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Chapman, James

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Re-presenting war

British television drama-documentary and the Second World War

James Chapman

University of Leicester

ABSTRACT This article examines a cycle of British drama-documentaries about the Second World War broadcast in 2004–5: *Dunkirk*, *D-Day*, *When Hitler Invaded Britain*, *D-Day to Berlin* and *Blitz: London's Firestorm*. It places these films in the context of the drama-documentary tradition in British film and television; it considers the institutional and cultural contexts of their production; it analyses their formal properties, especially their combination of actuality film with dramatic reconstruction; and it examines the extent to which they offer a revisionist perspective on the British historical experience of the Second World War. The article argues that these films represent a significant new direction for representing history on television.

KEYWORDS *Blitz, Britain, D-Day, drama-documentary, Dunkirk, history, Second World War, television*

The further the Second World War recedes into history, the more ubiquitous it becomes on British television screens. Since the 1970s two distinct lineages, or taxonomies, are apparent in British televisual treatments of the war: on the one hand, the drama series or serial, partly or wholly fictitious, a character-driven narrative set against a 'real' historical background of wartime circumstances and events (the paradigmatic example is probably *A Family at War*); and on the other hand, the documentary, usually based on a combination of archive film and interviews with actual participants recorded on camera (paradigmatic example: *The World at War*). In 2004–5, however, a cycle of drama-documentaries broadcast on British television – *Dunkirk*, *D-Day*, *When Hitler Invaded Britain*, *D-Day to Berlin* and *Blitz: London's Firestorm* – represented the emergence of a new hybrid form that combined aspects of both 'drama' and 'documentary'.¹ These five productions – two three-part series (*Dunkirk* and *D-Day to Berlin*) and three single dramas – constitute a distinct production cycle in their own right: not only were they broadcast within the same 20-month period, but



they share a number of highly distinctive stylistic and formal traits that mark their difference from other depictions of the war on British television. This article will argue that they represent nothing less than a deliberate and considered attempt to create a new aesthetic strategy for the televisual representation of war that merges the conventions of drama and documentary, and in so doing transforms both those genres in bold, possibly even radical, ways. This article will place this cycle of drama-documentaries in their various contexts: it will situate the programmes in the history of British drama-documentary, consider the institutional and cultural contexts of their production, analyse their formal and aesthetic strategies and discuss the extent to which they represent a new way of understanding the British historical experience of the Second World War. Fundamental to this approach is the assumption that, as with all media forms, these television films do not stand alone as autonomous texts, but rather are products of a complex set of institutional, cultural and ideological determinants.

The drama-documentary tradition

Drama-documentary has been defined as a form that 'uses a sequence of events from a real historical occurrence or situation and the identities of the protagonists to underpin a film script intended to provoke debate about the significance of the events' (Paget, 1998: 83). As a mode of representation its origins pre-date television and can be traced back to intellectual and aesthetic developments in the British documentary movement during the 1930s. The drama-documentary was the product of particular historical and ideological circumstances and these formative contexts have continued to influence its development ever since.

The orthodox history of British documentary sees the movement fragmenting towards the end of the decade, particularly after John Grierson was ousted as head of the General Post Office (GPO) Film Unit in 1937 (Lovell and Hillier, 1972; Rotha, 1973; Sussex, 1975). It was Grierson, widely (and appropriately) regarded as the 'father' of the documentary movement, who had laid down its aesthetic and intellectual principles and had the greatest influence on its early history. Following *Drifters* (1929), which he produced and directed on behalf of the Empire Marketing Board, Grierson was instrumental in forming a documentary unit first at the Empire Marketing Board, and then from 1933 at the GPO, and in recruiting young filmmakers such as Edgar Anstey, Arthur Elton, Stuart Legg, Paul Rotha and Basil Wright. Grierson's mantra of 'the creative interpretation of actuality' was applied in the early and mid-1930s to a series of documentaries such as *BBC: The Voice of Britain* (1935), *Coalface* (1935) and *Night Mail* (1936), characterized by the poetic treatment of their subject matter. In fact, as recent research has demonstrated, the documentary movement was riven with differences from the outset and



achieved a relatively fragile unity until around 1936–7, when it fractured in a decisive manner (Aitken, 1990; Swann, 1989). Grierson, Rotha and Wright left the GPO Film Unit either to set up independent documentary units (Rotha with Strand Films, Wright with the Realist Film Unit) or, in Grierson's case, to create Film Centre as a means of seeking commercial sponsorship for documentary-making. Films such as Wright's *Children at School* (1937) and Elton's *Housing Problems* (1935) demonstrated a more didactic mode of documentary that focused on social problems and were more obviously political than the work of the GPO Film Unit. The most significant development at the GPO Film Unit in the late 1930s, now under the direction of Brazilian Alberto Cavalcanti, 'was the development of the dramatic documentary film, which was built around stories drawn from actual happenings but then recreated' (Lovell and Hillier, 1972: 30). Films such as Harry Watt's *The Saving of Bill Blewett* (1937) and *North Sea* (1938) marked the emergence of the narrative-documentary or story-documentary in which real-life events were reconstructed, both on location and in the studio, using non-professional actors who usually had been involved in the events on which the films were based. The aim was to make the documentary film more accessible to a mass audience (which meant making it more attractive to cinema distributors and exhibitors) by importing some of the narrative codes and conventions familiar from the fictional feature film.

