

After 'Civilisation': The Past, Present and Future of Art on TV

**Wednesday 27 May 2009
The Hospitium, Museum Gardens, York**



On Wednesday 27th May 2009, the University of York's Institute for the Public Understanding of the Past (IPUP) brought together a selection of academics, presenters, producers, television executives, and cultural critics, to consider some of the ways in which the arts have been presented on television. The one-day colloquium was occasioned by the 40th anniversary of the BBC's *Civilisation*, presented by Kenneth Clark, a landmark series and the first colour documentary programme to be broadcast on British television. As well as considering some of the ways in which both the arts and the creative process have been portrayed and represented through the medium of television from Clark's programme to the present day, contributors focussed on the potential future for arts broadcasting in the age of digital media. The aim of the day-long symposium was for people who work at different stages of the production process in arts broadcasting, from presenters to producers to commissioning editors, to talk about their experiences of making programmes, and to discuss with academics and critics the potential future directions that might be taken in order to create innovative and wide-reaching television about art. The speaker's programme was augmented by morning and lunchtime screenings of examples of landmark arts programming, including *Civilisation*, John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, more recent offerings from Simon Schama, as well as IPUP's own film of the new installation at the York St. Mary's Gallery by Emma Biggs and Matthew Collings.

The first speaker, Jonathan Conlin, spoke specifically about Kenneth Clark's contribution to arts broadcasting in a paper entitled "Civilisation: milestone or millstone?". He began by warning that there is a sense of nostalgia about some of the retrospectives concerning *Civilisation*, but argued that perhaps it is now more appropriate to look forward, and think about the ways in which the programme, as a template, can help us in the future of arts broadcasting. One of the major problems in considering the role and influence of *Civilisation* is that, traditionally at least, media analysis prizes film over television; a serious and sober evaluation of the arts on the small screen is long overdue, and it is now time to reconsider some of our prejudices and examine series like *Civilisation* on their own merits. Furthermore, the problem of the cultural stereotypes that the series has itself attracted remain problematic: some consider it in a negative light, assuming that it dispenses orientalist and patrician values, and other lionise it as the yard-stick by which all arts broadcasting is to be judged. Both of these images are misguided, and there is a great need to remove them and start afresh with an evaluation that examines the achievements and shortcomings of the series in its own context. *Civilisation* was commissioned to showcase the new technology of colour broadcasting, which hitherto had been seen as gaudy, trashy, and insufficiently serious. Its budget, at the time, was enormous, and modern myths suggest that this was not repaid in viewing figures, although Conlin showed how a more nuanced reading of the viewing figures illustrates that it was proportionally quite high when considering how few of the viewing public could receive the new colour broadcast. That the show had an enormous impact cannot be doubted, especially in America, where Clark was hailed as an almost Messianic figure defending conceptual civilisation in the dark heart of the Cold War. This simplistic reading of the series' narrative thrust wildly underplayed Clark's pessimism and scepticism about civilisation, especially as he frequently suggested that the 'barbaric' threats to progress came as much from inside the gates as outside, and the series' closing 'credo' is demonstrated to be substantially out of step with the overall timbre of the rest of the episodes. In terms of the presentation of art itself and the form of the

programmes, Conlin showed how Clark and his production team placed an extraordinary amount of trust in the viewer's ability to understand the images they were being shown, with extended lingering shots of art allowed to unfold for the audience without intrusive voice-over commentary. There was also an extraordinarily haptic approach to art, with Clark frequently touching the works about which he was talking, and allowing his hands to act as extensions of the viewer, encouraging a remarkable sense of interactivity with the objects. There were some mis-steps, as Conlin discussed two brief attempts at dramatisation during the series, and one near-disastrous experiment with special effects, which together worked to destroy the carefully constructed air of authenticity that had otherwise been a hallmark of the series. Finally, Conlin showed two contrasting televisual readings of a single image, Goya's *The Third of May 1808*, on by Clark and the other by John Berger, from *Ways of Seeing*. Whilst both were commended, the latter was shown to be aggressive, politicised, and reliant on a model that argues art is quotational, whereas Clark was shown to emphasise art could be interesting, subtle, beautiful, and capable of presenting its own narrative.

