words to which most self-described professional historians, in this country at any rate, are famously allergic;

the logo on their tunics that of the Nike empiricist: 'Just Do It' (or in academic speak 'Just Get On With It'). But the 'It' that is being got on with (if got on with properly) is, even inadvertently, the carrier of these big things. History, the repository of shared memory, as Orwell insisted in 1984, was, necessarily, the enemy of determinist inevitability. Because in its texts lay pictures of alternative worlds; the buds of different outcomes. It would have to be critical history to be sure, not the kind manipulated for self-reinforcement. Which is why theocracies and tyrannies can never live with it. Second big word: empathy, if you like, 'alterity', immersion into the experience of others separated from us in time. Without the willingness to reach towards their world, their mental habits, history just becomes, once again, an exercise in self-admiration; exactly the kind of history those theocracies and tyrannies like to teach. Third big word: community, or less sententiously if you like: connection; negatively expressed, the demystification of perpetual difference. The Vikings were always the enemies of the English? No, the Vikings *were* the English. Once too there was a history shared by Muslims and Jews, by Muslims and Hindus; by the English and the Scots; there once was even a time (though admittedly lost in the mists of antiquity) when there was a Conservative majority in the House of Commons.

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If you accept the premise that, as Benjamin wanted, in a time of danger history needs to capture memory (before the bad guys hold it hostage), can television, must television ride to the rescue? Should it set its sights higher than low-budget costume shows, nostalgia-fixes, tonics for the patriotically insecure who want to pull the covers over their heads and be sent to sleep by Tudor lullabies and wake up perhaps with a strange urge, if not to go around executing enemies, then at least issuing Parliamentary Acts in Restraint of the Euro: 'England is an empire, entire of itself'? Now that it does seem to have a mass audience, can television history get serious without breaking the spell?

The answer from some (not all) quarters of the academy has been 'of course not'; because of all the reasons I listed at the beginning. The verdict is based on four interconnected assumptions all of which you'll be happy to hear, are mistakes. The first is that real history is essentially coterminous with the printed book; the second is that only printed text is capable of carrying serious argument, compared to which images, still or moving, are necessarily weak carriers of meaning and debate, essentially auxiliary and this expendably frivolous illustration. Thirdly-

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Reasons why a cademy
TV are
intelligible

Can TV
get
history
serious?

that, for all the flirtation of scholars with writing for popular readership, history remains shaped by full-time professionals, hewers at the rock-face of the archives who alone have the esoteric knowledge (the 'training' as academia likes to say) to define both the terms of the debates and just who is allowed to join them. Consequently, and finally, the success of television history is judged (just take a look at academic written reviews of *A History of Britain* in *History Today* for example) by the degree to which the preoccupations of print historians are faithfully translated and reproduced on television.

So let me just clear the decks before I say something positive about what we can do and how we do it. First, history, even Western history, has not been purely coeval with the printed text. If the scholars of the change from oral to written history – such as the late Eric Havelock at Yale – have taught us anything, it's that the beginnings of Western history were meant, especially in the hands of Herodotus, as part of the oral, and performative tradition. Beyond the monk-written memorials and muniments, there remained of course a strong, unofficial tradition of performative history; strongest indeed exactly where it reached beyond a small cluster of brethren. So, whether he knew it or not, and I strongly suspect he did, A.J.P. Taylor, the grand-daddy of all television historians, was reviving that tradition as has been the great oral Chicago historian, Studs Terkel, dean not of a faculty, but of radio history in the USA.

Second: the triple mistake that print is deep, images are shallow; that print actively argues and images passively illustrate. Now this particular blunder is a result, I suppose, of the self-reinforcing failure of all those graduate departments to educate their students in iconography (the scholarship of the meaning of images) and iconology (the relationship of those meanings to the cultures which produce and receive them). 'Don't know' is echoed by 'don't need to know'. The prejudice born of this visual phillistinism is that images are somehow a product or obedient expression of the things that historians habitually do know about: political power; economics; religious doctrine. But images can constitute culture as well as be constituted by it. The regime which, in effect, killed Benjamin was a prime case in point of empowerment through spectacle, as Albert Speer, the impresario of Hitler's 'cathedral of light' at Nuremberg and Riefenstahl who filmed it for mass diffusion, both well knew.