However, it was during the Second World War that the drama-documentary came into its own. Contemporaries identified a 'wartime wedding' between the fiction film and the documentary.² This was evident on different levels, institutional as well as formal. There was significant crossover between the documentary and commercial sectors of the film industry: documentarists Harry Watt and Alberto Cavalcanti moved from the GPO Film Unit to Ealing Studios, while feature directors such as David Macdonald and John and Roy Boulting joined the armed services' film units. This fluidity in terms of personnel was reflected in the cross-fertilization of aesthetic practices as documentarists adopted narrative techniques from the feature film, and feature film directors imported the realist mode of the documentary into the commercial sector. Many of the 'classic' British feature films of the war – including, but not limited to, *In Which We Serve* (Noël Coward and David Lean, 1942), *One of Our Aircraft Is Missing* (Michael Powell, 1942), *Millions Like Us* (Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat, 1943), *San Demetrio, London* (Charles Frend, 1943) and *The Way Ahead* (Carol Reed, 1944) – were acclaimed for their restrained narratives and realistic style which critics attributed to the influence of documentary. *The Times* (1943: 6), for example, remarked that 'the best British films have been those which . . . have blended the discipline of the documentary with a minimal amount of the story-teller's licence'. The major development in documentary during the war was the emergence of the feature-length drama-documentary in officially-produced films such



as *Target for Tonight* (Harry Watt, 1941), *Coastal Command* (J.B. Holmes, 1942), *Close Quarters* (Jack Lee, 1943), *Fires Were Started* (Humphrey Jennings, 1943), *Western Approaches* (Pat Jackson, 1944) and *Journey Together* (John Boulting, 1945).⁵ All these films were dramatic reconstructions of the work of different branches of the services, both military (*Target for Tonight*, *Coastal Command*, *Close Quarters*) and civilian (*Fires Were Started*, *Western Approaches*), using non-professional actors who were themselves members of the services concerned (except *Journey Together*, which employed a professional cast including Richard Attenborough and George Raft).

The drama-documentary has come to be recognized as 'the key representational form in British wartime cinema' (Higson, 1986: 84). It merges the conventions of narrative cinema (cause-and-effect narratives, continuity montage editing) with documentary techniques such as *typage* (casting actors who physically resemble the social types that they are portraying) and an emphasis on groups rather than individual protagonists (such as the bomber crew in *Target for Tonight* or the firemen in *Fires Were Started*). As Andrew Higson suggests: 'The ideological effect of this is an articulation of nation as responsible community *and* individual desire, an articulation which finds a place for both the public and the private' (1986: 87). In this reading, the drama-documentary is posited on a structural tension between the public and private spheres (crudely speaking, documentary would be associated with the public, and the fiction film with the private) and its narrative represents a site of contestation between those competing discourses. This helps to explain the ascendancy of the drama-documentary during the war when the national war effort required subordination of the private (individual desires and aspirations) to the public (doing one's duty). It also helps to explain the postwar trajectory of the form. To quote Higson again:

The ideological conditions of World War II had thus established the possibility of a remarkable convergence of documentary and narrative fiction modes but had also paradoxically set the terms for the consequent marginalisation of British documentary. (1986: 88)

In the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s the narrative-documentary mode became fully institutionalized within the commercial practices of the British film industry. This was most apparent in the films of Ealing Studios which, regardless of genre or director, displayed a remarkable consistency of style in their adoption of documentary techniques. Films such as *The Captive Heart* (Basil Dearden, 1946), *The Blue Lamp* (Basil Dearden, 1950) and *The Cruel Sea* (Charles Frend, 1953), are properly described perhaps as documentary-drama rather than drama-documentary, as they are based on 'an invented sequence of events and fictional protagonists to illustrate the salient features of real historical occurrences or situations' (Paget, 1998: 82). The persistence of the 'wartime wedding' of documentary and



the fiction film into the postwar period is most evident in the war films of the 1950s which reconstructed true stories of the war. *The Dam Busters* (Michael Anderson, 1955) is often seen as representing the culmination of this trend. *The Times* remarked: 'All air war films up to this point have been, as it were, working out the fiction-documentary formula . . . Here is a full statement, final and complete' (Chapman, 1998b: 69).

As for the documentary movement itself, most of its practitioners either moved into commercial filmmaking (Watt, Lee, Jackson) or specialized in the production of educational films (Anstey, Rotha, Wright). The mantle of 'poetic realism' was taken up in the mid-1950s by the Free Cinema movement (Lindsay Anderson, Karel Reisz, Tony Richardson), which in turn informed the British 'new wave' cinema that flourished in the late 1950s and early 1960s. However, the main development for documentary during this period was 'the incorporation of the documentary idea into the institutional form of television' (Higson, 1986: 93). The conventional argument is that television adopted the drama-documentary, incorporating it as part of the public service ethos. John Caughie, for example, suggests that 'television, in its dramatized documentaries of the 1940s, 1950s and early 1960s, seems to have accepted the form "in good faith" as part of its social responsibility to inform and educate a democratic citizenry' (Caughie, 2000: 104). And Susan Sydney-Smith has demonstrated how the wartime drama-documentary informed the creation of early BBC drama series such as *Dixon of Dock Green* – famously resurrecting the police character slain in *The Blue Lamp* – although again, this is properly described as a documentary-drama rather than a drama-documentary as it focuses on fictional characters against a realistic background (Sydney-Smith, 2002).

If the war had been the first 'golden age' of the drama-documentary, then the 1960s was a second: it was during this decade that the form was revolutionized by television. Important landmarks in the 1960s were *Culloden* (Peter Watkins, 1964), a drama-documentary shot in *cinéma vérité* style using a handheld camera and addresses by characters to the camera; *Up the Junction* (Ken Loach, 1965), which challenged conventional notions of dramatic form and narrative structure in the sense that it did not follow a natural cause-and-effect line; and *The War Game* (Peter Watkins, 1965), an imaginative documentary-drama treatment of the effects of a nuclear strike on southeastern England which was not broadcast by the BBC. Caughie summarizes the significance of these and other developments – particularly the launch of *The Wednesday Play* in 1966 – thus:

In general terms, the achievement of the drama documentaries of the 1960s and after is that they built on the specificities of the televisual, on its unique capabilities for the representation of the social real, and introduced a new form to twentieth-century art. They seem to me to have developed an *aesthetics* of immediacy which was grounded in the technological and historical specificity of television, but was articulated as an achieved form rather than a fact of



nature, exploiting the illusion of the real for political ends . . . The creative excitement of these particular drama documentaries lies in the transformation of forms and the complex politics of the everyday which they produce, rather than in the stylistic and generic refinements of later 'quality television'. (Caughie, 2000: 122–3)

While alert to the possibility that television drama-documentary might have followed other trajectories, Caughie argues that what ultimately defined it was 'an aesthetics of immediacy which is unique to television' (2000: 123).

