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The British Docudramas of the Falklands War

By Georges Fournier

Introduction

Thanks to the two docudramas, *Tumbledown* (Richard Eyre, 1998) and *The Falklands Play* (Michael Samuels, 2002), British viewers were provided with new and alternative views on the Falklands War.

While documentary, which, according to Robert Rosenstone, is “never a direct reflection of an outside reality, but a work consciously shaped into a narrative which – whether dealing with past or present – creates the meaning of the material being conveyed”^[1], docudrama puts fiction at the service of history and its controversial issues. The power of attraction and of conviction which docudrama obtains from its fictional dimension is also its weak point. The deficit of credibility, which its detractors put forward, has to do with its discursive nature which some consider incompatible with its journalistic and documentary vocations.

Underpinned by authenticated elements, the docudramas examined in this work used the names of the protagonists and actual locations. Rigour and precision were also observed in the evocation of the events and their chronology. Paradoxically, the censorship which struck the docudramas on the Falklands War largely increased their appeal.

Tumbledown and *The Falklands Play* were designed to dramatise the controversies that were raging at the time and to offer scenarios of these weeks of conflicts as the protagonists lived them, whether on the battlefield or among the War Cabinet. Britain’s sovereignty over islands 7000 miles from London had always been challenged. So why run the risk of hundreds of casualties and of a possible defeat? Such were the terms of the debate at the time in London. *Tumbledown* resulted from the combination of political journalism and committed fiction: it followed the publication of an article in *The Guardian* by Charles Wood, the scriptwriter of the film, in which he wrote about Lieutenant Robert Lawrence’s wartime experience.^[2] The story focuses on the battle of Tumbledown from which Lawrence returned with injuries to the spine following an ambush shot from an Argentine soldier, permanently altering his way of life. As for *The Falklands Play*, it was originally a commission from the BBC designed to highlight the erring ways and divisions among the War Cabinet.^[3] They were broadcast respectively on 31 May 1988 on BBC 1 and on 10 April 2002 on BBC 4, even though both were

commissioned the year the conflict ended.

The *Falklands War* offered docudrama the opportunity to show how, as the combination of both journalism and documentary, the genre was perfectly suited for the provision of alternative narratives on recent history. The following development will show how this hybrid genre proved to be a relevant tool that answered the filmmakers' need to bypass censorship and to inform the population on the unrecorded aspects of the war.

The Circulation of Information

While the transmission of information and pictures over the globe was at the time already widely spread, the images from the Falklands had difficulty reaching news agencies in London. On the information front the United Kingdom was losing the battle because of a lack of images, partly due to censorship.^[4] For fear of a Vietnam syndrome that would lead to mass demonstrations across the country, the Ministry of Defence was not displeased with the problems of communication, especially if solving them meant showing pictures of the dead and wounded. The quasi-exclusive use of archive footage for weeks on end to support the information from the war front testified to the authorities' choice not to make this conflict visible so as not to move the population and hinder adopted strategic and diplomatic options. The hostilities had hardly begun when the management of the BBC announced their concern about the pressures they felt the authorities were exercising on them: "Within days of the invasion, the Managing Director of BBC Television (and Director General designate) Alasdair Milne was warning news and current affairs producers that they might come under pressure to take the government's side similar to those exerted during Suez".^[5] The images that were finally sent to the media, photos of the 25 April 1982 recapture of South Georgia, perfectly fit into the traditional iconic war representations, showing British troops bravely soldiering on in adverse conditions. By delaying the transmission of images of a conflict considered as a major source of controversy because of the opposition of public opinion,^[6] the authorities proved right those who accused them of dissimulation.

Docudrama and Censorship

From aborted production to the indefinite postponement of broadcasting, the subtle forms of censorships the main docudramas on the Falklands conflict were subject to demonstrate their relevance. It bespeaks the authorities' fear over fictional and controversial representations which might contradict the official ones relayed by TV news and magazines.

Shortly after the termination of the hostilities, two scripts were in circulation: *The Falklands Play* and *Tumbledown*. Their authors' intentions were to make up for the lack of images during the conflict and to offer the British population less official and less sanitised versions than those supplied by the press. Both were committed to providing fiction films that would fit into a journalistic perspective which precluded the staging of images or even statements not backed by reliable testimonies. They chose to turn the testimonies and pieces of evidence then available into fiction films so as to convey the thoughts and feelings of those who were at the heart of the decision-making process or those who were in the outposts and whose wounds, pains and sufferings did not make the headlines.

