

New Perspectives: Approaching Public History with Artistic Licence  
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I became a historian because I wanted to tell stories from the past. This may sound overly simplistic (and it is), but it is also true. My desire to tell these stories was in response to a wider goal that most historians can relate to: namely how did we get here, and what does it mean to be here? I went about this goal the way most students of history do – by completing an undergraduate degree and choosing a geographic area to focus on. Yet, upon my decision to undertake graduate work I found that many university programs demanded too narrow of a focus for my liking. This is not necessarily a critique, as I understand that the academic community demands specificity of its scholars. In essence, we must take the set of skills we have learned in our undergraduate and rigorously apply them to an independent historical inquiry. However, on top my inability to choose one historical theme/subject for intense scrutiny, I also found myself wanting to work outside of the academy. I did not know exactly where I saw myself, but I knew it had to be a little outside the box. Enter Western's Public History program: a one-year degree in which students are introduced to those areas outside of the university environment where history makes an impact on the general populous. Some of the many areas covered in the curriculum include archives, film, television, museums and historical plaques. Throughout the year, our small group of ten studied these areas of historical transmission in relation to the more 'traditional' practises of written, academic history.

We also spent a fair amount of time trying to decipher just what Public History *is*. This may have been as much for ourselves as it was for our friends and family who always wanted a clearer understanding of what we were studying. What exactly distinguishes public history from regular history? In many cases, I found it easier to give examples of public history than to define it. (The ones I touched most on tended to be Heritage Minutes, those blue Ontario historical plaques, and Jack Granatstein). Indeed, I have found that providing various illustrations of Public History is a bit of a tradition with Public Historians. Western's History website falls back on this habit too, defining the subject in its first paragraph as "Canada: A People's History, Ken Burns, Pierre Berton, the Bata Shoe Museum, genealogy, the National Archives, and your junior high

Social Studies teacher.”<sup>1</sup> Although academically imprecise, the effect is usually successful. People at least get a clearer understanding of what public history encompasses.

However, while Public History is a discipline concerned with how history is experienced by and interpreted for the public, it is still a discipline based in the academy. As such, it has developed its own discourses and practises to critically study the public’s engagement (or lack thereof) with history. Due to its fragmentary nature, public history has also undertaken to be more open to collaboration and innovation. However, the desire for a steadfast definition of *what public history is* has remained constant. To this end, the most recent conference hosted by the National Council on Public History attempted to draw up a definition of the ever-expanding field. The Board’s draft definition went as follows:

Public History is a movement, methodology, and approach that promotes the collaborative study and practise of history; its practitioners embrace a mission to make their special insights accessible and useful to the public.

In essence, public history is the study and practise of the aforementioned examples. Yet, as a testament to the difficulty of defining Public History, a small battle quickly erupted on the Council’s listserv. From all directions, participants inputted their varying perspectives of what public history is and ought to be. And this is not an isolated case. Ever since Public History became a distinct discipline its practitioners have been debating what sets it apart from other forms of history. Our inability to nail down a ‘short and sweet’ definition of the field has done two things. First, it has always given public historians something to argue about; and second, it has allowed the discipline to become a very ambitious one. Although not entirely outside the ‘ivory towers’ of academia, public historians have embraced a wider perspective of how to make history meaningful to society at large. They have done this in public archives, in museums, in film, and in private enterprises.

Although the question of definition is a profoundly important one, it is not one I will be dealing with at great length today. Instead, I would like to focus on what public history *can* be – when seen from different perspectives and taken in different contexts.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of History, “What is Public History?” The University of Western Ontario, <<http://history.uwo.ca/gradstudy/publichistory/whatisph.html>>

The base of my discussion will come from my own experiences and the work I did this previous summer during my internship with artist/curator Andrew Hunter. The title of my presentation is “New Perspectives: Approaching Public History with Artistic Licence.” In the footsteps of such public historians as Shelly Bookspan, Rebecca Conrad and Robert Rosenstone, my viewpoint is largely a personal one. My hope is that by sharing my experiences in this ever-expanding field, that I will make clear (or clearer) the range of opportunities available to the historian who wants to push the boundaries of their discipline.

In her article, “Public History as Reflective Practice,” Rebecca Conrad notes that with each year of incoming graduate students she sees “[them] come with a passion for history, or at least historical knowledge, and a desire to do something besides teach, but they have only the foggiest idea of what the designation ‘public history’ really means. More important, they come looking for a sense of direction and of professional identity.”<sup>2</sup> Such was certainly the case when I entered the graduate program at Western last September. Certainly I had a passion for history, although not an exclusive one. Parallel to my interest in history was my enthusiasm for the arts, particularly modern and contemporary Canadian art. I used to joke that I was an art historian trapped in a public historian’s body, although this may not have been far off the mark. However, I had a tendency to see my interest in art entirely through the eyes of a historian. I had spent a lot of time studying Canada’s war art, and following the work of the Canadian War Museum’s art curator Laura Brandon. I wrote a variety of papers reflecting on what this art meant to Canadian cultural history, particularly in relation to other quintessentially Canadian art such as the Group of Seven. This was the area that I anticipated I would professionally move into – viewing art through the lens of academic history, and (presumably) writing about it.