The immediacy of drama-documentary, in both its filmic and televisual incarnations, lends it to largely contemporary subject-matter. A common feature of the films of the 1930s and 1940s and the television productions of the 1950s and 1960s is that they are located temporally in the present (the exceptions among the examples previously cited are *Culloden*, which recreates an episode from more than two centuries ago, and *Fires Were Started*, made in 1943 but set during the Blitz winter of 1940–1 before the formation of the National Fire Service). To a large extent, of course, this contemporaneity is an inevitable consequence of the ideological contexts in which the drama-documentary has developed: the propaganda imperative of the war and the critical examination of social problems such as abortion (*Up the Junction*) and homelessness (*Cathy Come Home*, 1966) in the 1960s. It is also partly due to aesthetic considerations: on the whole, narrative treatments of the past on British television have tended to adopt the trappings of 'heritage' drama (authentic and lovingly photographed period settings, literate scripts and a highly pictorialist *mise-en-scène*) in preference to the grainy, rough-edged style of the drama-documentary. These, certainly, are the characteristics of Second World War television dramas from the 1970s (*A Family at War*, *Colditz*, *We'll Meet Again*, *Secret Army*) to the present (*Foyle's War*). To this extent, the appearance of a cycle of television historical films in 2004–5 that adopted the style and conventions of the drama-documentary and were characterized by an 'aesthetics of immediacy' (including, for example, handheld cameras and first-person monologues) represents a significant departure for the genre. The example of *Culloden* demonstrates that these films were not the first drama-documentaries to reconstruct historical subjects, but they probably represent the first coherent cycle of historically-themed drama-documentaries displaying consistent formal and thematic traits.

How do these productions relate to the historical tradition of the drama-documentary? The producers themselves came mostly from a documentary background. For example, it was Jane Root, controller of BBC2 and formerly head of factual programming, who initiated *Dunkirk*, while the executive producer of *D-Day to Berlin* was Laurence Rees, creative director of BBC History and producer of three major documentary series about the Second World War: *The Nazis: A Warning from History* (1996), *Battle of the Century* (2000) and *Auschwitz: The Nazis and the 'Final Solution'* (2004).



Blitz: London's Firestorm was made by a production company (Darlow-Smithson) specializing in historical programmes: Michael Darlow, its co-founder, had been one of the directors of Thames Television's *The World at War* (1973). Moreover, the production discourses of the programmes position them between 'drama' and 'documentary'. Alex Holmes, the director of *Dunkirk*, averred: 'What I wanted to do was use the idiom of an observational documentary but structure the piece as a drama' (Holmes, 2004: 22). And Richard Dale, director of *D-Day*, claimed: 'It feels like 100% drama, but it's also 100% factual' (Hamilton, 2004: 24). Dale said that he preferred the term 'factual drama' to 'docu-drama', pointing out that *D-Day* was not solely a dramatic reconstruction of events but also made use of supposedly 'factual' material: archive footage, contemporary newsreels and oral testimony. To this extent *D-Day*, *Dunkirk* and the other films in the cycle incorporated some of the techniques of what might be called 'traditional' documentary into the drama-documentary format.

Institutional and cultural contexts

In the early 21st century the provision of historical programming on television is more extensive than it has ever been. To a large extent this is a consequence of the creation of a multichannel environment with an insatiable demand for 'product' to fill airtime: in this sense, history is a commodity to be marketed alongside gardening, cookery or makeover programmes. It also reflects a popular interest in the past that sustains two mainstream magazines in Britain (*History Today* and *BBC History Magazine*) and two dedicated history channels on both cable/satellite and digital terrestrial television (the History Channel and UKTV History). These channels provide a diet of repeats of 'classic' television documentaries (for example, *The World at War*, *Cold War* and *People's Century*) alongside a range of other commissioned programmes using a mixture of archive film and dramatic reconstructions (of events for which no archive film exists), with a particular emphasis on military history. To a far greater extent than any of the other mass media, television has become the dominant means 'through which public history was created, sustained and reflected, and through which commercial interests could seek to profit from popular interest in the past' (Black, 2005: 28).

While most members of the historical profession welcome this public interest in their subject, it is coupled with deep dissatisfaction about the nature and content of much televised history. As David Cannadine recently complained: 'A wholly disproportionate amount of television history is about the twentieth century (and thus about the two world wars and the Nazis)' (Cannadine, 2004: 4). The History Channel has sometimes been dubbed 'the Hitler Channel' because of its propensity for programmes about the Third Reich (Black, 2005: 29). There are various reasons for the bias of televised history towards the 20th century in general and the Second



World War in particular. The most obvious of these is the availability of archive film. Roger Smither, keeper of film at the Imperial War Museum, points out 'that programmes based on archive footage have been relatively cheap to make, and that warfare offers one of the richest seams to mine in the world's film archives' (Smither, 2004: 63–4). An advantage of archive film over dramatic reconstruction is that it comes 'ready-made' and only requires editing into a compilation. It also allows programmes to be promoted as being based on 'rare' or 'previously unseen' footage – claims that always must be treated sceptically as only the most prestigious (and more expensively-produced) documentary series such as *The World at War* or *People's Century* (1996) undertake extensive research in the film archives. Moreover, in very recent times there has been a vogue for colour film of the war – exemplified by *The Second World War in Colour* (1997) and *Britain at War in Colour* (2000) – which 'introduced to the airwaves the concept that a programme had added interest if it sought out colour images of events and periods that were more commonly recalled in black and white' (Smither, 2004: 55).