Once again, the broadcasting authorities cracked down on the release of information and did all they could to hamper the broadcasting of *Tumbledown* and *The Falklands Play*. Britain was at a stage in which it was too early for Richard Eyre's film to be broadcast on TV, especially as the nation was not ready to re-confront this information through fiction. Further, some revelations may still have been detrimental to the political career of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher who was not ready to let anyone tamper with her victory. As for *The Falklands Play*, its broadcasting may have further weakened the BBC and questioned "the validity of funding the Corporation by means of a universal licence fee"^[7] at the time when there was already a wide consensus among the government and the Conservative Party on the need to challenge the BBC's public funding by outsourcing the production of some of its programmes.^[8]

The similarities between *Tumbledown* and *The Falklands Play* are numerous and both went through unforeseeable developments, either during the scriptwriting phase or during the broadcasting preparation. They bear testimony to the stormy relationships between the media and politicians during the 1980s, and in particular between the BBC and the Thatcher governments.^[9] While members and sympathizers of the Conservative Party joined their efforts to postpone the broadcasting of *Tumbledown* because of the imminent general election, the BBC repeatedly required from *The Falklands Play's* writer Ian Curteis that the scenario be revised: it was considered too laudatory in its treatment of the Prime Minister and insufficiently realistic when handling the dissensions among the Conservative Party during the conflict.

On the other hand, the script of *Tumbledown* was a promising subject for the BBC, which could finally get hold of a project on which to base a critical vision of the Falklands War: Lawrence's story reawakened the condemnations of Thatcher as instigator of a conflict which could have been solved by diplomacy. When the press got wind of the project, they

lashed out at the BBC, accusing it of hypocrisy, duplicity, “pornography”^[10] and even of being leftist and anti-Establishment. The BBC wanted to provide information but not at the cost of alienating the support it still retained amongst some politicians by airing a fiction film critical of the leader on the eve of general election. Therefore it was only six years after the inception of the project that the movie was finally broadcast on BBC 1.

Contrary to the film, the publication and the later reprinting of Lieutenant Lawrence’s book on the battle of Tumbledown did not experience any pressure or censorship, showing that images, even when fictional, represent a real threat for politicians. The broadcasting of *Tumbledown* sufficed to bury for a long time other fiction films on the topic and it took years for the script of *The Falklands Play* to be turned into a film. After Anglia and HTV, the scenario ended up at the BBC which bought the rights to the script in order to censor it for its positive and even glorified image of Thatcher. This decision provided extra ammunition to the opponents of public service broadcasting who took this opportunity to reassert its lack of impartiality, in particular towards the Establishment and the Conservative Party.

Some opinions were also the object of censorship, one in particular being the question: was a handful of far flung islands, geographically tied to South America, worth a military intervention? This viewpoint, held by those accused at the time of being apostates, is put forward in the first scene of *The Falklands Play*. The focus is on Nicholas Ridley, who in 1980 proposed a lease of ninety-nine years after which the islands would be leased back to Argentina. To Lord Carrington, he explained: “We just can’t afford to keep those islands on indefinitely”. To which the latter answered: “Well. It’s not that it’s wrong in principle. But it’s far too blunt”. The sense of ridicule which results from the use of a fish-eye lens, to introduce Nicholas Ridley’s intervention in the Commons, reveals the filmmaker’s intention to undermine the Secretary of State’s resigned posture, in contrast with the belligerent position uttered by the Prime Minister and her Parliamentary supporters.

In *The Falklands Play*, all those who do not support Thatcher’s position unconditionally are turned into fools, whether it is Ronald Reagan, who does not succeed in memorising the names of the islands; his envoy, Alexander Haig, who is constantly reminded of his fragile health following a double coronary bypass; or the British Foreign Affairs Secretary who does not succeed in getting Thatcher to listen to his proposal. Jeanne Kirkpatrick, the US Ambassador to the United Nations and an unflinching supporter of the Argentine cause, is the only opponent who manages to hold her head high: at no time does she meet Thatcher and thus cannot fall under her spell, unlike Haig who goes to London with a supposedly

neutral position, though actually favourable to Argentina, and who comes back convinced of the British sovereignty over the islands. The portrait that is drawn of Thatcher is that of someone who could not be resisted, a modern Circe.

Tumbledown, The Falklands Play: Behind the Scenes of the Falklands War

Standing in sharp contrast to the propaganda which lasted long after the conflict, *Tumbledown* and *The Falklands Play* threw an unusual light on the main battles and on the forces of power that began with the diplomatic option, which was ultimately abandoned in favour of military action. The backbone of Richard Eyre's film relied heavily on notes from Lieutenant Lawrence's record. It is about a personal narrative which contradicted the official versions. The war images are of battles at night-time with the darkness sporadically lit up by bombshells or by missiles taking off or hitting their targets. The only real fixed lights are pale neon bulbs in operating blocks and dormitories where convalescent soldiers wait.

In the press and in the TV news, the images of mutilated bodies and deaths appeared only once the conflict was over and victory was complete. Although these images have always been part and parcel of all conflicts, for many, among the then pro-war parties, the publicity they had received underpinned a pacifist rhetoric perceived as disgraceful. The testimonies of those who were wounded in the conflict were compounded by a logic of pity and lamentation which did not fit in with the cheerful spirit of the military victory.

