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The Historian-Filmmaker's Dilemma: Historical Documentaries
in Sweden in the Era of Hager and Villius (review)

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President Josiah “Jed” Bartlet (Martin Sheen, *The West Wing*) embody patriotic/messianic language becoming of virtuous leaders versus the shallowness of other presidential characters often seduced by political expediency and defended by spin experts working with smoke and mirrors.

This work is timely as America enters the presidential race of 2004 and begins to debate over presidential character; furthermore, the country may revisit disputes over a contested presidency. *Hollywood’s White House: the American Presidency in Film and History* is highly recommended as a guide for its insights into the dynamics of the most important office on the globe and how that symbol of power has been presented to popular audiences.

Not satisfied with one volume dealing with the presidency in film and history, the editors have provided a more narrowly focused companion work, *The West Wing: The American Presidency as Television Drama*, dedicated exclusively to the award-winning television series created by Aaron Sorkin. Following the formula established in *Hollywood’s White House*, Rollins and O’Connor have assembled a cast of experts whose devotion to, and criticism of, *The West Wing* provide insights into television’s most popular weekly presidential drama.

The West Wing is not a glorification of the television series; instead the editors have skillfully chosen to examine the “politics of visual language.” They explain that Americans share a hope that our country will produce people willing to serve—often out of a spirit of noblesse oblige. The visual language used by Aaron Sorkin and the characters of *The West Wing* convey an “inspiration and hope while it entertains a loyal audience that desperately wants to believe in the nobility of the American dream.” Whether embedded in American cultural beliefs or displayed in visual language, the spirit of America found in *The West Wing* remains not a set of tired ideals but a vibrant drama of possibilities and service—offering hope for the nation’s future.

The book is divided into four parts. The first set of essays examines public and private issues including episodes detailing how the fifth estate can be manipulated; race and gender issues; myth and reality surrounding the behavior and impact of White House staffers; and separation of presidential and personal responsibilities in what Heather Heaton refers to as “the Kings, two bodies.” Succeeding essays discuss the language and dramatic structure of the series, including the wide-spread perception of *The West Wing* as morally driven and that it ignores the realities of internal politics which often includes backstabbing, and compromising accommodations. *The West Wing* concludes by offering journalistic views which assert that the television series is a metaphor for a mythical Clinton White House. *The West Wing* has been described as little more than “political pornography” aimed at liberals; on this latter point, correspondents Chris Lehmann and John Podhoretz are extremely emphatic.

The West Wing: The American Presidency as Television Drama is a colorful book about a remarkable television series. As

a companion to *Hollywood’s White House*, it enhances the study of the American presidency while quietly illuminating a lifetime collaboration of two remarkable film/history scholars. The two books should be acquired by every public and university library for they will be of interest both to the expert and to the general reader.

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David Ludvigsson.
***The Historian-Filmmaker’s
 Dilemma. Historical
 Documentaries in Sweden in
 the Era of Häger and Villius.***

**Uppsala University Press, 2003.
 411 p.**

**Swedish Insights on
 Historical Documentary**

The Swedish historian David Ludvigsson (Uppsala University) has recently published an impressive study on historical documentary under the title *The Historian-Filmmaker’s Dilemma. Historical Documentaries in Sweden in the Era of Häger and Villius*. The book does not try to be a complete account of Swedish audiovisual history but, rather, concentrates on two of its major figures after the 1960s. Olle Häger and Hans Villius both held a PhD in history when they were hired by the Swedish Broadcasting Company in 1967 to make historical documentaries for television. Häger and Villius formed a productive couple who, without doubt, would have been world famous if they had worked in an English-speaking country and emphasized more international themes. They collaborated thirty-five years and produced over two hundred programs together. Ludvigsson writes about “the era of Häger and Villius” and, indeed, the two historians really made an institution and represented history for decades. Hans Villius was the one who became known by the public. He appeared sometimes as an on-screen presenter but was more often recognized for his distinctive voice-over narration. His south-Swedish accent became the voice of history in Sweden.