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All we have to do is to look up at the Banqueting House ceiling to see how the unreadable fantasies of James I

concerning the godlike powers of the monarch, once translated into celestial imagery, could become persuasively spellbinding. What better place to show the apotheosis of the king – literally a translation into a deity, akin to, say becoming Director General of the BBC – than above our heads? And since the paintings were commissioned by his son Charles I, they embody filial devotion too, and (in the near painting) the union, in the Stuarts, of the English and Scottish crowns. It was just because this Great Britain was a marriage made only in the heavenly sphere of the ceiling painter that, once brought down to earth, it created, in effect, the Civil War; a war which among other things was a conflict between *logos* and *icon*, word and image.

There's another example, drawn from our Programme 14, 'The Empire of Good Intentions', of the ways in which images make history as much as they are made by it: two very different uses of the Victorian camera; one to show what David Cannadine has called the 'ornamentalism' of the British empire – hence the match between the romantic-exotic Viceroy, Lytton and the self-conscious parade of Indian 'feudal' princes; the other camera to record, as you'll see a very different but absolutely contemporary India. One set of photographs, playing to neo-feudal fantasies of the exotic, displaying bejewelled and extravagantly moustachioed maharajahs, became popular. Not surprisingly, the other set, of famine victims, reduced almost to living carrion and taken by appalled missionaries, using newly portable Kodak One cameras, did not.

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Imagery, still or moving, does not just tell stories. It argues; but it argues in a different way in print, and it ought to be the first rule for television historians to embrace that difference. Non-fiction writing need not be absolutely linear. Because of the permanent, simultaneous way in which highly diverse details can be carried within the same book, it is possible to jump back and forth between sections – even at the cost of abandoning the cumulative engagement that comes from the pleasure of following rich narrative. In Norman Davies' *The Isles*, for instance, a work that argues against any sort of coherent experience, for something he thinks is the spurious and short-lived invention 'Britain', the broken form of the book itself actually mimics or acts out Davies' argument, balkanising the story into a multitude of parts, held together only by loose chronology. This process of textual atomisation is, like the argument, arbitrarily stopped at the point at which nations deemed 'authentic' – Scotland, Wales and Ireland – are allowed to retain their

TV history
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coherence, even though the history of those entities is one of endless, centrifugal conflict between regions and religions, and is open to precisely the same objection of arbitrary state-building as Davies' 'inauthentic' Britain.

But, even supposing I believed that a series on British history should be boiled down to its bedrock nations (which I don't), it would be impossible to produce a series in which each of the programmes devoted a token number of minutes, in ethnically correct proportion, to a population, and still sustain a coherent, let alone engaging, narrative. So while we (that is the Scottish-Jewish Martin Davidson-Simon Schama producer-presenter partnership) have been accused of being thoughtlessly Anglocentric, the opposite was the case. Committed to the issue, we took a conscious decision that, rather than break up each and every programme, we would spend entire programmes on precisely the 'British nations problem'. As a result, 'Nations' (*A History of Britain*: Episode 4) is about the imperialism of the Plantagenet monarchy in Wales and Scotland (and the imperialism of the Bruce family in Ireland). 'The British Wars' (Episode 8) locates the initiation of the British civil wars in Scotland and Ireland; 'Britannia Incorporated' (Episode 10) is about the eighteenth-century transformation of Scotland, and 'Empire of Good Intentions' (Episode 14) sets the Irish and Indian famines of the nineteenth century side by side.

We also knew that we needed to find visually economic ways of making our points. Here is one of them: our Culloden. As Peter Watkins's great 1960s television documentary *Culloden* made obvious – itself a turning point in historical film-making – there are all sorts of brutally shocking things about that hour-long slaughter. We didn't want to compete with their graphic battlefield carnage; but we *did* want to shock. So we used the history of music, one very familiar piece (the additional triumphalist verse written to 'God Save the King') to make our point.

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It has also been said, and lazily repeated by both academic and journalist critics, that the series has been 'all kings and queens' – in which case they must have been looking at some other series. We make no apology for medieval programmes that concentrated, for example, on the nature of kingship and the constraints on its authority, by looking at the Angevins – Henry II, Richard and John. Any programme purporting to deal with medieval England which did not do that, or a programme about the Norman Conquest that reduced Hastings to a fly-by footnote,

would be perverse. In other programmes, even in medieval programmes where monarchs were indisputably history-makers, we endeavoured to put the kings, as it were, in their historical place. The story of Richard II, for example, emerges out of a picture of a world traumatised by the Black Death and in the context of the Peasants' Revolt.