The second paper was given by John Wyver, and was entitled "Format: a field guide to art programmes". Wyver argued that we might broadly categorise arts programmes into three distinct types: the lecture, the dramatisation, and the encounter. The first of these was the oldest, and sprang out of early radio broadcasts, when it was imagined by pioneers such as Hilda Matheson that one might, as a broadcaster, seek to address the audience as individuals, almost 'domesticating' traditional forms of radio address. By the time this strain of programmes began to appear on the television, it had taken on influences from the Grand Tour to the lantern slide lectures of early twentieth century art history. Kenneth Clark operated inside this paradigm, strongly attached to the idea that the viewer might want information rather than idea, and Wyver traced this style from Clark, through to Robert Hughes and on to Matthew Collings and Simon Schama in present-day television. All of these broadcasters hold within their style of programme the idea that it is the presenter who is the repository of knowledge, transmitting and translating this for the viewer through a voice-over address. Wyver wondered what alternative forms broadcasting might take, if the presenter-as-omniscient-narrator model was to be removed, and he showed a clip of one of his own films from the series *The State of the Art* to suggest a way a decentralised montage effect might be created by juxtaposing various images with quotational non-linear commentary. Beyond the lecture, the dramatisation of artist's lives, as a form at least, might be traced all the way back to Vasari, but on television its heritage begins with the work of Ken Russell for *Monitor*. Early attempts were much more restrained in tone than they are now, and Wyver suggested that a dramatic reconstruction of a life will always tell us much more about the people making it than it will about its subject. The final type, the encounter, attempts to capture art within the frame of the broadcast, frequently augmented by music or commentary. Such programmes (or sequences) implicitly take for granted the idea of an authentic art 'out there', with an objective existence, which can be explored through television. To sum up, Wyver showed how the current climate of arts broadcasting is one of mixed hopes. Major channels have certainly reduced the amounts of arts programmes they are making, but the shrinking costs of digital camera and other equipment, coupled with the possibilities of new digital channels of distribution, might well represent a new era for arts broadcasters. SkyArts is to be commended for its coverage, as are other innovative approaches, such as opera performances being screened in regional

arts cinemas. Yet despite this, we must stop to evaluate our assumptions about Knowledge. Ought there to be a kind of catalogue of what 'ought' to be known about the arts? Certainly the BBC thinks that this is the case, and Wyver cautioned that this represents a dangerous elision between knowledge and understanding. Surely there should be a way to present art without explaining it, to show it without telling it, to allow it to transcend some kind of supposed 'curriculum' in order that it might speak for itself, unencumbered by frameworks of presentational authorial voices who seek to tell us what it is they think we ought to know about the art. Maybe this problem has been reached because art refuses to be packaged and is determinedly ambiguous, whereas television rejects ambiguity; we must, if we can, return to a place where art can be allowed an unmediated relationship with the audience, so that it might retain its power to shock, puzzle, and thrill the viewer.

The third paper was offered by Nigel Spivey, and he spoke on the subject of "Translation: putting brains on television". Spivey offered an immensely personal take on the experience of making his programme *How Art Made the World*, and he looked back on the outcome of that work, both in terms of the series itself, as well as the accompanying book. The intention of the series was an attempt to go back and revisit the Linguistic Turn, re-injecting the primacy of the visual and symbolic into considerations of the artistic realm. Taken as a whole, the series attempting to examine the entirety of human existence and explore how art had been used in a wide variety of different circumstances, across the whole spectrum of our global heritage. One of the tenets of the programmes was to link the past not merely with the history of art as viewed from contemporary academia, but to show how it was related to the deployment of signs and images in the contemporary world more generally. Spivey talked about the ways in which understandings of the architecture of narrativity, and most especially those used by film-writing guru Robert McKee in his analyses of cinema story-telling, have affected the ways in which documentary makers plot the flow of their films. Spivey also showed how the film sought to include serious and detailed research from disciplines such as psychology and neurology, in order to provide new, cutting-edge insights. Some found that the research used in the programmes was insufficiently 'peer-reviewed' and flimsy, although this was ironic considering not only the incredibly high-status of the research used, but also the overt desire on the part of the producers to make the science as accessible to the lay viewer as possible. In any case, television frequently demands a level of analysis that is forced to transcend the habits of academics to hedge and accept the limitations of their own analyses; instead, 'momentous conclusions' must be reached, of a kind that frequently invites accusations of hyperbole. Overall, Spivey hoped that what might ultimately be reached was a final outcome that allowed the viewer to have their understandings of art be demystified without being disenchanted. Art should always have a place on television, and so should brains, the latter should refrain from lecturing the viewer about the former, and television should be seeing from afar, as its name suggests, as long as we remain constantly vigilant that endless reproduction of art might go some way towards destroying the very things that make it so fascinating.

