

Ib Bondebjerg:
Screening Twentieth Century Europe. Television, History, Memory.
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History is everywhere on our screens, and historical TV fiction has always been a popular genre. In Denmark, the first comprehensive account of historical TV drama was Ib Bondebjerg's *Elektroniske fiktioner* (Electronical Fictions) from 1993. This book was a milestone in research, highlighting the cultural role of television drama, not only in a Danish context, but also internationally. Combining cultural and sociological approaches with analyses of aesthetics, Bondebjerg successfully pointed out salient similarities, as well as differences, in Danish, English, German and American historical drama.

Since then, Bondebjerg has been engaged in other endeavours in media research – mapping the Scandinavian film and TV landscape, writing the history of modern Danish cinema and conducting research on Danish TV and film documentaries. During the last 15 years, he has expanded the perspective further, with large comparative projects focusing on mediated cultural encounters in Europe. During the process, Bondebjerg has repeatedly contributed to characterising prevailing subgenres, developments and trends, including historical television drama. In this context, *Screening Twentieth Century Europe* can be attributed the role of summa, combining knowledge from studying fiction and documentaries with new perspectives, invigorating his interest in European dimensions.

In the introduction, Bondebjerg delineates the focus of the book: “how central themes and events have been reflected and mediated in historical documentaries, docudrama and different genres of historical drama in the UK and Germany during this period” – a period including the late 1960s, but privileging productions from the period after 1980.

A double perspective is always present in history on screen, paving the way to the past as well as telling something about the present.

The first chapters refer to classics in the field (Burgoyne, 2008; Erll, 2011; Goldfarb, 2006; among many others), and deliver an informative survey of salient questions in research into history on screen. Bondebjerg discusses differences and similarities between fiction and documentaries. He describes advantages and disadvantages in observing history from below (for example from the perspective of humble peasant families) and above (for example from a royal perspective). He analyses how history and memory are entwined so that memory is part of our constant efforts to understand the present and ourselves, and how national productions cooperate with transnational means of financing. According to Bondebjerg, national stories dominate in historical fiction and so do stories of families and networks of families in a national context. A “core of universal similarity”, however, combining the local and the national level with family narratives assuming a universal character makes it possible for historical drama to travel. The birth of children, death of family members, conflicts between generations and interaction between historical events of major importance and everyday life tend to appeal everywhere.

The prism of Goldfarb’s *The Politics of Small Things* is valuable for the account of “history from below”. Illustrating the significance of details about our daily lives, *Heimat I* (Edgar Reitz 1984) and *The Village* (Peter Moffat, 2013-2014) serve as representative examples of the value of this approach. Although the two national contexts differ, the rural setting and the rhythm and determining role of labour show more similarities than differences.

Bondebjerg chose the biopic genre focusing on well-known historical characters as an example of “history from above”, often the rich and the famous, but in the best cases, put into their social and cultural context. Here, *The Crown* (Peter Morgan, Netflix, 2016-) is compared to *Die Manns. Ein Jahrhundertroman* (I-III, 2001, Heinrich Breloer). Both cases represent a vantage point clearly popular with broad audiences.

The following chapters unravel the history of war and peace in English and German fiction and documentaries, according to the course of history. From WWI to the roaring twenties, from the crisis in the thirties to WWII, the Cold War and beyond, we follow the determining events in European and world history as they are re-enacted on screen. This type of presentation serves as a timely illustration of what has more or less become a commonplace – that the way in which we experience and value history today is highly dependent on media versions. As time passes, Erll (2011) has pointed out, it is difficult even for eyewitnesses to make clear-cut distinctions between their own observations or experiences and mediated re-enactments.

Bondebjerg’s methodological approach – following the course of history from a constant, comparative perspective – makes his account of English and German historical drama and documentaries not only informative, but also fascinating reading. It provides the reader with functional tools to assess the special character of the productions and their cultural impact.

Considering the ambitious title of the book, *Screening Twentieth Century Europe*, one question lurks in the background. What about the rest of Europe? To what degree is historical fiction in all Europe (including Germany) based on the British model? Do small countries apply the same ingredients in their versions of history as the big ones, or are they different? To accommodate questions like these, Bondebjerg has supplied the book with a large number of references to the development of historical drama and documentaries in Eastern and Southern Europe; perhaps too many, as it is difficult to assess the importance of all those mentioned.

Bondebjerg's observations of differences between the Northern-Western and the Eastern-Southern spheres of Europe are most interesting, but they leave the reader with more questions than answers. Bondebjerg hints at the important role played by historical drama in Eastern Europe, in the so-called "Frozen Cultures", but he lacks the space to develop his arguments. That Russia and the former Soviet Union are not included in the concept of Eastern Europe may have been deserving of comment. Bondebjerg makes keen observations about Italian period drama spanning a wide array of periods in Italian history – in opposition to Spanish historical drama, which has developed with a certain hesitation. Considering the common background of fascism in both countries during the interwar period, and in Spain beyond, the difference is striking, but why? Other incisive observations might have deserved further comment, for instance why historical documentaries about the twentieth century have prevailed in a country like France, usually so proud of its cultural past.

Objections such as these only demonstrate that the scope of the book is broad, and that Europe is a patchwork of different traditions. One or two sequels would be welcome. The choice to focus primarily on British and German historical productions is appropriate and rewarding. Any reader interested in history on screen will enjoy revisiting their favourite productions under the professional guidance of Bondebjerg.

References

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