A more immediate context for the 2004–5 cycle, of course, was that it coincided with the 60th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. This was most apparent in the case of *D-Day*, broadcast in Britain on the 60th anniversary of the Normandy landings. As Richard Dale testifies: 'There was a real imperative at the BBC to make something significant, and a commitment to showing it on 6 June as a single big piece' (Hamilton, 2004: 24). If the other programmes were linked less directly to specific anniversaries, they can still be seen as part of a wider cultural project to mark the 60th anniversary of the war which also included the BBC's 'People's War' project (a website and a series of national events laid on to collect oral testimony of participants in the war) and a revival of the wartime television drama in series, such as *Foyle's War* (2002–), *P.O.W.* (2003) and *Island at War* (2004). Furthermore, the broadcast of *Dunkirk* was followed by a documentary, *Dunkirk – The Soldiers' Story* (21 February 2004), based on some of the interviews collected for the 'People's War'.⁴

The production histories of films in the cycle exemplify both the institutional dynamics of the television industry and the economic imperatives that underpin it. While the ITV network has always commissioned most of its programmes from independent producers, this practice did not become the norm at the BBC until the 1990s, when the introduction of an internal market – in which individual productions were effectively competing for resources – became part of the regime of director-general John Birt. Birt had instigated a tough regime of economic discipline in order to placate a government hostile to the public funding of the BBC through the licence fee, and under attack following the Peacock Report (1986). During the 1990s and 2000s it became the norm for the BBC to commission programmes from outside producers, effectively bringing it in line with other terrestrial broadcasters and satellite television. There



was also an increasing trend towards co-production with overseas partners, reflecting the emergence of a global marketplace for television – or rather, the recognition of a global marketplace that already existed but had become more lucrative in the era of satellite and digital provision, with a proliferation of channels needing programmes to fill airtime (Steemers, 2004). Co-production with overseas partners is advantageous in two ways: it allows production costs to be shared and guarantees access to overseas markets. At the same time, however, co-productions also mean that the commercial and ideological needs of partners determine to some extent the content and nature of the final product.

These economic and ideological imperatives are best illustrated by the case of *D-Day*. This was commissioned by the BBC from an independent production company (Dangerous Films), but as a relatively expensive production (costing £3 million) it was necessary to find co-production partners. The involvement of French (Telefrance), German (ProSeiben) and US (Discovery Channel) production partners largely determined the content insofar as the narrative of *D-Day* shows events from the American, British, French and German perspectives.⁶ The film was prepared in slightly different versions for different markets: the French and German versions were ‘more skewed in their stories to their nation’s activities’, while the American version ‘sees some of the drama cut in favour more of the Discovery blend of good old “what, where, why, when, who?” fact’ (Hamilton, 2004: 26). This suggests that the US broadcaster favoured a more traditional ‘factual’ documentary approach over the drama-documentary form. *D-Day to Berlin* was a co-production between the BBC and the History Channel, which guaranteed it exposure to a potentially vast audience, as in 2004 the History Channel had some 125 million subscribers worldwide, including 83 million in the United States (Black, 2005). The narrative, which follows the Anglo-American campaign against the German armies in Western Europe in 1944–5, again demonstrates its parentage. *Blitz: London’s Firestorm* was another co-production, this time between two ‘minority’ broadcasters (Channel 4 in Britain and Public Service Broadcasting in the United States), while *When Hitler Invaded Britain* was produced by one of the ITV franchise holders (Granada). Neither of these two single dramas seems to have enjoyed the same level of international sales exposure as *D-Day* or *D-Day to Berlin*. The odd one out in the cycle, in that it was an entirely ‘in-house’ and domestically-financed production, was *Dunkirk*. This was because Jane Root ‘wanted to do something very British rather than a co-production’ (Holmes, 2004: 22). It is also the only one in the cycle that focuses exclusively on the British perspective of the war.

Formal and aesthetic strategies

These films represent a stylistically coherent production cycle because they employ (albeit to different degrees) techniques that demonstrate



consistency between individual films, while at the same time differentiating them as a group from other television history programmes. As well as the mode of dramatic reconstruction (the re-enactment of actual historical events and occurrences), they also import techniques more associated with the documentary mode (particularly the use of archive film and the reliance on personal recollections of the war). It is the combination of these modes that marks the most significant departure from previous representations of the war. Traditionally, the professional discourses of British television documentarists, most famously exemplified by *The World at War*, had distinguished between actuality film and dramatic reconstruction. While the former was seen as 'authentic', the latter was regarded as 'false' or 'inauthentic' and should be avoided wherever possible. Where a documentary does make use of dramatic reconstruction it is the usual practice to identify it as such, either through a caption or in the narration.

Perhaps the most innovative formal feature of these films is that they combine, but do not distinguish between, actuality film and reconstruction. While this practice is anathema to most historians, it does not necessarily represent an intention to deceive the viewer. In fact, the differences between actuality and reconstruction are quite obvious to all but the most untrained eye, not least because the actuality film is mostly in black-and-white whereas the reconstructed material is in colour. *D-Day* attempts to disguise some of its reconstruction as actuality: black-and-white footage of the British landings on Sword beach (recognizably the material shot by the cameramen of the Army Film and Photographic Unit now held by the Imperial War Museum) is mixed with obviously reconstructed colour sequences and several reconstructions that are mocked-up as actuality film.⁶ The film cuts freely between actuality and reconstruction to the extent that both are incorporated within the diegesis. That said, the use of actuality film does not necessarily meet the standards of authenticity that would have been expected of a pure documentary. *Dunkirk*, for example, includes an actuality shot where British soldiers are seen running past a stone wall under fire. In the narrative context of the film this is purporting to represent the British retreat in 1940, although the shot itself is actually from the Normandy campaign of 1944, and was included in the Anglo-American campaign documentary *The True Glory* (Carol Reed and Garson Kanin, 1945). In this and other instances, actuality film is used for illustrative effect rather than to represent a specific historical incident recalled by one of the interviewees.

