

Scan Lines: A Report from the XVIIIth IAMHIST Conference in Leeds, England, 14-17 July 1999.

By John C. Tibbetts

“It is a truth not universally acknowledged that Leeds is the birthplace of the cinema.” With this declaration, Richard Howells of the University of Leeds set the tone for the XVIIIth IAMHIST Conference in Leeds 14-17 July 1999.

“You laugh,” Howells told his attentive audience, “but this evening I’m going to show you some moving picture footage made in 1888, the earliest footage you ever will see—which predates the far-more famous footage by Edison and Lumiere by six or seven years.” Armed with slides, archive film, and diagrams Howells proceeded to recount how in 1888 Leeds resident Louis Le Prince designed and built a 16-lens camera that would capture “animated pictures of life.” Le Prince set up this apparatus and photographed carriage traffic from the Leeds Bridge.

Le Prince vanished without a trace in 1890. The Bridge still stands.

Of course there were other reasons why a contingent of more than one hundred IAMHIST faithful—from England, America, Canada, France, Denmark, Portugal, the Netherlands, and Spain—converged in historic Leeds, 14-17 July 1999. The University of Leeds was the first British university to embark on the academic study of communications. Three decades ago past-IAMHIST President Nicholas Pronay helped found the InterUniversity History Film Consortium (IUHFC), whose aim was to promote the study of film and news film as essential source material for understanding twentieth century history. Since 1989 the University’s Institute of Communications Studies (ICS) has conducted research and teaching in various aspects of communications. Sculptor Henry Moore was born here. The National Museum of

Photography, Film, and Television, newly renovated since its 1983 opening, is located a few miles down the road in nearby Bradford. Also nearby is the Haworth parsonage (home of the Bronte family) and the little town of Shipley, where “angry young man” director Tony Richardson was born in 1928.

The Conference theme, “Television and History,” tackled the always uneasy relationship between broadcast programmers and historians, past, present, and future. Some of the speakers struck an optimistic tone, as in the opening speech by past-President Nicholas Pronay, founder of the Institute for Communications Studies at the University of Leeds; others were more downbeat, like past-President Pierre Sorlin, from Paris, and Sam Kula from Ottawa. Pronay pointed out that a substantial increase in the last three decades in history programming on British television makes more history available to more people than ever before. As history itself has become a commercial enterprise, television now can be used as a library for the pursuit of history. History programming need no longer descend to the level of a mass audience; rather, because of the new, more selective channels and their audiences, programming now can presume to greater sophistication and higher standards of responsibility.

On the other hand, while Sam Kula’s speech, “All Talk, All the Time,” bitterly blasted the direction television tabloid journalism is taking in prioritizing entertainment above responsible journalism, Pierre Sorlin’s “Historians at the Crossroads” speech was a gentler critique of the present status of television’s processing of news and events. “Television as a witness to history has given us a new image of the past,” said Sorlin, “and historians are relying on it more and more as a source of evidence.” But

television is a postmodernist phenomenon, which is to say that it tends to “flatten” everything and erase the distinctions between events and things. “On television everything seems exactly the same,” Sorlin continued. “It is ongoing and timeless, and it has obligations to fill air time—usually with images and commentaries that have been transplanted from other sources and events at other times. You think I am criticizing television. No, but I think we historians are now at the crossroads. We admit we are all interested in television. We are used to looking at it and introducing documents from it into the classroom. But the problem is that with it we are facing a different conception of history. The extensive use of oral history and testimony leads us to believe that everybody now is an expert historian; that everybody has a vague but large knowledge of something which itself is a vague and flattened past. What can we do? The first solution might be to go on using television and try to maintain our explanatory vision of the past. Or we will choose not to accept this flattened view of history from this timeless machine. I confess I have no solution. I have come here to debate with you in the hopes that something will emerge from this Conference. But I firmly think it is absolutely necessary at least to modify our conception of history.”

As if in response to Sorlin, Prof. Phil Taylor, of Leeds, expressed the desire of the Conference to continue IAMHIST’s tradition of bringing together a community of historians and broadcasters to assess the past products and future potentials of televised history programming: “This conference is attempting to bring together both historians and program makers to take the shared appreciation of this rich historical source forward to the mutual benefit of all,” he declared. “We believe that many of the now infamous clashes between program makers and academic historians in the televising of

historical events were caused largely by a lack of mutual understanding between what the collaborators were trying or were able to do.” This vision was echoed in a talk given by Laurence Rees, Head of the BBC History Unit, who argued that the only way good history programs can be made is to ally historians and producers; that academics have to understand the need of a mainstream production to appeal to viewers who otherwise could exercise other choices in their viewing. “What we programmers can do,” he said, is “restore people to the story; find those who don’t want to talk and get them to talk.” A demonstration of this was seen in an excerpt from Rees’ Nazis: A Warning from History, in which not only victims of Nazi atrocities spoke out, but the soldiers who oversaw their tortures as well. And Karsten Fledelius paid tribute to his old friend, Stig Moller, whose vision successfully combined that of the historian and the television communicator.

