

***Talking Heads in Black and White: History on Australian Television***

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Thanks to Alex for inviting me to speak to you all today. I bring a couple of experiences to bear on this talk. Before I was a presenter, I was a lecturer and still am in a course that we teach at Macquarie called History on Film. That course takes students on a critical journey through understanding history and more importantly how histories are constructed and built through historical film and television. And teaching in this course sharpened my sense of the possibilities in film and television to communicate some of the complexities of the past in both accessible and really challenging ways. Second, my ideas on history on television have been shaped by my involvement in producing it. Last year I was working as presenter on the ABC's experiment with history television, the weekly magazine series *Rewind*. That experience was a really rich and challenging one, but it was also very sobering in some ways. I'd come from teaching this course excited by the possibilities of creating innovative history television. But we ended up producing television that I think was smart and thoughtful, but not necessarily innovative in the way I hoped it would be. What I would like to see on Australian television is more innovative television history. Now what do I mean by this? I think I'll explain a little bit more or perhaps throw out some ideas about what that might mean towards the end of my talk. But right now I want to stress why it is important that we try to work towards new approaches to television history in Australia in the wake of new media genres like reality TV and the resurgence of popularity of documentary in cinemas, John Hirst has already mentioned Michael Moore, and there's also Morgan Spurlock's *Supersize Me*, and a host of documentaries about the sixties: *Guerilla*, about Patty Hearst, *The Weather Underground*, *Inside Deep Throat*. All these new documentaries are making it into cinemas and doing quite well, and I think television history is in danger of being left behind, of missing the opportunity to capture a younger audience who I don't necessarily think want to see more documentaries about war. Capturing a broad audience for history television is also important for educational reasons too. According to the recent *Australians and the Past* survey, more Australians gain their information about the past from television than any other medium. Eight four percent of

those surveyed had watched historical film or television in the past year. So history on television is important for public understandings of our past. It has consequences. Further it is evident that Australians watch a lot of history on television and they understand its conventions and can read and interpret it in quite sophisticated ways. The Film Australia project seems to me to represent a tremendous opportunity to expand the parameters of television history in Australia, to take the audience on new journeys into the past through television.

So to begin I would like to briefly look at how history has been 'done' on our televisions in recent years. Most of us probably grew up with those conventional history documentaries like *The World at War*, the strong narrative voices in the 'voice of God', Lawrence Oliver mode, filled with black and white archival footage interspersed with the talking heads of esteemed academic historians. And while we might think of such conventions as a little dated, they have proved remarkably enduring and these three features remain the cornerstones I think of contemporary television documentary. And even in films like *The Weather Underground* which was quite innovative—it used cinematic techniques like music very well—but it also used conventional documentary techniques very effectively.

More recently the rise of new documentary formats of reality TV has been the impetus for all sorts of new kinds of history documentary. I don't know if anyone saw that forensic *CSI*-style series called *Crime Team* which featured two celebrities solving a historical crime each week. Or the original model for *Rewind*, which was a series called *History Detectives* in the United States where a group of historians and archaeologists would go and trace the provenance of various historical objects. So for example, in one story a woman thought she had the bullets that had been taken from the bodies of Bonnie and Clyde and the history detectives investigated this. Now I think these do tap into a thirst for crime on TV. But I think they run the risk of being current affairs in period costume, a series of objects in search of a story. And while that may have a charm of its own, I'm not sure if that's really where we want to go. We've also seen the rise of the living history genre, the *1940s House*, the *Edwardian Country House*, *Regency House Party* and these tap into reality TV conventions quite effectively. And I'm not sure what the ratings have been like, but I suspect from the chatter that *Outback House* was quite

successful in bringing in maybe a slightly different audience to historical television—but I also think they do occasionally run the risk of being *Big Brother* in period costume—is it the reality TV its considered acceptable to watch?

We've also seen the re-enactment return to television history and Liz's discussion this morning on the docudrama indicated the resurgence of re-enactment in British television. It's also being used in a more sophisticated and more self-conscious way in programs like the *Seven Wonders of the Industrial World*, where historical actors are "interviewed". This is one playful solution to the problem of a lack of eyewitnesses or a lack of documentary footage, and it's quite a clever way to deal with those problems. The other major innovation it seems to me outside of Australia in television documentary is the increasing use of CGI, the very expensive recreations which create the impossibly glossy and expensive historical TV which has, in many cases, the production values of historical film. And *The Seven Industrial Wonders of the World* is again a series that used these techniques.

