‘2-D Histories’:
Media Texts and the Creation of the Past

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Introduction: un-disciplined history?

Why might it be desirable or possible for historians to analyse media texts? The objective of this paper is to outline some theoretical considerations which seem necessary to the planning and execution of such a research project. I will discuss the question of how both media and history relate to the past, examine the significance of narrative as a device that brings coherence to media and historical texts, and finally relate these points to the construction of national identity.

In this era which has been characterised by some theorists as ‘postmodern’, it is argued that the media are one of the most significant sources of information in existence,[1] or even that media ‘simulations’ of reality have become more real than the real.[2] Although opinion is divided on whether this represents a positive or negative feature of postmodern culture, it is clear that the media is a pervasive source of knowledge about countless facets of culture and society. The information represented in the media can be thought of as falling into two main categories. First there is ‘factual’ information about people, places and events around the world (factual texts might either be reported as news, the issues of the ‘real world’, or else constructed overtly as media events) and, secondly, fictional narratives which are supposed to be taken as relating to the real world in a mimetic (therefore believable) sort of way. Historical information is one of the many categories of knowledge disseminated to viewers and readers of media texts; this site for the reception of such knowledge must surely be considered a significant one, alongside formal education and interpersonal communication.

Interestingly, postmodernism has also been thought to be reflected in the collapsing of tradtional disciplines into interdisciplinary fields of study. This is partly attributable to the notion that “knowledge is always partial - in a double sense: that is, knowledge is both incomplete and necessarily connected with interests.”[3] The problematics of history and media studies might appear poles apart; logically enough,

as history focuses on the past whereas in media studies contemporary texts are the field of enquiry. However the fact that the debates of both history and media studies revolve around the analysis of texts of various kinds should not be overlooked. It seems to me that the best way of approaching media and history, in a way which does not prioritise one over the other, is through adopting what might be termed a 'cultural studies perspective'.[4] Chris Jenks has argued that cultural studies should not be seen as one unified approach, but rather as an interdisciplinary movement concerned with the lived experience and everyday life of ordinary people; as such it "legitimates, justifies, celebrates and politicizes all aspects of popular culture".[5] I would add that within cultural studies issues of identity, knowledge, meaning, power and pleasure are often explored within the context of cultural representations. From this position the media need to be understood as one (very significant) site for the production, dissemination and reception of cultural meanings, and therefore a prominent point of focus for the analysis of culture.

History, the past, and narrative

What is history but a fiction agreed upon?
- Napoleon Bonaparte[6]

In suggesting that history is fiction, there is a danger that it might be thought that I argue that history is 'just another fiction'; this is not the case. To begin with, fictions of whatever kind carry messages and meanings, the impact of which cannot be quantified, but which provide the resources for people to make sense of social reality. In this model, fiction is no longer measured against fact. Furthermore, history may be fiction but it is a central and indispensible one:

> History and culture are fundamental aspects of the fabric of everyday life. They help to give us our sense of identity, telling us who we are, where we are from and where we are going.[7]

This very centrality of history explains why it is not, in fact, agreed upon, but instead critiqued and contested by all those groups who feel that they have been 'hidden from history'. A significant feature of historical accounts is that they take the form of narrative. As Keith Jenkins argues, "the world/the past always comes to us as stories ... we cannot get out of these stories (narratives) to check if they correspond to the real world/past, because these 'always already' narratives constitute reality".[8] Jenkins describes history as "one of a series of discourses about the world" which must be understood as fundamentally different from the past. The past is gone and cannot be known except through the partial and multiple narratives of history.[9] The

features which structure and constitute narrative must then also impinge upon the construction of histories.

"To narrate is to make a bid for a kind of power", observes Michael J. Toolan.[10] Narrators (including for example historians and film directors) are in a position to tell 'how it happened', and this telling is a product of their own concerns and perspective. Toolan defines narrative as "a perceived sequence of non-randomly connected events". A narrative must be *perceived* as non-random, in that the connectedness is "motivated and significant".[11] For there to be narrative there must be events, setting, and characters.[12]

What is most important here is that narrative is a domain of inclusions and exclusions. What is perceived as important or unimportant? And what is appropriate and what is hidden from view? Historical narratives gain their coherence through a process of selection and sequencing whereby events and persons are placed in relations to each other which may or may not have been felt by those involved. Much speculation often revolves around the thoughts and actions of particular individuals in the past. Narrative has the power to ascribe these to such individuals; they are unable to respond, and if they did, would they tell the truth? Toolan highlights the issue of the 'ontological status' of characters. What claim to existence do characters have? "Does Jane Austen's Emma Woodhouse have a fuller existence, in the minds of some readers, than Jane Austen herself, although we know that Emma is only words?"[13]

