

It's Not History, It's HBO

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My investment in making history accessible through performance informs and motivates my response. A Massachusetts upbringing cultivated this fascination with history (“Jefferson lives!”), but most people lack any desire to open up dusty tomes about *ludi circenses* or bicycle crazes. History is, ironically, stuck in the past – inaccessible, dated, and almost irrelevant to 21st century life. Enter HBO. HBO capitalizes on remaking, resetting and repositioning the past, a tele-visioning with cinematic flair, captivating experts and entertainment-seekers alike. Under what circumstances can history be captivating? The answer is integral to the survival of the past.

Typically, archives are inaccessible. A person needs time, money, patience, and guidance to dig up even relatively known pasts. The *New York Times* made its archives public on the Internet, but it takes skill to successfully wade through hundreds of thousands of documents and Ancestry.com has a toll road system in place – pay up to find out what’s behind door number three. HBO is a pay channel, too, but YouTube and Netflix assist the circulation of series like *John Adams*. HBO is a business – the network has a war chest funding spectacular projects. Imagine what exhibits the New York Historical Society could create with \$100 million dollars! Gone are the days of Little House on the Prairie or Dr. Quinn Medicine Woman – our Wild West has CGI.

HBO’s tele-vised history illustrates the importance of dramatic structure, of scenes. We project our own hopes and desires onto the past. Why else would we be drawn to certain characters? We follow the fabricated McDreamy love interest of Alice Paul’s in *Iron Jawed Angels* and feel for the British soldiers standing trial in Boston. Mundane details, those likely never to be dug up in an archive – like John Adams’s slow-talking close friend or fonts popular in boomtowns or application of eyeliner in the 1910s - are brought to light.

In terms of accuracy, HBO and historians alike cannot include every fact. It sure was convenient that John Adams happened to stumble upon the Boston Massacre. Elisions must be made in order to tell a coherent story. David McCullough originally intended *John Adams* to be a book about the tenuous relationship between Adams and Thomas Jefferson. I assume screenwriters and editors ask, how can we make x character more heroic? More of a foil? How can this conflict become more concise and powerful? Too, screenwriters – like all of us – are simultaneously influencing and are influenced by history. Are the male-dominated narrative lines of *Rome*, *John Adams*, *Deadwood*, *Band of Brothers* products of strict historicization or still-present norms?

Ultimately, HBO’s modern influence is, in my opinion, mostly a boon for history. In an age where newspapers and magazines struggle to survive, amazingly and importantly, celebrity and fandom help educate audiences. People are prompted to do more research (albeit a Wikipedia scan) to find out more information. Showtime’s *The Tudors*, a series perhaps sparked by HBO’s good fortune with history, asks its audience to suspend disbelief that King Henry VIII was not morbidly obese but a Jonathan Rhys Meyers lookalike. Fandom fleshes out some elisions: a friend’s infatuation with Meyers led to research about Mary Queen of Scots and Queen Elizabeth. HBO helps democratize the memory landscape in the public sphere. *The Pacific*’s section of HBO’s website invites veterans with WWII Pacific theater experience or people with family members who fought to share their stories.

Many people have speculated about the future of the print archive. If we are to continue cultivating and curating history, television and film seem like the best methods of revising,

restoring, and securing the archive for posterity's sake. What and where is the archive today? Ten years from now? We must be cautious, however. If HBO continues to act as curator, will there come a time when product placement inserts itself into historical narrative? Some histories are not profitable, either facts grate too harshly against national mythos or lack explosiveness. Most of these histories are of marginalized peoples underrepresented in print archives and scholarly research. What becomes of those histories if they are not ready for close-ups? Are some histories too high-brow for television? Too low-brow? Has HBO changed the face of history from elitist to accessible or has HBO made it harder for some histories to make the cut?

History needs our charity and celebrities can help. But I propose that alongside HBO's blockbusters, we consider a form found in the History Channel's "The People Speak." Howard Zinn teamed up with Matt Damon and Josh Brolin to bring actors and singers in front of live audiences to perform narratives, laws, interviews, songs from various periods in history. Sometimes just embodying the words of the past and giving them a modern voice invigorates interest.