Now some, but not all of these features of overseas historical television are expensive to produce, which sets the bar in impossibly high for the more modest budgets and time frames of Australian historical documentary. Although after hearing Liz's stories, it sound as though the budgets of British documentaries are very modest too! Of course, Australians see more overseas historical television than they see Australian historical television. We're voracious consumers of British historical television - even the ABC's traditional time slot for history (7:30 Sunday nights) has been dominated by histories other than Australian history.

So what of Australian history television? Australian history TV has ranged from those kind of nostalgic, popular history presentations which present a lot of archive footage like Peter Luck's *This Fabulous Century* from the 1970s, to the successful series and miniseries like *The Sullivans*, *The Dismissal*, *Bodyline* and *Vietnam*, which I would argue have probably done a better job in putting Australia's social history on the screen, than historical documentary has done. The ABC made a bold foray into the history of race relations with *Frontier* a few years ago and after a few years of shying away from big television histories of the nation like *Federation* and *100 Years* (which were

both produced around 2001), we are seeing a return to history on the ABC in the newer formats I outlined earlier. Both the ABC and SBS have produced reality shows (*The Colony* and *Outback House* respectively) and the ABC did a few nostalgia programs like *The Way We Were*, and *Mondo Thingo*, and these kind of shows that appeal to a common historical sensibility amongst audiences. And then of course there was *Rewind*, which I worked on, which had a bumpy ride onto television screens and was ultimately rejected by the ABC. As *Outback House* has now finished, there is no regular Australian history television on our screens.

Australian historical television has had a difficult ride. This is partly because it suffers in comparison with British and American historical television for several reasons. First is the idea that Australia has a “small” history compared to these nations—this was something that came up in the *Rewind* office more than once: “Well, it would be easy to make historical television about America, they had all sorts of battles and wars. What are we going to make stories about?” Second is the fact that Australian production budgets can’t really hope to match those of those big BBC history productions—I think *Rewind* was judged according to this and found wanting and I suspect that Australian historical television generally suffers the same kind of fate. Australia cannot compete with the massive production budgets of some of those overseas television history productions. So why should we compete on those terms? I think we should think about how we could step outside of the parameters of the established television universe and try something a little bit different.

I should stress here that some of these ideas are half formed, but I’m trying to be a little bit provocative, trying to think about different ways of presenting Australian history on TV. One of the things that Marnie Hughes-Warrington and I do in our history on film course is to teach a course that is as much about writing history as it is about putting history on film. So in other words, the course is about historiography, and it encourages students to think very carefully about the ways in which history—and historical films—are constructed. So, for example, we might ask: how does *Saving Private Ryan* construct a particular narrative of patriotism: what does it leave out? Whose stories are told? Was D-Day purely an American event? Clearly it wasn’t, although the film presents it in this way. Many of the newer approaches in

historical writing are about exposing the foundations of historical narratives, saying not just “we know the story to be true”, but asking “how do we know this story to be true”? Historians can use footnotes to raise challenges to their narratives and to question them—so how might film sometimes do this as well? Two historians could come up with vastly different conclusions based on the same pieces of evidence, and they frequently do. But we rarely see these kind of debates in historical films. Historical documentaries tend to present history as a linear narrative, and we don’t tend to see people considering the historical evidence in contrary ways. History is not just about “what happened, when”: its also about “how do we know what happened, when”. Yet historical television tends to proceed on the assumption that we know everything that happened in the past. So my first suggestion is that historical documentary could perhaps venture into this world of conflicting interpretations—sometimes. If filmmakers did it all the time I think it would get incredibly frustrating and tedious for an audience. But it would be refreshing to see a documentary film admit occasionally, when we don’t have all of the evidence, to say that—and to invite the audience in to consider that puzzle. To let the audience in fact, act as the historian.