The fourth talk was given by Matthew Collings, under the title "Beauty: art beyond/before ideology", and was again, as with the preceding paper, a very personal reflection on the process of making arts programmes. Collings talked of his own personal circumstances, growing up without the traditional formal educational qualifications of examinations, but with a love of art and with experience of art

school, and the art market. His entry into television came as a researcher on the BBC's *The Late Show*, where he found himself an unlikely expert repeatedly called upon due to his experience at the cutting edge of contemporary art production and sales. This was an area about which the BBC was suddenly attempting to display more knowledge of, having recently been criticised for a lacunae in its arts coverage. The increased profile this afforded Collings eventually allowed him to branch out into presenting his own programmes on art, which were as much intended to be sidelong glances at the mechanisms of production and distribution of modern art. He recalled how much of the original commentary for the first of his series was delivered in an *ad hoc* fashion, with varying degrees of forethought and pre-planning, and surprisingly it was this format of delivery that was such a success. Collings reiterated that in making programmes there must always be confidence on the part of the presenter or production team in whatever is being done, even if it is being created or thought about in an improvisational fashion. Without this self-confidence then the programme risks destabilisation and compromise. Collings also reflected on the fact that when his first series was an immense success, producers returned to him with encouragement to embark a new projects of his own choosing, and although on occasion he was forced some compromise with producers and film-makers over the choices of artist to be investigated, on whole his experience of the mechanisms by which television companies make programme about art has generally been positive.

The fifth and final talk was given by Clare Beavan, who spoke on "Dramatisation: the power of art or lives of the artists?". She argued that producing arts programmes is fundamentally about the acceptance of compromise, because constraints on film-makers will always exist and the real test of a producer is how to accept, understand and deal with them. Creating documentaries about the art world will always be an immensely challenging task, and it will always involve decisions taken on the hoof and initial hopes being dashed or compromised. In her most recent experience, a programme for the BBC about John Donne, there was a desire to move on and create something new, so she utilised a workshop format with the poems being placed under discussion, moving away from a somewhat ceremonial use of a presenter towards a more organic, looser experience for the viewer encountering the poetry. Beavan also argued against an academic model that encourages hesitancy in analysis and feels that meaning can be treacherous or prescriptive. This is a stance that ultimately freezes one into inactivity, being afraid of saying anything about a work of art in case it is in error. Television demands something else entirely, a robust defence of our ability to speak about art, and it should not be beholden to those academics who feel strongly attached to discourses of ambiguity, because that ultimately leads to censoriousness. Popular explanations, those that feel right and true, are to be courted, even when they go unfashionably against the grain of academic consensus.

The discussion that followed the final paper offered three contrasting final perspectives on the issues discussed. Helen Weinstein offered some questions and issues about the future of arts broadcasting, arguing that recent work on the audiences for history programmes has shown how broadening the narrative's reach to include human interest stories of social history shifted the viewer demographic away from older males towards families and females. Thus, it is becoming necessary that programme makers ask themselves how to reach out to parts of the population that simply do not engage with largely white high culture and women viewers who may have felt neglected by the kinds of narratives hitherto offered by arts programmes.

These areas of programming have seen a shift towards the Robert McKee-school of scripting, where the emotional register of the programme shifts constantly to provide some affective engagement for the viewer. Thus the arts may want to try and aim for a kind of 'social history'-style framework to allow its output to be more inclusive. Jan Younghusband offered an immensely upbeat assessment of the current state of arts broadcasting, suggesting that there may well be little money available for such programmes and whatever does get commissioned may find itself extraordinarily ghettoised in the channel's scheduling, but these are struggles that are inevitable and must be accepted and overcome with passion and creativity. It is those programmes which are the very hardest to make, and which meet with the most institutional opposition which so very frequently turn out to have the most value. Broadcasting is an organic, collaborative experience, and it must be approached with spontaneity; much of the process involves rejection, compromise, and problematic structures of commissioning, but rather than allowing these things to create despair, one must accept the nature of the terrain and push on with renewed resolution. Finally, one must believe that the best ideas do not emerge ready-formed, but are created out of a myriad of circumstances of rejection, compromise, collaboration, and discussion, and there is nothing to do but move forward and try to create. Finally, Robert McNab ended the colloquium with some thoughts about the nature of archival preservation, warning us that if the situation in the present persists, where many arts films are off-limits even to researchers who are prevented from gaining access by over-zealous bureaucratic systems, we risk never being able to learn from our past. We risk being continually forced to make the same kinds of inventions over and over again, because we are denied access to an extraordinary treasure-trove of arts programmes from the past which might, should we be able to access them, speak to us in exciting and invigorating ways.

IPUP explores the role of the past in everyday life, with a mission to establish and embed new methodologies relating to understandings of the past through discussion and collaborative projects, and to explore the ways in which audiences in general engage with the past. The event was the first of a series which IPUP will be running on the relationship between the humanities and television. Future symposia will turn to examine the packaging of the past on television, with individual foci on the ways in which archaeology, cultural heritage, and history have all been presented through the medium.