Chapter 6 /
“This is Clearly Bullshit”
Some views about
history on television /
Mijke Pol

Fiction or non-fiction?

June 2012. Just like every week, the mood is convivial on the *Graham Norton Show*. The atmosphere is cheerful and lots of jokes are cracked. The comedian Graham Norton is interviewing Charlize Theron, Steve Coogan, and Jon Hamm. Hamm plays the main character (an incorrigible chain smoker, drinker, and womanizer) in the American hit series *Mad Men*, which takes place in an advertising agency in the 1960s. Hamm turns out to be a very funny man, and the answers he gives Norton prompt loud laughter. For instance, he says, “One of the dangers of doing anything that takes place in a relatively recent past is that it’s all been documented. There are crazy fans who will say ‘Well it wasn’t raining on December 14th, 1968. This is clearly bullshit.’”

The terms ‘crazy fans’ and ‘bullshit’, in particular, provoked bursts of laughter. Although presumably neither Hamm nor many of the viewers realized it, the actor had broached a subject that has led to reflection and discussion in many scholarly articles and monographs. The key question in many of these discussions is: what is the actual value of history on television? Leading academic historians disagree on the answer. For instance, Dutch media historian Sonja de Leeuw argues that history on television is valuable and that it should not be dismissed as fictional nonsense, while the British sociologist and media scientist Andrew Hoskins claims that television can have a deleterious effect on our memory. With increasing technological advances, he believes, it is becoming ever more difficult to distinguish between fiction and non-fiction.

These different views on the value of presenting history on television will be discussed in this chapter on the basis of various examples. Academic historians like Hoskins often warn against the dangers of the historical drama series, among which we include *Mad Men* for the sake of simplicity. These series, they contend, form and transform collective memory. After watching *Mad Men*, people see the advertising industry of the 1960s as the director envisaged it, with women as

sex symbols and men spending the best part of their days at the office drinking and smoking. Critics are of the opinion that television is a constructed truth, which bears no relation to reality, and they portray viewers as passive consumers who do not realize they are being fooled by the television producers. Accordingly, we should not view documentaries about past events as valuable historical sources. They should be classified, instead, with drama series like *Mad Men*; for neither is more than pure fiction – fiction that is of no value, historically speaking.

Considerable criticism has also been leveled against re-enacting historical events in documentaries. Here, I will discuss re-enactment on television and look at how it is dealt with in different European countries. Starting with the British tradition of presenting history on television, which has had a great influence on Western Europe, I will then turn to the ways in which history is presented on television in France, Germany, and the Netherlands.

Although there are differences in the way history is shown on television in Western countries in Europe, in all of them historical documentaries and drama series have become enormously popular. Along with their often extensive websites, they now reach a wider audience than traditional history books, and it is precisely this reach that ensures that history programs can be monitored to a greater degree than traditional monographs and articles.

The history of the world filmed in South Africa

One of these television producers is Andrew Marr, who has made many history programs for British television. His most recent extensive series is *Andrew Marr's History of the World* (BBC 2010), which tells the story of the past seventy thousand years, tackling such large questions as: How was the world formed? What developments has mankind undergone?

The series was filmed in South Africa, because it is a melting pot of people from Africa, the Middle East, Europe and Asia, and because this decision avoided the need to pay production crews to travel all over the world to the various locations included in the story. Marr is part of a relatively long tradition in Great Britain of producing history documentary series on television, a format that has generated a very large following, thanks to such early successes as *The Great War* (1964) and *Grand Strategy of World War II* (1972). One year after the latter, the first commercial series was shown on television. *The World at War* (1973, Thames TV), changed the existing BBC format somewhat by according a large place to ordinary people telling their own stories.

The BBC has had a major influence on the way Western Europeans have broadcast history on television, especially in the development of documentaries that feature a presenter, a form seen nowadays, for example, in the series hosted by the British historian and art historian Simon Schama. One of the

Andrew Marr's
History of the World
(BBC, 2012).

Kenneth Clark in
Civilisation (BBC,
1969).