Media discourse as historical discourse

I would like to turn next to an example in order to illustrate the points outlined above and demonstrate how media discourse can also be read as historical discourse. The *New Zealand Herald* regularly reproduces articles from the l890s drawn from its files under the heading "100 Years Ago". One such article, published 29/8/1996, related the tale of a court battle:

> APIA -- The most interesting case in the past month has been an action in the Commissioner's Court in which Mrs Robert Louis Stevenson figured as defendant.
>
> The plaintiff was Mr R. Chatfield, proprietor of the *Samoa Times*, and the claim was for a little over £80 for work done and money expended by Mr Chatfield on Mrs Stevenson's estate while the plaintiff was in charge of it during her absence in America.
>
> Mrs Stevenson denied having given any authority to Mr Chatfield for the work. She defended her own case and at its conclusion

> read a lengthy address to the court of a decidedly pungent nature, and bristling with what Punch would call feline amenities.
>
> The court gave judgement in favour of the plaintiff for £53.

The features of narrative can immediately be detected: setting, characters, events. In addition the text can be seen to structure the plot and position the characters within relations that we typically expect within narrative. In my reading at least, Mr Chatfield emerges as the protagonist, and Mrs Stevenson as the antagonist. Mrs Stevenson seems to be a wealthy absentee landowner who wants to deny the honest and helpful Mr Chatfield of what is rightfully his. A beginning is described, a middle, and a final confrontation during which Mrs Stevenson is seen to pull out all the stops. The denouement sees order restored.

Why does this text represent Mrs Stevenson in such a negative light? Ascribing pungency and feline qualities to her address to the court calls into question her reliability as a witness. It seems unlikely that a *Mr* Stevenson would be described in a similar vein. She is operating on an emotional rather than rational level; also, perhaps, her incursion into the masculine territory of the courtroom has reflected badly on her 'womanliness'. It is very interesting that Mr Chatfield is the proprietor of the *Samoa Times* as well; might the *Herald* have received its account of these events from just this source?

The study of literary and other texts which originate in the past in relation to history is emerging as a thriving area of interdisciplinary inquiry,[14] but how does this type of research relate to contemporary texts which seek to represent the past? Media texts, for the purposes of historical analysis, can be regarded as falling into three categories:

1. Texts produced in the relatively distant past. These are clearly historical; they are part of the remains of the past. These do not have to be 'about' history from the perspective of the producers. These present social relations and practices in a way which is, of course, constructed and mediated (even in documentary)[15] but nevertheless can be viewed as products of their moment, in which the concerns and certainties of that moment are circulated.[16]

2. Texts produced in the past which are explicitly about history (for example, *Gone With the Wind*) can be studied in terms of 'what they have to say about' their moment of production, but also serve a historiographical function of narrating past events; when analysing such a text it is vital to consider the interplay of production-past, narrative-past, and present.

3. Contemporary texts which are set in the past can be seen as more analogous to current historiography. It is this category of texts which generally seem not to have been accepted as proper objects of historical study. In the abstract, the question of whether the narrative(s) portrayed are claimed to be 'true' (i.e. history) is not important, although in the analysis of a specific text this may become a prominent concern.[17] Here contemporary audiences are given an insight into what the past was qualitatively like, which retains its force even if the events portrayed are presumed by the audience member to be fictional. In this sense, although I have used the term 'representation' throughout this paper, such texts can be said to create rather than 're-present' (put into the present again) past events.

When watching *The Piano,*[18] the viewer must understand from the text that the setting for the tale is 19th century New Zealand (this signalling is accomplished through elements such as costume, speech, social relations). The text must therefore carry traces of current discourses about the 19th century in order to make its own discourses identifiable; however, the representations contained in the film can also be seen to extend and modify the viewer's knowledge of this period in New Zealand history. Whether or not the representation is considered by people with specialised knowledge to be an 'accurate' facsimile of the past does not, in the main, affect the perception of the general viewer, nor does it tell us whether viewers find the text agreeable, believable, questionable, or offensive.

Historical narrative and national identity

If we accept the multiple status of histories, the status of historical documents as texts, and the significance of narrative as the device through which history becomes legible, what then might be the relation of this further term, 'national identity', to the others outlined above? This question calls into play the relationship of identity to history. While Anthony Giddens argues that self-identity is produced by individuals, that the self is "reflexively made",[19] other theorists have stressed the idea that identities are multiple and composite.[20] A central concern in cultural studies work on media has been how audience members as subjects make meaning from texts. In what ways do the meanings made relate to the specificities of the individual subject? And in what ways do individuals relate their own identities to cultural representations of class, race, gender, sexuality (the list continues)?