Dunkirk, nevertheless, represents the fullest integration of actuality film into dramatic narrative of all the films in this cycle. There are several occasions where actuality is not only included alongside reconstruction but is integrated into the formal system of the film through its use of point-of-view (POV). The best example is in the second episode, where a narrative thread follows the crew of a fishing boat (one of the 'little



ships' involved in the evacuation) over the English Channel to the French beaches. The film cuts from a close shot of the crew of the boat staring past the camera, their facial expressions conveying shock and astonishment at what they see, to a POV shot of the beaches (long shot of masses of troops awaiting evacuation with pillars of smoke in the background) and then back to a reaction shot of the crew. The shot/reverse shot technique is an established convention of narrative construction, of course, but what makes this particular example unusual is that the POV shot is actuality, whereas the crew members are actors in a reconstructed sequence. While other films have freely mixed actuality film and reconstruction, I am not aware of any production that has integrated so systematically the actuality film into its formal system.

Another innovation of these films is the incorporation of computer-generated imaging (CGI) into the drama-documentary field. In this respect the films exemplify technological advances in film and television production: one of the reasons the cycle appeared when it did was that it had become technically possible to achieve certain effects. The most spectacular employment of CGI is in *D-Day*, where the reconstruction of the Omaha beach landings bears comparison with the famous opening scenes of *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998), although it is not executed on the same scale. *D-Day* uses similar techniques as the Spielberg film to approximate the 'look' of actuality film of the landings (a jerky, handheld camera splashed with water and sand, for example), but also includes several long shots of the beaches (from the POV of the German defenders) which show an armada of ships and swarms of troops coming ashore. This exemplifies the use of CGI for visual spectacle. *Dunkirk*, in contrast, employs CGI sparingly. Alex Holmes averred that he wanted to avoid the excessive use of enhanced effects:

It was a big challenge as Dunkirk is an epic story involving thousands of people and hundreds of boats. I didn't want to rely on CGI for all of that. It is great technology but it didn't lend itself to our kind of film. We did use it but you can't rely on it for an epic scale – it's an add-on or embellishment. (Holmes, 2004: 22)

Another innovation of these films is their incorporation of oral history into narrative. Of course, eyewitness testimony has always been a mainstay of television documentary, ever since the BBC's *The Great War* (1964) pioneered the use of on-camera interviews with veterans and combined it with actuality film. *The Great War* and, later, *The World at War* demonstrated a shift away from what might be called 'mandarin history', based around the memoirs of major historical figures, towards the use of the recollections of 'ordinary' people. This is what social historians refer to as 'bottom-up' rather than 'top-down' history. The introduction to *Blitz: London's Firestorm* positions itself in this tradition by referring to 'the view from the ground'. That oral history becomes an authenticating



device for the drama-documentary is exemplified in the commentaries for *Dunkirk* ('All the characters are real, all the events are from first-hand accounts') and *D-Day* ('These are the true stories of those who lived through D-Day'). *When Hitler Invaded Britain* represents the fullest integration of oral history into its narrative by using extracts from the diaries and memoirs of participants (including novelist Margery Allingham and Generals Sir Edmund Ironside and Alan Brooke) which are delivered to camera by the actors playing them. Here, significantly, the eyewitness accounts represent views expressed at the time rather than those filtered through hindsight.

In the traditional documentary form, oral history is treated separately from the visual material: the interviewees are usually filmed in a studio and the film extracts rarely demonstrate the specific experiences that they relate, but rather are used for illustrative effect. In these films, oral history is integrated into the drama, not only because the reconstructed incidents are based on personal recollections, but also because the interviewees themselves appear as participants in the narrative. For example, in *Dunkirk*, each time a new 'character' is introduced, the film includes a photographic shot of the 'real' person alongside the actor playing that person. *D-Day* and *Blitz: London's Firestorm* go further by featuring on-camera shots of participants on or near the locations that are cut into the reconstructions in which those people are played by actors. This device serves to rupture the diegetic world of the drama by switching back and forth between past and present, between reconstruction and actuality. This breaking down of the historical diegesis differentiates these films from feature films such as *Saving Private Ryan* and locates them within an alternative form of historical representation that Robert A. Rosenstone has labelled 'the New History film'.

The New History film, according to Rosenstone, is one that 'finds the space to *contest* history, to interrogate either the metanarratives that structure historical knowledge, or smaller historical truths, received notions, conventional images' (Rosenstone 1995: 8). In contrast to the traditional historical feature film, characterized by linear narrative and the use of familiar archetypes and conventions, the New History film is marked by its unconventional and experimental use of form and technique. It tends to exist outside, or on the margins, of the film and television industries and is usually the preserve of *auteur* directors with a highly self-conscious formalist style. Examples would include *Hiroshima, mon amour* (Alain Resnais, 1959), *Memories of Underdevelopment* (Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, 1968), *Hitler: A Film from Germany* (Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1977) and, to take a television example, *Culloden*. Films such as these do not simply present a narrative set in the past, in the style of the traditional historical film, but also reflect on the ways in which that historical past is represented and constructed. To this extent the New History film



provides a series of challenges to written history – it tests the boundaries of what we can say about the past and how we can say it, points to the limitations of conventional historical form, suggests new ways to envision the past, and alters our sense of what it is. (Rosenstone, 1995: 12)

This assumes a relationship between form and content and suggests that formal innovation is a necessary prerequisite for challenging the accepted conventions of historical narratives.