On the set of
Civilisation
(BBC, 1969).

first to play this role in Great Britain was the well known art historian Kenneth Clark in the series *Civilisation* (1969).¹ History is now a fixture in British television programming. Audiences can watch history programs on various channels, and every day the BBC broadcasts object-oriented art history shows like *Cash in the Attic*, *Bargain Hunt* and *Flog It!* In Andrew Marr's series, which was shown every week on British television, he combined various elements from the different series that had preceded his, and his voice-over gave continuity to the series, providing context and background, while the history was re-enacted by actors.

This re-enactment of history did not fail to attract criticism from academic historians, and such criticism, which continues to be voiced, is illustrative of the attitude of many academics toward this form of 'public history' - used here as an umbrella term for everything brought to large public via the media by historians or professional writers.²

International differences

Although the British tradition of history on television has had a big impact on neighbouring countries, it is striking how many national differences exist in the way in which history has been, and still is shown on television. In the current era of television, the internet and downloads, series like *Mad Men* have gained an international audience, and American historical drama series are easily sold in Western Europe. Take, for example, the cross-border success of series like *The Tudors* (2007–2010) and *The Borgias* (2011–).

Unlike *Mad Men*, however, the success of most national television programs often stops at the border, with the exception of a few British series. In their own country, they are watched, loved or distrusted, but elsewhere they are hardly known. This is mainly because they are often about national history, but there are also differences in the way they present history. Although the formats are sometimes copied, the actual execution is different. All the same, the kind of criticism expressed about these various programs remains the same. Before outlining that criticism and explaining why I think it is unjustified, I will describe several European programs.

In France, history on television was initially intended to arouse political debate in a public television system that was very strictly controlled. Between 1953 and 1965, 47 different television dramas were broadcast, many of which were followed by studio discussions about the French past. The programs avoided certain subjects, however, and there were some historical events, such as the Dreyfus affair, which were strictly taboo.

From the 1980s onwards, history on television in France (and in the other Western European countries, too) was assigned a different role: it was to be primarily for entertainment. And the importance of regular scheduling on television receded into the background. This does not mean that history no longer plays a role in France; rather the zeal to provide the population with uplifting material has subsided. This change

is reflected in the program *Secrets d'Histoire* (France 2), presented by Stéphane Bern, which discusses famous people from French history (such as Victor Hugo) and intersperses the stories with re-enacted scenes. It is characterized by the use of rapid montage, and exciting music lends tension or drama to the story. The content is provided by a voice-over and a few experts, and it is more difficult to distinguish between fiction and non-fiction than was the case in earlier programs.

Fictional elements are seen not only in dramas and docudramas. Many German history programs about the national or international past also contain re-enactment, to which fictional elements are regularly added consciously in order to make the story more exciting. Sometimes the events are ones about which very little is known, in which case the producers give their own interpretation and have actors in costume re-enact the story.

Just after World War II, perhaps not surprisingly, people in Germany found it very difficult to film recent history. When the American miniseries *The Holocaust* (NBC) was broadcast there in 1978, it sparked a debate about how Germany should deal with its own history. The German media and film scholar Tobias Ebbrecht, who studied German drama and docudrama about World War II, concluded that German television approached the subject differently than British television did. In German films, documentary and fiction are combined “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.”³ In America, *The Holocaust* was dismissed as fiction and sensationalist, but in Switzerland, France and Germany some praised it for leading people in those countries to confront “the process of the destruction of European Jewry in all its enormity”.⁴

In Neanderthal guise

Watching *Der Neandertaler-Code* on the history website of the German broadcasting company ZDF, we see actors in Neanderthal dress (i.e. in some sort of rags),⁵ running around in a big group and yelling loudly. Did they really run like that? Did they really look like that? Nobody knows, of course, but they offer an attractive way of illustrating a period of history for which there is no authentic footage.

The use of fictitious elements in dramatic re-enactment is also a device used by Germany's best-known teacher of national history, Guido Knopp. In December 2012, just after the announcement that he was leaving ZDF, the German magazine *Der Spiegel* looked back at his presentation of history in books and on television, which, over the years, reached an audience of millions of people. Professional historians accuse Knopp of playing to the gallery with the highly emotional settings in his

On the set of
*Der Neandertaler-
Code* (Sonja
Scherle-Krauser,
2010).

programs and books. According to them, he produces 'historical fiction'⁶ by creating a montage of fiction and documentary material.