It is sometimes the same historians who have argued that there was nothing intrinsic in the state of the Roman Church in England that would have brought down the Reformation upon it, had Henry VIII not been in desperate need of a male heir (and who presumably, therefore, see Tudor state policy as the motor of change). They have also criticised us for being over-preoccupied with the royal divorce and the relationship between Henry and Anne Boleyn. What, in the scholarly world passes as thoughtful revision, becomes, when turned into television, 'soap opera'.

Underlying many of these complaints is a deep-rooted prejudice against the possibility of serious television history, given that the subject is held to be too important to be left to bungling (as it is implied) 'amateurs'. 'Real' history is, apparently, the monopoly of the academy. Whenever something like this is said, it reminds me of the great medievalist Oxford professor, Bishop Stubbs who, in his inaugural lecture, warned that it would be a waste of time and effort, perhaps a dangerous waste of time and effort, to teach history in the schools. He was, of course, thinking only of boys' schools. Girls, it is safe to say, seldom entered the episcopal-pedagogic mind. For Stubbs and his generation, the integrity of historical scholarship was conditional on its separation from the contamination of the vulgar world. So the walls and archives were to be raised in its colleges, behind which the priesthood could pursue its disinterested research far from the clamour. But, of course, the research was never purely disinterested and what the walls came to shelter was an enormously ramified profession, institutionalised through the triple initiation rites of tutorial essay, examinations and lectures, whose first obligation, as the late French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu pointed out with unkind candour, was its own collective self-reproduction.

Now those walls have been overthrown and television history especially – I'm proud to say – has been part of the demolition squad. Public access to the digital archive is stripping away that particular mystique. In some of the pioneering efforts, such as the Library of Congress's *American Memories* site, where primary sources, textual, visual and oral, are made available at every level of enquiry, from the highest of high scholars, to casual browsers and family researchers, the usual hierarchies of authority have been turned at last into something

approaching a democracy of knowledge. At Edward Ayres' extraordinary Civil War website at the University of Virginia, students of all ages, whether at high school, on PhD programmes or adult learning courses, are able to browse archival materials, exchange research data and written essays, and share a multitude of sources – from Confederate and Union army records and slave songs, private diaries and correspondence to the photo-archives of the counties of Pennsylvania and Virginia directly affected by the conflict. In place of a profession, we now, at last, have the real possibility of a community.

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This is, I know, all very high-minded. But none of it will work – especially not what I obstinately believe to be 'serious television' – if we uncouple storytelling from argument and debate. Now it is the anti-televisional lobby's point that these functions are incompatible. Even Macaulay who, in a famous 1825 book review of Hallam's *Constitutional History of England*, first insisted that history was divided into two realms, that of poetry and that of philosophy, believed no one had ever managed to bring the two together. He also believed, however, that it was every historian's duty to try. If we substitute narrative and debate for those divisional headings, then it seems also true, even in television, that we too often segregate them. Debate belongs to *Newsnight* and to *Question Time* – 'Now Mr Cromwell, or "Protector" as you seem, for some reason, to think of yourself, I PUT IT TO YOU, that you behaved very, VERY badly in Ireland. No, no, I won't take ifs and buts. Did you or did you not say these RUDE things about the Catholics, and are these the kind of things likely to bring about the "healing" you seem to be going on about much of the time. YES OR NO?'

The closest, in fact, that compelling historical reconstruction has come to embodying the prime time manners of contemporary news debate was the original *Culloden*, which used the device of a war correspondent in eighteenth-century costume, reporting from behind a wall, along with hard-bitten, capsule biographies of the soldiers, British and Jacobite, in the manner of fly-on-the-moor reality reporting. Some of this hasn't, in my view, stood the test of time very well although the parade of grimy faces (and authentically terrible teeth) in *Culloden* succeeded brilliantly in de-romanticising the rebellion – a misery without heroes or villains, just pawns and aristocrats. And the pre-Python danger of a parody of 1960s-style investigative documentaries ('Angus Macdonald, 31; shepherd; conscripted by his tacksman to join the Prince!') disappears altogether in the

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utterly convincing battle sequences, that were edited virtually to real time (since *Culloden* lasted barely more than an hour).

Those sequences were some of the bravest and earliest experiments in what I want to call 'the poetics of television history'. What that calls for is the sense of surrounding the viewer, for at least some moments, in a different world; and (even harder) making the viewer forget for those same moments that the outcome of that history is already known. What we might call 'historical reality' series (were that not an oxymoron) – *The 1900 House*, *The Edwardian Country House*, *The Trench* – sometimes seem as though they are in that same enterprise, but actually they're not, since our involvement with the characters depends on us knowing that they are really 'like us', or that, in so far as they can be made unlike us, the agency of that transformation is social and material – washing with lye, tying a corset. To truly complete the change, the washing, I think, has to be mental or imaginative, as much as physical. Poetic reconstruction, if it is to work, needs to lose the characters, and by extension, us, who are watching them, entirely within their own world without any inkling of their return trip to the contemporary.