History, myth and memory

One of the characteristics of the New History film is that it tends to be revisionist: it reveals an alternative history that often challenges received ideas about the historical experience. So, for example, *Culloden* subverts the narrative of romantic Tartanry by characterizing Bonnie Prince Charlie as a drunken coward who flees the field and leaves his supporters to their fate, while *Hiroshima, mon amour* explores the ambivalent feelings of a French woman who had an affair with a German soldier during the Occupation and thus subverts the Gaullist narrative of national resistance. It is often said that revisionist historians set out deliberately to ‘debunk’ received history and to challenge the ‘myths’ of the past. The same can be true of films and television. A correspondent to the *Daily Telegraph*, for example, claimed that the BBC had set out with the intent ‘to expose the myth of Dunkirk’ and that the series was ‘debunking the myth of the heroic little ships’. This charge – made some two months before the series was broadcast – prompted swift denials from both Alex Holmes and Jane Root. Holmes told the *Telegraph*:

I would like to reassure your readers that this is not the intention of the series, which sets out to reflect the stories of the men who took part in the evacuation. The film will be a testament to the bravery, sacrifice and heroism of those involved. (*Daily Telegraph*, 2003: 25)

Similarly, Root told *The Times*:

The aim of *Dunkirk* is to celebrate the veterans’ bravery and commemorate those who lost their lives. *Dunkirk* in no way questions the heroism and sacrifices of those involved in the evacuation. (*The Times*, 2003: 19)

She was even moved to reveal that ‘I was born in Leigh-on-Sea, the very place from where the cockle fleet set sail to France’ and that she ‘grew up hearing stories of these men’s extraordinary actions’. For this reason, she averred, she would not condone ‘a series that in any way belittled their astonishing achievements’ (*The Times*, 2003: 19).

The fact that the director and commissioning producer of *Dunkirk* felt it necessary to deny that the series had set out to ‘debunk the myth’ demonstrates what a strong hold that myth still exerts on the popular imagination some 64 years after the event itself. There exists a ‘popular



memory' of Dunkirk, just as there is of other events such as the Battle of Britain and the Blitz. This term is generally understood to mean 'the things that people implicitly believe rather than what historians tell them' (Smith, 2000: 1). Historians commonly refer to the 'myths' of events such as Dunkirk and the Blitz (Calder, 1991; Connolly, 2004). The term 'myth' does not necessarily imply that history is false or inaccurate, but rather that there exists a particular view of the war that is shared by many. All societies and nations have their own particular myths and usually they are rooted in historical experiences. The British myth of the Second World War arises largely from the propaganda films and newsreels of the war itself – examples include the GPO Film Unit's *Britain Can Take It!* (1940) and Ealing's *Went the Day Well?* (Alberto Cavalcanti, 1942) – and has been perpetuated since in memoirs, books and films. It is one based on a narrative of heroic resistance in which Britain defied the ambitions of Hitler and stood alone in the face of Nazi tyranny. It has its own particular heroes: individuals (Churchill, Montgomery) and collective heroes (the 'little ships' of Dunkirk, the 'Few' of the Battle of Britain). It is endorsed in the social rituals of commemoration and remembrance. It is popularized in British popular culture, from the stoical heroism of films such as *The Dam Busters* to the whimsical comedy of *Dad's Army* (1968–77). And it still exerts a strong hold on the public's imagination.

The irony of the controversy that erupted over *Dunkirk* is that, of all the films in the cycle, it was the one that most closely adhered to the myth. Indeed, to a very large degree the series supports the accepted narrative of Dunkirk as a miracle of logistical improvisation in which the British Expeditionary Force was rescued against the odds.⁷ Most of the elements of the Dunkirk myth that took shape in 1940 – that the debacle was the fault of the French, that the British Army had been let down by its allies, the role of the 'little ships' in the rescue – are present. Even the episode titles – 'Retreat', 'Evacuation', 'Deliverance' – would seem to endorse the familiar interpretation of events. In paying equal attention to the experiences of the soldiers retreating to the beaches and the civilians who manned the 'little ships', *Dunkirk* recalls the feature film *Dunkirk* (Leslie Norman, 1958), which similarly had endorsed the myth. Perhaps the most challenging aspect of the 2004 *Dunkirk* is that it demonstrates the ruthlessness of the British in contrast to the ethos of 'muddling through' exemplified by the 1958 film. Thus Churchill is shown ordering that no wounded men are to be evacuated, and British officers holding the perimeter are seen shooting one of their own colleagues who has disobeyed an order to stand fast. A tension emerges, however, between the actuality film and the reconstruction insofar as it is the reconstructed scenes that dramatize the sheer physical exhaustion of the troops and sailors involved in the evacuation. In the second episode, for example, one soldier is shown to be suffering from shock and another, Private Wilf Saunders, wanders around the beaches in a daze with a voiceover monologue, asking: 'How did it



come to this?' This contrasts sharply with the actuality images of returned members of the British Expeditionary Forces who are invariably smiling and waving at the camera: in one shot a bandaged soldier winks at the camera while munching on a bacon butty. These differences represent, perhaps, the contrast between the 'official' view of 1940 – the actuality shots were in all probability staged for the camera – and the 'unofficial' perspective of participants recalling their individual experiences more than 60 years after the events.