Dutch television producers keep their distance from re-enactment. In popular educational programs or historical documentaries, almost nothing is re-enacted, even when the period in question is one for which no historical footage exists. To give a personal example, I worked as an editor on *De Slavernij* (NTR), a series showing the place of slavery in Dutch history. In order to tell the story visually without being able to do any re-enactment, we had to come up with many tricks. For instance, the Surinamese presenter went back in search of his own roots (through DNA research), and the camera followed him on his travels to well-known places that were linked to the history of slavery. We showed drawings and engravings of the mistreatment of slaves, while reading archival material aloud. Some of the paintings were animated, so that a

On the set of
De Slavernij
(Mijke Pol, 2011).

ship suddenly appeared to be really sailing, but it was always clear that it was actually a painting. And we did not deviate from this approach for a single moment. We flew experts to Surinam and Africa, so that they could tell the story on location, a story that was set out in a detailed script prepared ahead of time.

No one has ever studied why re-enactment is used in German, French, and British history programs but not in those produced in the Netherlands. It is probable that the Dutch never did so from the start. One of the first major historical series on Dutch television was *De Bezetting* (“The Occupation”), by historian Dr. Lou de Jong, the first director of the Netherlands State Institute for War Documentation. The series, which recounted the story of World War II, had mainly a lecture format and made use of interviews, maps, photos, and other visual material to support the story line. There was no re-enactment. Of course that was not necessary, as there was sufficient source material available.

Criticism of history on TV

Television and other forms of public history are often unjustly criticized by academic historians. In his monograph *Past and Present in Contemporary Culture: Theatres of Memory*, Raphael Samuel discusses historians’ criticism of the popular form of heritage as presented on television, as well as in theme parks, museums, and elsewhere. “Heritage is accused of wanting to turn the country into a gigantic museum, mummifying the present as well as the past, and preserving tradition in aspic.”⁷ According to Samuel, historians think that the only true knowledge of the past can be found in written history. Heritage that is brought into connection with consumer society is considered not historical enough. Samuel, however, argues that the same phenomenon can be found in scholarly writing on history. “We use vivid detail and thick description to offer images far clearer than any reality could be.”⁸ Historians, he writes, also

offer stories to their readers that are far removed from reality. In their books they resort to stylistic devices to make the text legible and entertaining; therefore, Samuel contends, their criticism is unjustified.

In discussions about history on television, one of the biggest problems that academic historians in both Europe and America point to is re-enactment. Since, as a general rule, viewers are meant to take what they see at face value and not to be aware that a lot of editing has taken place beforehand, editing has, in effect, created a new reality. This is even more evident in the case of historical drama series, where actors re-enact the life of the past. In both the book *Televising History: Mediating the Past in Postwar Europe*, about historical drama series on Dutch television, and an article with the revealing title “Televising Fiction: A domain of Memory,” Sonja de Leeuw links history on television to memory. In doing so, she analyzes the four-part Dutch television series *Wilhelmina*, which was broadcast in 2001. In this conventional drama about the recent past, comparable to ones regularly made in other Western European countries, Queen Wilhelmina is shown fleeing to England during World War II, in a presentation that continued the ongoing debate on the role of the Dutch royal family during the war. De Leeuw remarks that although most of us did not experience World War II, we do have memories of it. These are constructed memories that are continually under development through various influences, one of which is television. Memories both form this medium and are formed by it, which is why a study of history on television is very important. As De Leeuw argues: “Historical film and television productions may be considered the liveliest artefacts witnessing the existence of a past. It is therefore relevant to discuss the stories that are being told about the past as these reveal what we are expected to remember, collectively.”⁹