Other speakers embraced and refuted, by turns, the possibilities for harmony between the two camps. Several television producers discussed their methods of dramatizing events. Gerda Jansen Hendricks, of Amsterdam, talked about “How to Present Riots that Have Not Been Filmed”—an object lesson in the devices filmmakers employ to overcome the lack of sufficient archival footage. At the heart of her talk was the controversial issue of transplanting film footage from one context into another (isn’t one mob just like another?). More illustrations of techniques used to inject story into history came from Christine Whittaker, newly-instituted President of IAMHIST, and Taylor Downing of “Flashback TV.” Whittaker’s “A History of BBC History” was a sumptuous showcase of clips—from Biography (1957) to The Great War (1962) to the innovative work of Adam Curtis (To the Brink, 1992). Downing’s

“Different Programmes for Different Audiences” also provided excellent examples of the variety of television history series, including “golden age” programs like Civilization, Station X, and his own Cold War. Both Whittaker and Downing emphasized their documentary work, while responsible to the factual record of history, was intended primarily for general audiences and not historians.

Peter C. Rollins, of Oklahoma State University, Vicky Wegg Prasser, of Flashback TV, and James Chapman, of Open University, questioned the legitimacy of such dramatic priorities. Rollins chastised the classic NBC documentary series, Victory at Sea (1952) for sacrificing historical reality to export the “myth of American innocence,” to glorify war, and to reaffirm the legitimacy of empire building and the ideology of freedom. Rollins’ screening of an excerpt from the “Guadalcanal” episode not only demonstrated the effectiveness of this rousing, highly charged propaganda, but, by no means coincidentally, underscored the expertise of the series’ underrated composer Richard Rodney Bennett, who arranged and deployed the familiar Richard Rodgers musical themes with the expertise and authority of a field general. Similarly, Prasser’s “Protest in Northern Ireland Revisited” compared two British documentary treatments of a 1969 Derry riot—one made by an independent unit and another by a mainstream crew—to reveal how differently the event was treated. However, neither reported the event from a more directly Irish point of view. Is it possible, Prasser asked, to see on British television a history of Northern Ireland that is made by Irish filmmakers? And James Chapman suggested that the producers of the British series, The World at War, departed from an objective documentation of World War II to

pursue an anti-war agenda more revelatory of the times in which the series was produced, 1973-1974.

Several presentations explored other ramifications of the “Television and History” theme. In “Negotiating the Nation in Contemporary French Television,” Lucy Mazdon, of Southampton, posited that the incursion of television talk shows in the ‘80s and ‘90s accurately reflected the shift from a centralized French identity under De Gaul toward plurality and difference under Mitterrand. How television has processed and disseminated the artifacts of the technology of the motion picture was investigated in “Television and the Memory of Silent Cinema,” by John C. Tibbetts and James M. Welsh, of the University of Kansas and Salisbury State University, respectively; and in “Coming Soon to a Cinema Near You,” by Su Holmes, of Southampton University. In the former, the American television series Silents Please (1959-1961) literally rescued an endangered silent cinema from a neglectful and indifferent film industry; in the latter, by contrast, a series like the British Picture Parade represented a productive synergy in which the television and film mediums cooperated in mutual promotion and programming.

A welcome surprise was a series of presentations devoted to the work of Britain’s most neglected and abused documentarist, Peter Watkins. In her “History of BBC History,” Christine Whittaker offered a lengthy clip from Watkins’ first BBC documentary, Culloden (1964), which depicted the Jacobite Uprising of 1745 and the battle between British forces under the Duke of Cumberland and a clan army of Highland Scots loyal to Bonnie Prince Charlie. Tony Shaw addressed the press response to Watkins’ most controversial film, The War Game, made for the BBC in

1965, but banned from television for twenty years because of its critique of the Home Office' inadequate civil defense planning. And John Cook of De Montfort University and Patrick Murphy of York & Ripon College excerpted Watkins' award-winning amateur film the Forgotten Faces (1961), which recreated the Hungarian Uprising of 1956. (So convincing was the pseudo "documentary" footage that professional critics wondered how this resourceful young director managed to get his cameras into Budapest at the time.) Perhaps these presentations would have been better served if they had been grouped into a single session, but it was encouraging to see the Conference paying tribute to Watkins in his native country.