Alice Weedon suggests that we have "a sense of history that is both public and personal", so that personal identity is a composite of past experience, family history, and "the 'historical experience' of larger collectivities such as the nation."[21] While not singling out any aspect of identity as primary, the question of the complex intertwining of national identity and history seems one very useful area for media analysis to focus on. Indeed, it has been argued that the notion that national identity is 'reflected' in national media must be radically challenged; instead, we must question the ways in which the nation comes into being, in a performative sense, as "an effect of these cultural technologies not their point of origin."[22]

To put it more succinctly, what is the link between 'nation and narration'?[23] The national as a category is one which we use unselfconsciously; the existence of the nation as an entity is something we take for granted. Labels like 'New Zealand history' and 'New Zealand film' are dependent upon concepts of nation and nationality yet, as Edward Said points out, "there is very little in contemporary critical discourse making these actualities possible as subjects of discussion".[24]

Ernest Renan has argued that national identity is predicated upon a 'forgetting' of history, as "historical enquiry brings to light deeds of violence which took place at the origin of all political formations".[25] Claudia Bell, from a New Zealand perspective, argues that national identity is produced through the promotion of unity and the suppression of differences within a heterogeneous population.[26]

New Zealand's colonial past and postcolonial present are the subject of much debate within local historical and media fields. To return to Jane Campion's *The Piano*, what sense can we say is made of the colonial past by this text? As I have mentioned above, Campion's text incorporates reference to recognisable historical features of 19th century New Zealand (although it cannot represent the past itself) in order to initially locate the events and characters within a setting and in order to maintain its credibilty as a historical narrative. Prominent within the historical concept of the nation has been the image of the pioneering European male, which has in Jock Phillips's view remained a constitutive element of New Zealand identity into the late 20th century.[27] This image, bolstered within literature,[28] has served as a celebration of hegemonic pakeha masculinity. Identity, like history, involves inclusion and exclusion, and within New Zealand's 'civil imaginary'[29] the identities of 'Others' - notably women and Maori - have tended to be excluded.

Campion as narrator of *The Piano* is in a position to introduce oppositional discourses about this past as well as draw upon recognised, traditional accounts. The placement of a woman, Ada, at the centre of the narrative allows Campion to reflect upon her status as a possession owned by men, and also to explore the potential for Ada to resist the structures of her society and enact her own desires. Less central, but present, are Maori characters who at times are able to comment derisively on the colonialist-imperialist ambitions of Stewart, Ada's husband, who exploits both the local Maori and the land for financial gain. These characters are marginal within the narrative, and how deeply felt their concerns or suffering are is not explicitly examined in the film; most often the Maori characters appear like a colonial chorus, producing a comic commentary on the main action.

The extent to which the narrative succeeds in projecting the oppositional discourses against the grain of the traditional is questionable; some analysts have argued that the much-vaunted postcoloniality of the text is mere veneer.[30] Viewers of the film might agree; or alternatively might praise the film for at least including Maori characters and their intermittent interjections. The narrating of the nation performed by *The Piano* is then highly ambivalent in terms of its 'forgetting of history' in Renan's terms. Campion can be seen to attempt a subversion of accepted knowledge, and perhaps to draw attention to the fragmented nature of histories. Alternatively the film might be viewed as attempting to placate contemporary Maori concerns about colonisation without placing the origins of these concerns on screen in a truly challenging manner.[31]

National identity is projected, shaped, constructed, and sometimes contested by media representations. Thus far I have largely discussed the analysis of media texts and the implications of this for history; however, the way in which identity is felt or absorbed by the inhabitants of the nation / media audiences, cannot be measured or known through the analysis of texts. This question is of central importance if the analyst is attempting a meaningful contribution to the understanding of power relations in contemporary society.

Conclusion: text, audience, and history

An issue which I have thus far been hinting at, but which I feel must be placed centrally on the agenda in any media-related research, is that of the audience (readers, viewers, listeners) of the sorts of cultural representations I have been discussing.[32] A key question associated with the notion of texts creating a 'qualitative past' for

viewers is that of actual audiences's interpretation of these texts. While I believe a study of 'the text itself' is a useful starting point, the meanings arising from the representational process[33] must be considered as contingent upon, rather than determined by, the text. Any analysis of a text, however rigorous, is a partial one. Analysis on the level of the text is essential, but in leaving the audience 'out of the loop' an analyst might suppose that meaning is fixed and singular. It is important to conceive of the meaning of a text as dependent on contexts such as the medium through which a text is received, and location in space and moment in time in which the audience member encounters the text.