In large measure those who objected to the treatment in *Dunkirk* complained not that it subverted the myth but rather that it marginalized or ignored certain events at the expense of others. Hugh Sebag-Montefiore, the chief critic, complained that the series had ignored the role of Scottish army regiments in holding the perimeter and focused instead on the (English) Coldstream Guards (Allan, 2004: 11). This is a familiar complaint made against television. The producers of *The World at War*, for example, received hundreds of complaints for the omission of any mention of a particular ship or regiment.⁸ One of the problems associated with oral history is the tendency of interviewees to see their own experience as representative of all those involved. Yet, as Holmes realized, 'it was clear from the start that no one character could cover all the facets of the story. We needed multiple perspectives and I was keen to use stories of people who are alive' (2004: 22). Dale also recognized the problems inherent in using oral testimony for *D-Day*:

You soon realise that everyone's war is only 100 yards wide [sic]. When you talk to individuals about their stories, there are huge amounts of disagreement between testimonies. You're very aware of history being a very fluid mix. (Hamilton, 2004: 25)

It would be fair to say that filmmakers will instinctively privilege those testimonies that provide the best dramatic material. These may not necessarily be the most representative experiences. On the whole, *Dunkirk* uses the stories of 'unknowns' such as Private Alf Tombs of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment or Lieutenant James Langley of the Coldstream Guards, on the grounds that they provide some of the more sensational incidents (Tombs survived the massacre of British prisoners of war by SS troops at Remont, and it was Langley who was ordered to shoot one of his fellow officers for retreating). However, perhaps with an eye on the American market, *D-Day* includes both the stories of unknowns and the memoirs of well-known figures such as General Eisenhower and *Life* magazine photographer Robert Capa, who landed with US troops on Omaha beach.

A recurring theme of these films is the 'revelation' of incidents that were not made public at the time. The ideological imperatives of the war meant that certain events did not become public until after the war – and in some cases were not revealed for many years. The deaths of American



servicemen when a training exercise off the south coast was intercepted by a German E-boat (*D-Day*), the revelation that the British were prepared to use mustard gas in the event of a German landing (*When Hitler Invaded Britain*), and the fact that innocent passers-by were shot and killed by trigger-happy Home Guard patrols (*When Hitler Invaded Britain*) are all examples. These incidents do not represent 'new' knowledge to historians, but they may be unfamiliar to the general public as they have largely been written out of the popular historiography of the war.

Arguably the most revisionist of these films is *When Hitler Invaded Britain*, which examines how Britain prepared to meet the threat of invasion in summer 1940, and suggests what might have happened had the German Army landed in southern England. The film contrasts the private thoughts of various individuals as to whether Britain could resist an invasion (including novelist Margery Allingham and US ambassador Joseph Kennedy) with the preparations being made for invasion by the German armed forces. Popular histories like to maintain that Britain would have resisted valiantly against an invasion, and that even if the country had been overrun, there would have been an organized resistance movement – the sort of spirit invoked by Churchill's famous 'We shall fight on the beaches' speech of 4 June 1940. However, *When Hitler Invaded Britain* suggests that the British Army lacked the men or equipment to mount a successful resistance and that, in all probability, it would have been beaten. The film includes a number of 'imagined' sequences of a German invasion, including a beach assault and parachute landing, represented through the conventions of slow-motion and blurred images. It also suggests that the SS and Gestapo would have arrested dissidents and shot hostages as reprisals for attacks on the occupying forces. *When Hitler Invaded Britain* can be located in a lineage of 'alternative history', which includes the wartime film *The Silent Village* (Humphrey Jennings, 1943) and the semi-professional documentary-drama *It Happened Here* (Kevin Brownlow and Andrew Mollo, 1964). While this sort of 'history' is entirely speculative, it challenges one of the underlying assumptions of the popular myth: that Britain would never have surrendered.

The kind of history that is represented in these films is determined to a large extent by the ideological agendas of the filmmakers. *D-Day*, for example, might be seen in part as a British-produced riposte to *Saving Private Ryan*, which had attracted criticism in some sections of the British press for ignoring the British Army's role in the Normandy landings. However, it is in *Blitz: London's Firestorm* that the most overt ideological intervention can be identified. In many respects this film follows the conventions of *Dunkirk* and *D-Day*, with its combination of oral history, dramatic reconstruction and actuality film, but there are some important differences. The balance between the various techniques is weighted more in favour of oral history, with repeated shots of the interviewees against the present-day London landscape (the London Eye, Canary Wharf), to



the extent that the 'documentary' elements assume greater prominence than the 'drama'. Moreover, in the course of the film a tension emerges between the eyewitness testimony and the ideological meaning imposed onto the Blitz by the commentary.

Blitz: London's Firestorm tells the story of the night of 29–30 December 1940, which witnessed one of the heaviest German air raids on the City of London. In many respects the interviewees endorse the 'myth' of the Blitz through the discourses of resistance and endurance familiar from wartime propaganda films such as *Britain Can Take It!* and *Christmas Under Fire* (1941). The film even uses clips from *Britain Can Take It!* (a bombed-out shopfront bearing a 'business as usual' sign) to represent Londoners' stoicism. One participant remarks:

The more we were hit, the more we had this spirit. I think they thought that they could bomb us into submission, but it did the opposite. The more that was done to us, the more that we responded by being – okay, yeah, we can take it, get on with it. We are not going to submit.

This testimony exemplifies the 'defiance, solidarity and togetherness' that defines the response of Londoners, and the citizens of other British cities, to German bombardment (Connelly, 2004: 129). To some extent, of course, the interviewees are associating themselves with an accepted narrative that has been presented in countless other accounts of the Blitz, including autobiographical sources and popular histories. However, it is clear from the commentary that the filmmakers were intent on using the Blitz for rather different ideological ends. The persistent theme is the immorality of bombing civilians rather than industrial or military targets and, contrary to the popular narrative, it is suggested that this was a process in which the British themselves participated through bombing raids on Germany during autumn 1940 ('When Munich was fire-bombed, Coventry was the answer'). The film concludes with a didactic voiceover that draws far-reaching conclusions about the nature of the strategic bombing offensive of the war:

The 29th of December 1940 answered a fundamental question of war: ordinary people could endure extraordinary things. The lesson Britain took from that night was that incendiaries and high explosives can breed a firestorm of hurricane levels so long as you return for one final attack. The British replied to the Blitz by bombing many German cities to destruction. In Dresden, as many as 100,000 people were killed in a single night. As in Hamburg and Berlin, the planes returned until the firestorm raged beyond control . . . The people of Germany showed the same resilience as the people of Britain, but the concept of civilians as legitimate targets of war had taken hold. And with it came the technology to succeed. In the face of the atomic bombs on the cities of Japan, resilience was irrelevant. America – the very nation that had appealed for civilians never to be a target of air attack – was the first to truly bomb a population into submission. For the people of London, who had witnessed the start of this spiral of war, the memory proved hard to erase.