Presentations of a more technical nature included Murray Weston of the BUFVC on "The Impact of New Technologies on the Academic Study of Film/History" and George Auckland's "Millenium History Project," an internet data base tied to the new blockbuster television series, The History of Britain, which will be premiered at the turn of the new century (and which was previewed for IAMHIST members by producers Ian Bremner and Michael Ibeji). Both speakers emphasized the interactive potentials in their respective projects. Ruediger Steinmetz, of the University of Leipzig, Germany, raised many questions and ventured a few answers in his "European Digi-TV Strategies: Investments and Political Regulations." Will digi-TV in the new century help to develop a European identity? he wondered. Certainly, he predicted, free-TV will prevail because politicians will always need media to reach their constituency and because advertisers need to reach the broadest possible audience base. Ironically, Steinmetz predicted, the many technological innovations and

extensive investments in Switzerland, Austria, and Germany in the last two decades (coaxial cable, fibre glass, satellite transponders, etc.) make the next technological step toward digital TV more difficult; whereas, southern European countries, like France and the UK, which have been dependent on terrestrial broadcasting systems, may well be in a position to benefit first from the new digital advancements.

Although several presentations departed from the “Television and History” theme, they were nonetheless among the most absorbing and informative sessions of the entire Conference. Andrew Higson talked about the movement in the late 1920s known as “Film Europe,” which was an attempt to create through studios like British International Pictures, a trans-national cinema to rival America. For a short time, he concluded, the boundaries among different countries like France, England, Germany, and America, were relatively permeable (although the inception of the talking picture soon would put an end to that). Related to Higson’s talk was Richard Maltby’s “Cinema and the League of Nations,” which was a virtual homage to a neglected film entrepreneur named William Marston Seabury, who in the 1920s used the League of Nations in his efforts to oppose the American domination of international markets.

Presentations on radio broadcasting included Seth Feldman, from Toronto, who discussed his CBC radio series, Ideas. For those of us in the United States, all too accustomed to the farrago of radio talk-show inanities and rabid anti-intellectualism, where gossip, rumor, and smut predominate, Feldman’s examples of intelligent radio talk left us wishing to hear more. “Bore Da—diolch am y cyfle i annerch y Gynhadledd,” said Eifion Lloyd Jones, of Wales, who, after greeting his listeners in his

native tongue, explained how radio broadcasting played a crucial role in the preservation of the Welsh language. Quoting Aneurin Talfan Davies, former Controller of BBC Wales—“A concern for the future of the Welsh language was the main instigator of efforts to establish a broadcasting system for Wales.” Behind the initial reluctance of the BBC to support separate broadcasts in the Welsh language, asserted Jones, was a bigotry that regarded Welshmen as a people of belittled capacities and intelligence. It was not until the early 1980s that S4C was finally established by the 1980 Broadcasting Bill as a Welsh channel in the Welsh language.

More difficult to classify were “Infamy! Infamy! They’ve all got in for me!” by Nicholas J. Cull, of the University of Leicester, an amusing glance at the period costume satires of Tolbert Torthwell—like Carry On, Cleo—that satirized the pomposities and conspicuous consumption of the spectacle genre, as well as reflecting the “emasculatation” of the British Empire in the late 1950s. “From Game Keeper to Poacher” was a “confession” by archivist James Barker of his double life as a “raider” of archives and a “keeper” of said archives against the invasions of other researchers. How well do most of us relate to Barker’s description of the media researcher: “In order to be good at the job, film researchers often have something of the poacher about them—justifying the jibe that people should always count the fingers on their hands after they have shaken hands with them.” In “The Cold War Lives of Paul Robeson and Jackie Robinson,” John B. Wiseman, of Frostburg State University, linked the achievements and fates of these two pioneers in race relations against the contrary impulses of the 1950s civil rights revolution and the anti-communist crusades. A

particularly moving presentation was “The Price of Color,” by Adrian Wood, of Trans World International, who confessed that he grew up in a “monochrome” era of documentaries. The recent discoveries of documentary film in color dating back as far as World War I, however, is literally changing our perceptions of history. Does color make more vivid the horrors of the Nazi atrocities at Buchenwald? Does the color film of the privations of life in the Jewish ghettos that Wood introduced into his film, The Nazis: A Lesson From History, enhance our knowledge of the time? Black-and-white film “sanitized” the War, argued Wood, while the restoration of these caches of color film restores its immediacy.

The Conference was not all work and no play. There were receptions at the Leeds campus and after-dinner parties at Devonshire Hall, where many of the conferees were lodged. A lively dedication dinner to Dr. Pronay was highlighted by roasts and toasts by IAMHIST Treasurer Dan Leab and Karsten Fledellius from Denmark. With glass upraised, the redoubtable Karsten led the entire assembly in a Danish song, the meaning of whose lyrics can only be surmised. On another occasion conferees visited the Bradford Museum and paused before that selfsame 16-lens camera with which the redoubtable William Le Prince captured his views from the Leeds Bridge. Many of us also enjoyed the opportunity to view a 3-D IMAX film about dinosaurs: Tyrannosaurus Rex seemed to step right out of history—and out of the screen—to startle the daylights out of the audience.