David Ludvigsson’s study can be set into a larger context. During the past decades, there has been a vivid interest in what Germans have called *Geschichtskultur*, an interest in how history exists in the present day, how history is continuously produced

and reproduced through institutions, through media and artifacts. Ludvigsson clearly acknowledges the importance of studying historical storytelling outside the academia. He starts by sketching the major changes of Swedish history culture and thus creates a background for Häger's and Villius' filmmaking.



In recent decades, historians' interest in audiovisual narration has increased in a rising curve. In Scandinavia, such pioneering figures like Niels Skuym-Nielsen and Karsten Fledelius emphasised the significance of audiovisuality already in the 1960s and 1970s and also paid attention on documentaries. Since the 1990s, audiovisual history has been a popular theme for both historians and film scholars. Most publications, however, have concentrated on fiction film while historical documentaries have remained on the margins. What is interesting in Ludvigsson's work is the fact that it focuses on a genre that has often been neglected as a means of telling about the past. The European tradition of historical documentaries has been an unmapped continent.

Ludvigsson's main interest lies in the question "how is history used in historical documentaries?"—and in Häger's and Villius' programs in particular. What is important is that the analysis is not based on audiovisual material only. The use of history does not refer to the composition of historical narratives *per se* but also to those considerations filmmakers have to confront when they negotiate with both cognitive demands and poetic ideas. Häger and Villius tried to be historians and filmmakers at the same time. This is why Ludvigsson writes about "historian-filmmaker's dilemma." Häger and Villius had to reconcile contradictory demands in their effort to work according to their historian's ethic but simultaneously to express their ideas in a form that would appeal to the audience. Ludvigsson argues that filmmakers have to encounter three kinds of considerations: cognitive, moral, and aesthetic.

In order to be able to analyse these considerations—which precede the actual filmmaking—Ludvigsson has gathered an amazing amount of source material. The author has interviewed not only Häger and Villius but numerous other persons that were involved. He has also meticulously drawn on archival documents, manuscripts, production files, photographs and letters. Although the archival work is impressive, the complete absence of economic considerations seems curious. Are there no sources on the economic framework of the filmmakers? One answer is offered by the fact that Häger and Villius worked for a public service television which is characteristic for all Scandinavian countries. The economic circumstances were often unspoken boundaries that

influenced what kinds of themes were selected. These conditions are seldom visible in the source material. It must be noticed that Häger and Villius made some excellent programs on international themes and filmed, for example, in Egypt and Jordania but the fact remains that most of their audiovisual history dealt with domestic issues. Swedish history was perhaps inexpensive to re-stage although this is certainly not the main point. What counted most was the fact that the Swedish Broadcasting Company had national goals and wanted to emphasize themes of national importance.

The division into three types of considerations arouses another question. Ludvigsson has demonstrated the importance of cognitive, moral and aesthetic considerations by analyzing some of the programs. One of his key examples is *The Year of Satan* (1968) that deals with the famine year of 1867. The film combines fictitious material with documentary modes of representation. Ludvigsson interprets *The Year of Satan* mainly from the perspective of moral considerations. It is true that the filmmakers clearly expressed their aim at contributing to the debate on Sweden's policy towards the developing countries. They wanted to show that Sweden had been, not so long a time ago, one of the poorest countries in Europe and dependent on the help of the international community (which, however, did not arrive early enough to prevent the catastrophe). In the middle of the Swedish welfare state, Häger and Villius wanted to remind about the otherness of the past, about something that had been forgotten. This is undoubtedly an example of moral, and political, consideration that can be found from behind. It can be argued, however, that this moral viewpoint cannot be separated from the aesthetic. *The Year of Satan* was one of Häger's and Villius' most innovative films and took the form of a tragedy. It was composed almost according to Aristotle's *Poetics*. Ludvigsson agrees implicitly with this point: categories can be seen as overlapping dimensions that exist simultaneously, and transparently. Aesthetic decisions have moral and cognitive implications, and vice versa. In the end, Häger's and Villius' career tells a story of two historians who gradually became conscious of these inescapable connections.

In conclusion, I must express my appreciation for David Ludvigsson's effort to write his book in English. Too often history is written according to dominant views, and the developments in minor countries are marginalised. Ludvigsson's book is a thick one and runs over 400 pages. It will certainly be helpful to all interested in not only historical documentary but Scandinavian culture and history as well.

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