On one level this exemplifies the intent of the drama-documentary, 'to provoke debate about the significance of the events' that it depicts. On another level, it imposes a meaning onto the narrative that is not necessarily supported by the content. To suggest a direct link from the Blitz to the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 is highly disingenuous. Historians now accept that the strategic decision to use the atomic bomb had as much to do with an American show of force against the Soviet Union as it represented an attempt to bomb Japan into submission. Even to imply, as the commentary clearly does, that the controversial bombing of Dresden was in direct retaliation for the bombing of London, is questionable history. It is certainly not a view supported by any of the interviewees in the film itself. To this extent *Blitz: London's Firestorm* exemplifies a highly ideological use of the drama-documentary form that arguably closes off other interpretations and imposes, through the didactic method of a voiceover commentary, a preferred meaning onto the events. Whether this reflects the view of producer-director Louise Osmond, or whether it expresses an institutional discourse, is a matter of conjecture. However, appearing when it did (autumn 2005), at a time of growing public unease in Britain and the US about the Iraq War, it is difficult to avoid the impression that the film was responding in part to a present-day issue. In 2003, US military spokesmen had used the term 'shock and awe' to describe the aerial bombardment of Baghdad and employed the euphemism of 'collateral damage' to refer to civilian casualties. Perhaps the film's horror at the strategy of targeting civilians was a response to the conduct of the Iraq War? Whether or not this was the intention, it once again demonstrates that history is not simply a matter of 'facts', but is shaped by the ideological and cultural conditions of the present and the forms in which it is represented. To this extent the revival of the drama-documentary as a means of exploring the historical experience of the Second World War represents an event of considerable significance in British television and popular culture.

Notes

1. *Dunkirk* (Alex Holmes, BBC, three episodes transmitted BBC2, 18, 19 and 20 February 2004); *D-Day* (Richard Dale, Dangerous Films, transmitted BBC2, 6 June 2004); *When Hitler Invaded Britain* (Steven Clarke, Granada, transmitted ITV1, 4 July 2004); *D-Day to Berlin* (Peter Georgi, BBC/History Channel, three episodes transmitted BBC2, 20, 21 and 22 April 2005); *Blitz: London's Firestorm* (Louise Osmond, Darlow-Smithson Productions, transmitted Channel 4, 27 October 2005).
2. The phrase 'wartime wedding' seems to have originated with Shearman (1946), although the same idea, if not the specific term, is commonplace in film criticism from around 1942.
3. *Target for Tonight*, *Coastal Command*, *Close Quarters*, *Fires Were Started* and *Western Approaches* were all produced by the Crown Film Unit (as the GPO Film Unit became at the end of 1940). *Journey Together* and the



lesser-known *School for Danger* (1947) were produced by the RAF Film Unit. The Army Film and Photographic Unit preferred feature-length documentaries compiled from actuality footage: *Desert Victory* (1943), *Tunisian Victory* (1944), *Burma Victory* (1945) and *The True Glory* (1945). For a fuller discussion of these films see Chapman (1998a).

4. The 'People's War' website can be accessed at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/ww2>. With my Open University colleague Bill Purdue, I was involved peripherally in the project and in the preparation of a teaching pack entitled *People's War?* (Milton Keynes: Open University, 2004). My conversations with students at the Open University Open Day on 21 June 2005 suggests that the Second World War still holds a particular fascination for many of those interested in history. Connelly (2004) explores our continuing cultural interest in the war.
5. To this extent *D-Day* follows the pattern established by Darryl F. Zanuck's production of *The Longest Day* (Andrew Marton, Ken Annakin and Bernhard Wicki, 1962). Adapted from Cornelius Ryan's book, based extensively on oral history, *The Longest Day* bears a number of similarities with *D-Day*, although it was produced on a much more expensive scale (see Ambrose (1996) for a discussion of *The Longest Day* as history).
6. The mocked-up footage consists of several grainy colour shots of Lord Lovat and Piper Bill Mullins leading ashore the 1st Special Service Commando Unit at Sword beach. As no British cameramen who went ashore on D-Day were equipped with colour cameras, these images must therefore be 'fakes' (see Haggith (2002) for an informed account of the filming of the D-Day landings by the service film units).
7. The 'against all the odds' idea featured heavily in the promotional discourse of the series. Trailers featured this voiceover: 'Chances of escaping a bullet: eight to one. Chances of staying afloat: forty to one. Chances of rescuing over 400,000 stranded soldiers: next to none.'
8. The Imperial War Museum's Film and Video Archive holds several boxes of letters sent to Thames Television about *The World at War*. One Dunkirk veteran, for example, complained that Dunkirk 'wasn't like that'. A veteran of the sinking of *HMS Peteral* demanded 'an apology or a public reference in your next programme on your overlooking the ship and its crew'. Associate producer Jerome Kuehl replied patiently that: 'I am afraid that in a programme covering a ten-year span, it's not possible to mention everything that happened.' I am grateful to Dr Toby Haggith of the Imperial War Museum for facilitating access to this material.

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**Biographical note**

James Chapman is Professor of Film at the University of Leicester. He has wide-ranging research interests in British cinema, television and cultural history and his recent publications include *Past and Present: National Identity and the British Historical Film* (I.B Tauris, 2005) and *Inside the Tardis: A Cultural History of Doctor Who* (I.B. Tauris, 2006). He is a council member of the International Association for Media and History and is reviews editor of the *Journal of British Cinema and Television*. ADDRESS: Department of the History of Art and Film, Faculty of Arts, University of Leicester, University Road, Leicester LE1 7RH, UK. [email: jrc28@le.ac.uk]