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Now this is an unbelievably difficult feat to bring off. Those of us who choose to do it are attempting, in effect, to create a drama; to deliver the immediacy of a past world, but do it on a documentary budget and usually, these days, in the unforgivingly crisply focused medium of tape. The ritual complaints – and many of them aren't necessarily wrong – about the clumsiness or the self-consciousness of reconstructions, come from a culture where the standards are set by drama (such as Peter Ackroyd's recent *Dickens* series) funded to supply hordes of extras, wardrobe and make-up on location, professionally dressed sets, professional actors and – most importantly – shot on film.

Having heard both sides of the eternal tape-versus-film debate, and having had to work with both (and having, initially been sceptical of cameramen's attachment to the 'texture' of film) I now, and without much hope of seeing it restored to documentary budgets, happen to think they're right. Digital video is not the same. Film-effecting is not the same. The plasticity of film (to import a term from art criticism) does better approximate the cognitive wiring we use when we summon up memories, both public and private; often a state of half-dreaming, half-remembrance, not in any event, in neither case, in sharp, brilliantly crystalline focus. For that very reason, video dogmatists (in the Danish

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Film is better

sense) routinely object to what they claim is the dishonestly manipulative quality of film. But, as far as I'm concerned, the moment a shot is framed, something other than the passive recording of 'reality' is being achieved. The *faux*-literalism of the video dogmatists is, in fact, reminiscent of the delusions of historians who persist in believing that somehow the archives write themselves and all they do is point their brains at the sources, exit and write the history. They, too, 'frame' when they pre-formulate the questions they ask of their sources, and their framing is just as much the product of prior preoccupations and prejudices as the video director's.

Taped reconstructions, imprisoned in documentary budgets, make the line between plausibility and giggles perilously fine. This was something the pioneers of television history were obviously acutely aware of. Even with this cautionary lesson, working on periods such as the Middle Ages, where there is little or no rostrum, and even less in the way of portraits that put faces to the names, it is virtually impossible, however, to do without them. How many wide shots full of pregnant emptiness can one shoot? And for all the professionals' distaste of so-called 'trumpet and drum' history, there are huge turning points in history – Hastings, Bannockburn, Edgehill – which can't and ought not, be avoided. So a repertoire of devices (hand-held shots, Super Eight close-ups) are mobilised to convey something of the physical reality of a battle without the need for hundreds of extras at several hundred pounds a head, per day.

Four years ago, when we did it ourselves, no one had yet been brave enough, or foolhardy enough, to try it. And the results in some of our medieval programmes undoubtedly did capture, and keep, a very large television audience. But we're all conscious now, I think, that those techniques have, with repetition, become a cliché and have lost the power to persuade. What might take their place without breaking the bank is a moot point. Computer-generated images might help but as of now, they are almost as much of a strain on budgets as all-out drama or feature film reconstructions.

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And yet we do have some models showing us how to convey some of the epic reality of war with relatively modest means. Here are my two favourite examples (one admittedly a movie): Yves Angelo's masterpiece *Le Colonel Chabert* still, after *Chimes at Midnight* (where Orson Welles has no money at all), the most perfect recreation of a historical moment since the war; and the beginning of Kevin Brownlow's 1975 documentary-drama, *Winstanley*, about the Civil War utopian commune

of The Diggers. The point I want to make, both to historians and producers, is that it seems to me that the brilliance of both sequences at capturing the poetics of the past depends on a conceptual, as much as a technical, break-through. Both directors start with an idea that belongs to the essence of the moment – the godly shout of the parliamentary armies; their austere thorny way to battle, in the case of Angelo's Napoleonic soldiers; charismatic glamour. They then proceed to undo those ideas in the action – the godly shout turns into ferocity; and you'll see what happens to the glamour. Importantly, they've both had some help storyboarding their idea: Brownlow from Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky*, explicitly acknowledged in the music; and for Angelo, Baron Gros's painting of the aftermath of the battle of Eylau in the winter of 1807. Not to mention from Beethoven. Angelo's idea is to show not the battle itself but its immediate aftermath, a moment both of incontrovertible historical truth and poetic pathos.