Second I think that historical television takes itself far too seriously. Humour is an underused tool in historical documentary. Not just taking lighter material as subjects for documentaries—if you make a film about Graham Kennedy, you’re not going to make it sombre and humourless, one would hope. But I think that humour can be used in the telling of historical stories. I want to show you a really short clip from a film by Michael Winterbottom, *24 Hour Party People*, which is not a historical documentary, but an historical biopic. In this film Winterbottom brings both a sense of humour to the telling of stories from the past and also a sense of acknowledging conflicting interpretation. It’s only about a minute long, and it has adult themes! But I like its insistence on playing with the conventions on narrative and opening up the possibilities of alternative interpretation. Could we just have our clip for a moment please.

[clip is played – shows central character catching his wife with another man in a nightclub bathroom. As he leaves, a man cleaning the toilets turns to the camera and says “I don’t remember *that* happening”. The frame freezes, and we hear the central character in voice-over saying, in effect, that while it

mightn't have happened that way, if you have a choice between showing the truth and the legend, then choose the legend.]

I like the film's playfulness—playing with the idea that we know all the answers. Maybe we don't. We don't always know everything and I think that clip makes that clear. Third, I would like to emphasise that while history is about narratives, it is also about analysis and interpretation. Written history tends to focus on analysis. But television history tends to still focus solely on narrative. We tend to make television history the way it has been made for decades, give or take a few new techniques. So why not use historical documentary more as a way of exploring ideas about the past rather than just stories from the past, as John referred to when he asked about looking at puzzles in television history? I don't know if anyone ever saw Trevor Graham's recent film *Hula Girls*, which was on SBS a few months ago, but it was a good example of this. The film presented a cultural history of the popular culture figure of the hula girl, which opened out to tell a story of colonisation in the Pacific. Instead of making another film about Gallipoli or war, why not make a film which asks, why has Anzac Day, which commemorates the failed invasion of Turkey, developed as our de facto national day? (This was Michael Cathcart's idea for a *Rewind* story.) To answer it, you could interview a range of historians and ordinary people. So it could trace the development of Anzac Day over the twentieth century and show the ways in which the present makes use of the past, and the way that we in the present understand the past and use it for particular ends. This focus on 'ordinary' people could also be extended to documentaries, for example, about the history of social dancing in Australia. The film could be light hearted, use a wealth of archival footage and tell a slice of Australian social history.

Finally I would suggest that Australian television history needs to turn to the more recent past for its subject matter. While I was working on *Rewind*, there was a reluctance to consider anything from the 1970s onwards as history (partly, I suspect, because some of the older journalists remember working on the stories at the time). A whole slate of new documentaries on the sixties and the seventies in the United States have hit our screens in the last few years. And I think we could take the lead from these and make documentaries about, for example, the breakdown of censorship in Australia

or the history of the second wave of feminism, or the history of contraception in Australia. Of course all of this might seem hopelessly academic and kind of removed from the realities of making television and I'm fully aware that I might get howled down for that. But I think that the Film Australia, Making History project, offers an amazing opportunity to revitalise Australia history television and do something new and exiting, and out of the box—something unexpected. Several times during the production of *Rewind*, I wondered if much of what we do as historians is incompatible with the demands of television. For example, *Rewind* made more than one story about searching for a shipwreck of one kind or another. Now, a shipwreck search fitted into the programs' investigation criteria more easily than my earlier example of asking why we valorise the failed invasion of Turkey above all military engagements. A shipwreck is a tangible object, it's a good story—it usually attracts a few obsessed boffins who are good talent and easy to track down. They're keen to try and find the shipwreck itself and with any luck you might find a shipwreck at the end. But and here's the essential problem. Where does that story fit into a broader kind of narrative, what does it tell us beyond the fact that there was a shipwreck? What can it tell us about the broader patterns of our past? I think that this might still be something people expect from some of their television history—that it tells a good story, certainly, but that it might also invite reflection on broader historical questions in an interesting, thought-provoking way. To do this, I think filmmakers will need to be bold and prepared to experiment, and historians will need to be generous with their time and their expertise. Most importantly, I think we will need to work together, and that would be my great hope for this day and for this project: that it brings academics and television producers into a much closer working relationship.