

Theory of Knowledge in History
Sources + **Historians** = Histories

- **Sources** are incomplete, untypical and unreliable, as we found out in our last session.
- **Historians** therefore need to:
 - *Select* sources to use, based on what questions need answering;
 - *Interpret* those sources and *make deductions* from them;
 - Organise and present their main conclusions to the public.
- Arguably, this process of selection and interpretation distorts our "knowledge" even further. All historians have their own views and interests, formed by *upbringing*, *social background*, and *current affairs*; this will determine the *questions* they choose to investigate, the *sources* they choose answer those questions, the *interpretation* which they put on those sources and even the *words* they use ("one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter").
- In this session, we will therefore investigate the different approaches of historians to the way they choose to "package" the past. We will do this by looking at three main approaches:
 - To **inform**
 - To **persuade**
 - To **entertain**
- These three central purposes of history – to inform, to persuade, to entertain – can overlap heavily. The important thing is to deduce the purpose of the history you are being presented with, then form your own judgements from it rather than accept those which are being rammed down your throat.
- This is, perhaps, the overriding purpose of history – to make you think for yourself.

1. To entertain

- AJP Taylor came up with arguably the best defence of history – "because it is interesting". His own history books were driven by the storyteller's desire to answer the question "What happened next?". This style of history is the most popular in TV and feature film dramatisations, which forms the main way in which most people get their idea of the past.

Pitfalls:

- Making history "**Entertaining**" can disguise the fact that it is also trying to "**persuade**". The classic American "Western" tends to depict the cowboy as an adventurous hero and the Indian as a violent savage; films about the slave trade (*Amistad*, *Amazing Grace*) serve a particular political purpose in today's multicultural society; a film such as *The Duchess*, with its barely concealed parallels to the life of Princess Diana, are also written with one eye on the present.
- Making history "**Entertaining**" means that "**Informing**" can take a back seat; this narrative approach to history as "life with the dull bits cut out" focuses on short term dramatic events and explanations and the actions of a few "Great Men" at the expense of other individuals and wider circumstances (e.g. *Luther*, *Sophie Scholl*). More alarmingly, the truth can get distorted for the sake of cinematic effect. Films such as *Braveheart*, *Pearl Harbour* and *Enigma* take massive liberties with the truth. The classic phrase "Based on actual events" is one to watch out for.

Examples to watch (Early Modern History)

a. Depiction of Henry VIII (a central figure in Protestant history)

Watch **Harry Hill**'s assessment of Ray Winstone as Henry VIII¹.

- What does he think are the main inaccuracies with the performance?

- Why do you think the producers of the film made these errors?

¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1xD2AykWZKU>

b. Depiction of Mary Tudor in the film “Elizabeth” (central figure in Catholic history)

You will see the scene of the **execution of Latimer and Ridley**, two famous Protestants. Here are essential facts about what really happened (according to the Protestant historian John Foxe, anyway...!). For each, consider why the filmmaker may have changed it:

The Facts	The Film	Why did the filmmaker change things?
Mary said that burning them was kind – because God would not send them to hell if they were punished on earth.		
Latimer and Ridley were the only people executed that day.		
Ridley came out dressed in his robes, which he gave to passers-by; Latimer wore a simple white gown.		
Ridley’s brother tied a small barrel of gunpowder to each man’s neck.		
When the fire started, Latimer leaned into the flames and the gunpowder blew his head off.		
Ridley was not so lucky. The flames burned his legs off slowly before finally reaching the gunpowder.		

The Guardian has an entire website devoted to the accuracy of Hollywood interpretations of History: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/series/reelhistory>

2. To persuade

History can also be used as a form of persuasion or propaganda. To justify present day values and policies, the past can either be demonised (“Victorian Britain was disgustingly racist, sexist and homophobic”) or idealised (“Victorian Britain was not afraid to stress its belief in community, family, authority and self-help”).

Method 1: Using history to oversimplify issues

<p>Those wishing to avoid or delay change will use history as nostalgia. This boils down to the fact that people and societies like to see themselves as “part of a process” and are naturally uneasy about drastic, sudden change. This makes people unwilling to accept change or to move forward.</p>	<p>Example 1: Social Anti-Immigration Bias</p>	<p>Example 2: Political Royalism</p>
<p>Those wishing to pursue or accelerate change will use history to stress how such developments are a long-term trend and nothing to be worried about.</p>	<p>Pro-Immigration Bias</p>	<p>Nazism</p>

Examples to watch (Modern History)

	What is the message of this source?	How does it get this message across?
"Matchstick Wars" ²		
"World at War: Foreign Policy" ³		
"The Eternal Jew" ⁴		

² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x1oCwpMucao>

³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fiNhqTzSyJE>

⁴ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P9rhgEKLtR8>

Method 2: Using history to complicate issues

- Too little history is a bad thing; but so is too much. History can be used to keep wounds open, to perpetuate the mistakes and prejudices of the past rather than move on from them.

Examples to Consider: Memorial Days

- There are now a whole range of “Memorial Days” on the calendar. They arguably create more confusion than they are worth.

Task: Discuss each of the following three memorial days, and take a class vote about the purpose of each one after discussion.

		Possible Purpose 1	Possible Purpose 2
Armistice Day	11 th November	To honour the war dead and admire the sacrifices they made for their countries	To pity the war dead and reflect on the utter futility of war
Holocaust Memorial Day	27 th January	To reflect on the suffering of all victims of racial persecution	To stress the unique suffering of Jews and therefore their right to be in Israel
Slavery Memorial Day	25 th March	To celebrate the abolition of slavery in the British Empire	To highlight the collective guilt of the British people for slavery and their obligation to compensate black people for it

3. To inform (educate)

- The deliberate oversimplification, complication and downright distortion of Historical knowledge can have catastrophic results: it breeds ignorance, bigotry and hatred instead of broad-minded tolerance.
- The most notorious example of this is Hitler's Holocaust, which in turn was used to further justify the demands for a Jewish state in Palestine, which in turn has led many Arabs to claim that they are being forced to pay the price for European guilt over the Holocaust (although the Arab states themselves overlook the fact that they as much as the Israelis were eager to seize control of Palestinians lands in they years both before and after World War Two).

Example to listen to (20th Century history)

One of the most powerful examples of a “historic” broadcast aimed to let the facts speak for themselves is **Richard Dimbleby’s broadcast from Belsen⁵** concentration camp. Dimbleby had to re-record it half way through after breaking down; the BBC refused to broadcast it at first as it was so powerful; he only secured its broadcast by threatening his resignation.

⁵ e.g. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=opn15-59L11>