Between the re-awakened dead and the living steps, the presenter, chorus-like (Derek Jacobi did a dazzling job of this in Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V*) tries somehow to help along the illusion of being lost in the past without being egregiously and annoyingly present. But he can get help in this exercise of creating virtual realities from locations that ought never be merely picturesque or generically suggestive, but which ought to speak simultaneously to story and argument. In the films the place becomes the chorus – not just scene-setter but commentator as well.

In 'Dynasty' (Episode 3) which focuses on Thomas Becket and Henry II, Becket, on the run from the royal wrath, finds refuge in the Cistercian Abbey of Pontigny, south-east of Paris. What we were aiming for here is a glimpse inside Becket's austere, uncompromising mind and as it happens – not coincidentally – Cistercian architecture is the most austere and pure of all the orders, which is why it was largely left alone in the French Revolution. So Clare Beavan, the director, framed the shots with occasional glimpses of me, as if we were indeed not just in a refuge but inside, as it were, not John Malkovich, but Thomas Becket. 'In Victoria and her Sisters' (Episode 13) – in a peculiar way almost like an ecclesiastical aisle – the strategy is deliberately, almost aggressively, counter-suggestible; where the frank visual admission of the ruin of the location – a derelict cotton mill in Ancoats, Manchester – repairs itself in the viewer's imagination. The wreckage has been made by time, but it plays perfectly to the sense of a wrecking crew by human hand that we wanted to imply at this point in the story.

For 'The Two Winstons' (Episode 15) Clare Beavan and I chose our locations with an eye to the poetry of ruins – the boarded-up country house; the extraordinary junkyard housed in one of the big ship repair

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presenter

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Practical &
Technical
Considerations

Location

sheds at Chatham Royal Naval Dockyard; the abandoned Second World War airstrip; even the backlit Wigan coalmine. This was not for cheap pathos. The emptiness of those locations we wanted filled by the viewer's imagination – especially the airstrip and control tower for the 1939–40 sequences, which we very deliberately did not intercut with shots or even sounds of Spitfires and Lancasters. Again, the idea was to make these locations speak to the heart and soul of our film, which was the issue of historicism itself – the virtues and the vices, the riches and the cost of the hardcore British addiction to the past. With the right director and cameraman (and I've been incredibly fortunate to have had both, right through this series) place can be made to speak, to be its own presenter; or even a kind of re-enactor. So can other players who don't need to learn their lines.

animals

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Our use of animals isn't an attempt to marry nature films with history – *Walking with Heraldic Beasts*. The proxy effect of using animals and birds emblematically has its roots in the historical sources and its rationale in the stage of both story and argument. In the case of turning Henry II into a bird of prey, we were, of course, alluding to the king's own famous passion for falconry, his notorious predator's instinct; but also to the medieval tradition of bestiary literature in which the persona of kings and bishops, heroes and villains was clad, symbolically, in feathers and fur. The white peacock mixed into the portrait of Elizabeth was to make a point, as economically as possible, about the relationship between display and charismatic authority. And William Cobbett – even physiognomy aside – was often compared to a pig, pungent and mucky, sometimes by himself, and always affectionately. Though we did not use the quote in the film, Cobbett himself wrote that when he was preparing a pigsty for the winter he would occupy it himself for a bit and if he liked it, then he could be sure that the pigs would too.

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So these visual strategies are never meant as mere décor. They are all intended to introduce debate by stealth, in ways which flow naturally from both the storyline and the visual storyboard. Sometimes, we introduced visual epigrams at the beginning of our films to which we'd return at the end, creating the on-screen equivalent of a complete narrative arc – the sawn-away ring on Elizabeth's finger inaugurating the debate about the bodies, political and personal (or as contemporaries said 'natural') of the two queens, and ending with the return of that ring to Mary's estranged son James VI, in Scotland.

Without promising too much – or risking hubris – it seems to me, four years after we began, and ten years after I started making documentaries about art and history for the BBC, that television history, done well through the union of provoking commentary and spectacular visual imagination, has nothing to apologise for. If it has the courage of its own convictions, and reinvents its own way of visiting the past, not just struggling to translate the issues of printed history; if it refuses to rest on its laurels but looks for new kinds of stories to communicate; if it re-examines the best ways to engage the imagination whilst stimulating debate; if it does not shrink from contemporary problems, whilst not distorting history to promote them, then it has a fighting chance of realising Macaulay's dream of making a history which is not only 'received by the reason but burned into the imagination'.