Yet, it is the function of fiction films, and in particular of docudramas, to convey these unofficial versions. Although *Tumbledown* mimicked the post-Vietnam war Hollywood narratives and borrowed many of their tropes, it was meant to be informative rather than arouse true compassion: the Falklands War was won by professional soldiers, accustomed to living at the heart of conflicts and fully aware of what was at stake, and not by young and inexperienced conscripts, like in the Vietnam War. Nevertheless, Eyre succeeds in arousing feelings of sadness and sorrow, as when Lieutenant Lawrence is left for dead for hours on end and when his ordeal, from hospital to hospital, begins with innumerable sessions of physiotherapy to end in a wheelchair. Combining the aesthetics of cinematic fiction and the intimacy of the documentary, Eyre's docudrama allows for a subtle approach to realities which are unknown to most viewers because they are inappropriate for the journalistic narratives to which the population is accustomed when it comes to being informed about war.

It is not so much the reasons behind this conflict that are examined in *Tumbledown*, even though it is a theme that permeates the whole work, as the absence of gratitude towards the victims and their sufferings. Lieutenant Lawrence's testimony highlights the lack of humanity in the official management of the casualties: no adequate structure existed at the time to remedy the serious physical handicaps and the psychological traumas, something which is emphasised by numerous scenes in which he is lying on a bed in the middle of immense, cold and dilapidated wards.

Although long denied, this refusal to show the sufferings of the victims was part of the victorious dialectic, orchestrated by Thatcher herself, and which required the rejection of unfavourable information. The grief and sorrow of the victims and their relatives is aptly dramatized in the scene of commemoration: the official scenography leaves no room for the disabled and wounded who are seated at the back of Saint Paul's Cathedral, well outside the field of view of the cameras : "We were specifically told the wounded couldn't take part. I was told I couldn't wear my uniform at the St Paul's service. [...] They hand-picked a small group to meet them"^[11].

The Falklands Play fosters the same promise: to offer viewers the representation of scenes that took place at the heart of the conflict, not on the battlefields this time, but among the decision-making authorities. Far from being a voyeuristic assignment, *The Falklands Play* had the goal to try and get viewers to understand politics in wartime and more particularly the numerous stages which led to the decision to start an armed conflict and then to successfully steer it so as to obtain the enemy's unconditional surrender. Each and every protagonist is clearly identified, whether they are representatives of the American Administration or members from Thatcher's War Cabinet. Each is invited to state their position when it comes to solving crucial issues. The film examines the reactions on each side during different stages of the war: when the prospect of invasion is looming large, when time comes to evaluate the consequences of a declaration of war, when it appears necessary to bend the apparently neutral American position from the inside so as not to incur the hostility of the South American continent, and finally when it becomes compulsory to obtain support from the UN Security Council and from the British Parliament. The obligation of docudrama to abide by what actually happened and what was said affords few opportunities to thrust dynamism into the narrative and the interest of this work lies mainly in the dramatic intensity of each and every sketch.

Ian Curteis chose to portray Thatcher as a figure isolated in the face of adversity, in Parliament and amongst her War Cabinet. She is both tormented by the consequences of her choices and unflinching in her

determination not to give in to Argentine aggression. Her resolve grows stronger as she gets little support from the American Administration which is originally adamant on treating the belligerents even-handedly, which the Prime Minister finds particularly abusive.

The use of a genre with a documentary value and with a hybrid nature was particularly relevant for the Falklands War, a conflict originally characterised by indecision and antagonising viewpoints among politicians and the outcome of which was tainted by the grief and bitterness of those who were wounded or who lost a relative. These docudramas resurrected these issues which the then government silenced so as to cash in on a resounding victory. Time alone permitted the broadcasting, on the twentieth anniversary, of a play on Margaret Thatcher as a modern Boudicca^[12] and on the military victory against the Argentine troops as the revival of the fighting spirit of the country. Both plays remain as testimonies on the links between politics and the mass media and on the way television dealt with covering war at home.

[1] Robert A. Rosenstone, *History in Images/History in Words: Reflections on the Possibility of Really Putting History onto Film*, <http://tlweb.latrobe.edu.au/humanities/screeningthepast/reruns/rr0499/rr6a.htm>. Accessed on December 2014.

[2] George W. Brandt, *British Television Drama in the 1980s*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 160.

[3] Lawrence Fredman, *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign: War and Diplomacy*, (London: Routledge, 2005), 21.

[4] Michael Parsons, "Le Times et la guerre des Malouines - aspects du discours de la guerre", (PhD diss., Université Michel de Montaigne, Bordeaux III, 1994), 76.

[5] <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/historyofthebbc/resources/bbcandgov/pdf/falklands.pdf>>. BBC Archives. Accessed December 2014.

[6] "In the Sunday Times a public opinion poll showed that six out of ten people in Britain were not prepared to see one Service Man's life or a Falkland Islander's life put at risk." Cited in Parsons, *Le Times et la guerre des Malouines*, 103.

[7] Michael Tracey, *The Decline and Fall of Public Service Broadcasting*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 99.

^[8] *Ibidem.*

^[9] Paul Smith, *The Politics of UK Television Policy: BBC Charter Renewal and the 'Crisis' of Public Service Broadcasting (Again)*, (Leicester: De Montfort University, 2006), 26.

^[10] Brandt, *British Television Drama in the 1980s*, 143.

^[11] "Putting a Soldier Together Again", *The Guardian*, 19 May, 1988.

^[12] Celtic queen who led the Britons in a rebellion against the Roman invaders.

Notes on Contributor

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