Queen Victoria's sex life on national TV

It is worth studying historical series and drama series, therefore, as they show what our collective memories are (or are assumed to be, or even ought to be). Much has been written about the phenomenon of the interplay between recollection or memory and television. Long before film and television became the most popular media, the French philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945) formulated a theory about the construction of memory. His ideas about collective memory were rediscovered in the 1980s when the French historian Pierre Nora published his *Les Lieux de Mémoire* (1984). The essence of his theory is the notion that in a time of globalization and ubiquitous technology, man has lost his secure place in the world and the memories associated with it. Where does he continue to belong? According to Nora, what he calls “sites of memory” (*lieux de mémoire*) help prevent people from forgetting everything. And history is one of the ways (one of the *lieux*) that ensures that we do not forget.¹⁰ How, then, does television fit into this theory? One might say that history on television is a “low-caliber” means of showing us what our collective memories ought to be. In fact, this is also what Sonja de Leeuw says in the works mentioned above. However, such a standpoint has disadvantages as well, as it implies that people are passive consumers who watch television uncritically and allow themselves to be told what their memories should be or are allowed to be. The fact that this is far from the truth was shown by the commotion caused in Great Britain in 2000 by the initial reaction to a historical costume drama about Queen Victoria and Prince Albert.

When the series ‘Victoria & Albert’ was broadcast by the BBC in the spring of 2001, an article in the newspaper *The Telegraph* bore the headline “Queen Victoria is raunchy lover in BBC series”, and it opened with the line: “Queen Victoria and Prince Albert are portrayed as a ‘lusty couple’ who were obsessed with sex in a multi-million-pound BBC costume drama.”¹¹ The two-part drama showed Victoria and Albert’s

wedding night and the queen ogling Albert's tight pants, and viewers were made privy to Victoria's diary, in which she writes of her sexual desires for Albert. In the article, historian Sarah Bradford, an expert on the royal household, comments on the dubious factual character of such scenes, opining "I think it is a bit sad really. What people do in bed is never factual unless it is photographed, witnessed or whatever."¹² And Donald Foreman, the secretary of the Monarchist League, predicted that many monarchists would find the series distasteful. Although accepting that it is well known that Victoria enjoyed sex, he does not believe we should sit around watching it on television. For him, "It is a bit like your own grandmother's private life being revealed."¹³ The attention given to the series and the reaction of expert viewers show that audiences do not necessarily swallow everything whole. Far too often, academic historians assume that viewers cannot think for themselves and that, for example, they believe that the sex between Victoria and Albert was precisely as shown on television.

Sociologist Andrew Hoskins argues that because of the growing number of media, we are confronted with "intensely mediated conditions"¹⁴, which are reflected in the discourse found in debates about the ways we tell and show history. He describes how individuals and the electronic media are intertwined in a continually evolving relationship. In an age when, thanks to digital technology, everything is possible, there is a growing need to connect with authentic elements of the past. And precisely because of the scope of this digital ingenuity, it is increasingly difficult to determine what is real and what is fake. According to Hoskins, individual and collective memories are literally 'mediated' by the various media, which determine what and how we remember. One consequence of this is that our understanding of the past is created, and history is reconstructed for us.¹⁵

In Hoskins' argumentation, too, we can detect the assumption of an attitude of passivity on the part of the audience. In other words, he implies that the consumer uncritically absorbs whatever reconstruction of the past the television producer chooses to show.

Greater reach means more monitoring

Even before World War II, documentaries were already being made in Europe and shown in movie theaters. There were no agreements or fixed rules about the form of a documentary, creating a major void in the theoretical discourse about them. For instance, the terms “documentary” and “cultural film” (in German *Kulturfilm*) were used interchangeably. Max de Haas, co-founder of the Dutch film association Visie (a company which produced films) described the documentary as the “filming of actual reality, as can be verified every day by eight million citizens of the Netherlands.”¹⁶

The viewer is nowhere near as passive as many academic historians claim in their discussions about documentaries. The criticism of the work of the German television producer Guido Knopp implies that the viewer is not capable of being a critical consumer, and that he/she simply accepts fiction as truth. If viewers had recourse to no other media than television, this might be a valid assumption, but in the twenty-first century, it is just not tenable. Thanks to the internet, consumers now have access to countless forums and websites commenting on the factual accuracies and inaccuracies in television documentaries. And if viewers have questions, they can easily use that same internet to get in touch with the editors. Moreover, during the broadcasts viewers can Twitter to their heart's content, and any inaccuracies are soon brought to light in 140 characters. It may thus be argued that precisely because of the enormous reach of television, the factual content is monitored to a much greater extent than in the case of academic books, which have a much smaller audience. The larger the audience, the greater the interaction (digital or otherwise) that automatically takes place, and this interaction keeps the quality of programs high and the producers alert.