Kudos go to Philip M. Taylor, Director of the ICS and his colleague, Graham Roberts, Director of the Conference and Lecturer in Communications Arts at Leeds, for

their efficient organization and attention to detail. Ably assisting them at the registration and information tables were Sue Heward and Isobel Rich. The facilities in the Roger Stevens Building, a sleek, modern edifice filled with a rather bewildering collection of ramps, walkways, stairs and elevators proved to be outstanding; and the rooms at Devonshire Hall—with its contrasting ivy-covered architecture and old-world appointments—were both clean and comfortable.

Leeds will be a hard act to follow in 2001, and we all owe the organizers a debt of gratitude. The next IAMHIST Conference has been set for the University of Leipzig in 2001 and will be organized by Prof. Dr. Ruediger Steinmetz, Universitaet Leipzig, Augustusplatz 9, D-04109 Leipzig, Germany (e-mail rstein@rz.uni-leipzig.de). The announced theme is “Changing Identities.” We’ll see you there.

John C. Tibbetts and James M. Welsh

Pierre Sorlin's "Historians at the Crossroads" speech was, as he said, "more critical" of televised history. "History is what historians decide it is to be." Until the 16th century, the telling of the past was bound up with theological activities. Since then the evolution of mankind sought for other, more purely human explanations. It is an attempt to rationalize the evolution of mankind. My assumption is that a tremendous change is about to occur; and that probably within a few decades this vision of the past will no longer be valid. One reason is globalization. History was a way of building nationalities, but nowadays, at least in western countries, it's very difficult for us to see ourselves as merely members of a nation. Secondly, television itself is crucial in that it is a witness, gives an image of a new vision of the past. Thirdly, people rely less and less on written documents. A new school of historians in Palestine, for example, forget entirely the Bible and work primarily on archaeological materials. They have lost the continuity of the past by abandoning written materials. Similarly, historians rely more on images, and that is why cinema was introduced in the learning of history. And now we have television as a source of evidence. But no. Television is a totally different matter. It is part of our daily life, a domestic appliance. Even those without television sets are overwhelmed by the ubiquity of the medium. Television is what gives us a vision of the world. It tends to "flatten" everything. To erase the distinctions between separate events and things. The vision of an event on a newsreel has nothing to do with the flow of events which can be seen everyday on television. I'm trying to say television is a timeless machine, and that on television everything is exactly the same.

It is obliged to fill air time with images and commentaries that have been transplanted from other sources and events at other times. You think I am criticizing television. No, that would be useless. We are all used to watching television, and we are part of that audience.

There are so many channels that we are overwhelmed with news. But every channel has its own interpretation. Television tends to follow and comment only on what is shown on the screen, which means that for television facts speak for themselves. The more we see, the more we know about it. This may contrast with testimonies from witnesses from those present at an event. The use of oral history seems to put us in the midst of that reality. This is a “presence,” the sort of thing that historians cannot convey in their writings. But think again and there is nothing in the oral history that hasn’t been testified to countless times before. Oral history is not a history told by someone, but it is our history. We are all potential witness. We will all be interviewed by television. And when you watch, we are both the viewer and potentially the person who is talking. Everything may seem of interest in our lives. It is gripping, but where is the history?

Television is typical of the postmodern era. The word itself is meaningless. We all know that modernity is an idea that it was possible to make progress. This is typical of the making of the English working class. Just by looking at the class you will see that workers have improved their condition, and hence that they will continue that. But there is no definition of “postmodern.” No explanation is valid, because any one is likely to be criticized. At the same time, it is the idea that everything is equally important. Even the very small and petty is important. It stands against any all-encompassing explanation. We are faced with that with television. I think we historians are now at the crossroads. We admit we are all interested in television. We are used to looking at it and introducing documents from it into the classroom. But the problem is that we are facing a different conception of history. Everybody now is an expert historian; everybody by looking at television has a vague but large knowledge of something which itself is a vague and flattened past. What can we do? The first solution might be to go on using television and try to maintain our explanatory vision of the past. But I’m afraid that within a few decades, historians will be like the sanscrit specialists, who teaches one student who in turn will be the next professor. I’m afraid that soon our situation will be exactly the same. We cannot accept this flattened view of history, this timeless machine. We have to find a way. I confess I have no solution. I have come here to debate with you in the hopes that something will emerge from this Conference. But I firmly think it is absolutely necessary to modify our conception of history.