How might historians proceed to conduct research on media? Methodology must be designed according to the specific needs of, and resources available to, the project. One way of using media texts might be to use them in conjunction with an oral history style approach, using the text to open up a discussion of the past.[34] Alternatively, an historian might wish to engage in the debates around contemporary texts (such as *The Piano* or *Heavenly Creatures*) bringing a depth of historical insight. The analysis of media representations is not only "a legitimate way of doing history"[35] but indeed is becoming a vital activity for historians who are concerned with the impact of postmodern thought on the methods and objects of history. In the meanings we make from media texts which present our past as members of different kinds of communities, we are all, in a sense, writing our own histories.

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[1] Polity Press, "Introduction", *The Polity Reader in Cutural Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994), p.4.
[2] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations,* Trans. P. Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983).
[3] Glenn Jordan and Chris Weedon (eds), *Cultural Politics: class, gender, race and the postmodern world* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 18.
[4] For a good survey of influential theorists in the development of cultural studies, see Simon During (ed.), *The Cultural Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1993).
[5] Jenks, *Culture* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.157.
[6] Quoted in Robert Matzen, *Research Made Easy* (New York: Bantam, 1987), p. 26.
[7] Jordan and Weedon, *Cultural Politics,* p. 3.
[8] Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 9.
[9] Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History,* pp. 5-6.
[10] Michael J. Toolan, *Narrative: a critical linguistic introduction* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 3.
[11] Toolan, *Narrative,* p. 7.
[12] Toolan, *Narrative,* p. 90.
[13] Toolan, *Narrative,* p. 265.
[14] This tendency has been prominent at the intersection of history and literature in Renaissance studies; see Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, and Margaret Iversen (eds), *Uses of History: Marxism, postmodernism and the Renaissance* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1991).
[15] See Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991) on documentary as 'a fiction (un)like any other.'
[16] Su Beresford, Louise Mace and Carolyn Read (this volume) examine media and popular culture texts created in the past from a contemporary perspective and demonstrate how such analysis contributes to historical knowledge and to our understanding of the media genres they have used.

[17] Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight discuss the New Zealand 'mocumentary' *Forgotten Silver* in terms of its borderline status as a documentary which was later shown to be fiction; "Silver Magic", *Illusions* 25 (Winter 1996), pp. 14-19.
[18] *The Piano,* directed by Jane Campion (New Zealand, 1993).
[19] Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1991) pp. 2-3.
[20] Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson, "Social Criticism without Philosophy: an encounter between feminism and postmodernism", *The Postmodern Turn: new perspectives on social theory,* Ed. Steven Seidman (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994).
[21] Quoted in Jordan and Weedon (eds), *Cultural Politics*, p. 115.
[22] David Morley, *Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 288.
[23] Homi K. Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990).
[24] Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1983), p. 169.
[25] Renan, "What is a nation?", *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhahbha, p. 11.
[26] Bell, *Inventing New Zealand* (Auckland: Penguin, 1996), p. 185. On the topic of government and national identity see Raewyn Dalziel, "What is History?" (panel discussion, this volume), and Bell, p. 189.
[27] Phillips, *A Man's Country? The image of the pakeha male*. (Auckland: Penguin, 1987), p. vii.
[28] See Kai Jensen, *Whole Men: the masculine tradition in New Zealand literature* (Auckland: Auckland UP, 1996).
[29] This term is used by Simon During to mean the attempt to make sense of all the persons and things which are thought to exist within a society; see During, "Literature: nationalism's other?", *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha, p. 142.
[30] Jane Roscoe and Ann Hardy, "Scratching the Surface: *The Piano*'s postcolonial veneer", *SPAN* (forthcoming).
[31] As argued by Roscoe and Hardy, "Scratching the Surface".
[32] Ien Ang points out the disparity between 'the audience' (as constructed and idealised by the film and television industries and media critics) and what she terms 'actual audiences'; see her *Desperately Seeking the Audience* (London: Routledge,1991), p. 13. For an accessible account of the development of audience theory and research within cultural studies, see Morley's Introduction and Chapter 1 ("Television Audience Research: a critical history"), in *Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies.*
[33] By the representational process I mean the production, dissemination and reception of the text. Another way of describing the text-in-context is as a 'communicative event'. Sociolinguist and media theorist Norman Fairclough has advanced this theory in *Media Discourse* (London: Routledge, 1995), especially pp. 57-62. Here, the text is only one dimension of analysis. Two further dimensions must also be 'built into' the researcher's understanding of a text's use within culture. These are the *discourse practice* (in which the production and consumption of the text are considered) and *sociocultural practice* (in which the focus is on the wider context of the communicative event within culture and society).
[34] See for e.g. Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship in 1940s and 1950s Britain* (London, Routledge, 1993).
[35] Robert A. Rosenstone, Introduction, *Revisioning History: film and the construction of a new past*, Ed. Robert A. Rosenstone (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995), p. 3.