This became apparent last year from the criticism on Twitter and on a few blogs of the Dutch program *De Grote Geschiedenis Quiz* (“The Big History Quiz”), which is shown once a year. I have been involved with the program for several

years as an editor, and I kept an eye on viewers' reactions during the broadcast. It soon became clear that people did not like the name of the quiz. It suggested that the questions were about the whole of history, whereas they focused mainly on the events of the twentieth century. Although this criticism was justified, the choice was understandable from the producers' viewpoint, since, obviously, more footage is available of the twentieth century than for any other. The criticism from the viewers led to us to pay more attention to earlier history in editorial meetings and to justify our choice of topics with the help of feedback from the show's website. Critical reactions thus keep me alert in my editing.

The above example is mainly about the wider public having some say in determining the content of the questions, leading us to ask ourselves, for example, if our topics cover as broad a history as possible. Another instance where this 'verification' by the public worked extremely well is the series *In Europa* ("In Europe"), broadcast in the Netherlands in 2007 and 2008, in which the writer Geert Mak presented history for the man in the street. Two Dutch historians soon came out with strong criticisms of the historical inaccuracies in the series. They offered their arguments in various newspapers and on television.¹⁷ The producer of the series was also given the opportunity to respond to the criticism.

TV: not a dictator, but a mediator of memory

Sonja de Leeuw, on the other hand, takes a totally different view. Talking about the success of the drama series *Wilhelmina*, she attributes the secret of its popularity to its celebration of the unity of the nation in a postmodern era. If only for a moment, the series gave viewers the feeling of belonging to a united Netherlands, a single nation.¹⁸ The media, and television in particular, have thus become the mediators of memory, and she, at least, does not see this as a reason for pessimism.

According to Halbwachs, memory is a reconstruction of

the past, based on information from the present.¹⁹ And, thanks to modern technology, television and film can now make more creative use of history and bring it to life. Sources from the past, whether edited or not, are once again shown to the public. History is thereby transformed into a popular cultural memory, and even more so into a collective memory – “collective” because a large audience watches such presentations simultaneously and because they stimulate debate and discussion.

Images from our television archive thus become new *lieux de mémoire*. They are found on digital sites that can be visited continually and repeatedly, and they contribute to the construction of collective memories and the sense of identity and nationality. Television fiction thus functions as a bridge between past and present. In my view, this applies not only to drama series, but also to historical documentary series.²⁰ Dismissing history on television as fiction necessarily implies dismissing books and articles for the same reason. History on television – and here I include historical drama series as well as documentaries and other programs in which reality is not portrayed by actors – offers many possibilities and advantages. It rightfully occupies an important place in the television programming of Western European countries, because it is a valuable tool for research and education, and as such is not inferior to books or articles. History on television, therefore, should finally be seen as a serious and valuable form of practicing history, just as television producers in Western Europe have regarded it for years.

It is thus time to dispel the pessimistic view that history on television is not a valuable source and has nothing to do with reality. In the discipline of history, we are now sophisticated enough to acknowledge the fact that even professional historians sketch their own versions of history in their books. Yet, this does not detract from the value of these writings. So let us view documentaries and historical dramas in the same way. Moreover, we should not underestimate the viewers, seeing them as passive consumers who let themselves be told what they should remember or describing them as naive and

gullible consumers. Viewers do know when a drama series or documentary contains re-enactment, and even if the game is not given away by modern color images about times when cameras did not exist, the word 'drama' will tell them that they are not watching authentic images. Re-enactment is therefore not a contemptible imitation but simply one of the means at a director's disposal for recounting history in images. As the noted historian Simon Schama once confessed: "It's a history because it's shamelessly my own version." ²¹

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