Our yearlong course on Public History: Theory and Practise set the stage for many great discussions and debates. Yet, none changed my perspective on the subject as much as Robert Rosenstone’s book *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to our Idea of History*. In it, Rosenstone chronicles the possibilities of historical film to render

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<sup>2</sup> Rebecca Conrad, “Public History as Reflective Practice: An Introduction,” *The Public Historian* Vol. 28 No. 1 (Winter 2006) 10/11.

the past in a way that will satisfy both historians and filmmakers. Moreover, Rosenstone asks the reader to reconceptualize how we judge visual history – in this case, film. He contends that while visual media may not offer the same adherence to “the facts” offered by more traditional written history, to judge such historical work by our academic standards is to miss the point. Instead, he asks what criteria are applicable for judging visual history. How can film contribute to our sense of the past? How can film offer a new relationship to the past?<sup>3</sup>

More than just analysing historical film, Rosenstone raises the notion that scholars may not be the only legitimate purveyors of history. At the heart of his argument, Rosenstone snaps his fingers in the historian’s face and ask them to “consider the possibility that filmmakers may have as much a right to think about the past as do historians.”<sup>4</sup> Reading that sentence, I circled the term ‘filmmakers’ and added in the margins: artists, poets, dancers, musicians, and anyone else. If the medium of film can tell the stories of our past in a way outside of the written word, what other vehicles may be utilized to transmit history to the wider public? Certainly films have an audience that may never set foot inside a museum or crack open a history book. Therefore, historical films have the potential to bring history to a wider, if not different public.

The question of audience is a key to the discipline of Public History. Indeed, any field that puts ‘the public’ in its title is obliged to always consider how the public will perceive that work. And this challenge is not lost on public historians. Along with the ever-present attempt to define public history is the challenge of defining *what* public and *whose* public we are aiming for. In many ways, the term is too broad to even work with. We are taught in high school marketing courses that our greatest successes will come from those individuals who are already loyal supporters. Like in politics, any energy spent on those who are not paying attention will be wasted. Instead, we should concentrate on those who are already our allies, or those on the fence. According to this model, public historians should spend more time on ‘the public’ already interested in history; I.e.: Those people who visit museums, read plaques and watch documentaries – in other words, ourselves. Yet, if we accept that *most* people receive their historical

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<sup>3</sup> Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to our Idea of History* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995) 6/7; 12.

<sup>4</sup> Rosenstone, 7.

knowledge from popular visual media – and this must surely be the case – why are we historians not aiming for this wider public? Is it too big to conceive as a whole, or are we simply making ourselves unavailable to the average person?

Which brings me to the discourse of academic history. I return to Rosenstone for guidance once more, when he asks us to remember that:

All history, including written history, is a construction, not a reflection. That history (as we practise it) is an ideological and cultural product of the Western world at a particular time in its development. That history is a series of conventions for thinking about the past. That the claims of history to universality are no more than the grandiose claims of any knowledge system. That language itself is only a convention for doing history – one that privileges certain elements: fact, analysis, and linearity.<sup>5</sup>

While seemingly simple, these are things that many historians, including public ones, tend to lose sight of. While the past is our focus, History (with a capital H) is our discourse, and it has some major shortcomings. To channel Marshall MacLuhan, the linearity of the written word itself creates a very narrow picture of the past. It is unable to fully translate the intricacies of the real world, full of sound, emotion and conflict. In terms of audience, we must face the fact that written history is reaching a very limited audience. Even historical ‘blockbuster’ books such as *Paris 1919* by Margaret MacMillan cater to a select public that *wants* to read history books. Coupled together, we must ask ourselves how relevant ‘traditional’ written history is to the general public. Which is why Rosenstone is adamant about the possibilities of historical filmmaking. While historical films cannot engage in reflection and debate the way written works can, this is a drawback that can be offset by the many opportunities visual media provides. Mainly, the opportunity to make more people think about that where we have come from and where we are going.

As a Public History student trying to ‘find my feet’ in the discipline, what I took from Rosenstone’s study was the notion that artistic forms other than the written word could still aptly portray history. In the process, these alternative methods could also reach a different audience. I became profoundly interested in how Rosenstone’s arguments

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<sup>5</sup> Rosenstone, 11.

might also apply to the visual history created by artists, particularly contemporary ones. With a little research I discovered that many artists and curators have already begun to use history as a major theoretical theme in their work. A good example is Jeffrey Thomas, whose photographic work finds evidence of Iroquoian history in the urban environment. Thomas is like an urban archaeologist whose photographs reinterpret cultural sites such as the monument, billboard and historical plaque. In the process, he calls into question cultural stereotypes and traditional history.

As the second term began to wind down and we all began to look for internships, I found myself wanting to explore the connections between art and history more fully. After getting in touch with a former professor at Trent University I was put in touch with Andrew Hunter. As an artist and curator, Hunter's work "emphasizes a highly personal engagement with history and ideas of place."<sup>6</sup> He has curated exhibitions throughout Canada and dealt with some of Canada's most precious historical icons, including Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven. Hunter is a storyteller in the widest sense. His projects have used a variety of historical perspectives – factual, personal, and fictional – to create narratives that reflect the complex nature of the past. There is less emphasis on linearity and more playful engagement with history. The result is that Hunter's works are broadly accessible to a wider, if not different public.

As Hunter recently became the director of the University of Waterloo Art Gallery – now the Render Gallery – my project would be based on the guiding principles of experimentation, which also guide Render. In consultation with Hunter I undertook a project that would be based on the history of downtown Galt/Cambridge. My first order of business was to find a historical 'diamond in the rough' that would keep me interested for the duration of the summer and could sustain a creative history project. I found this 'diamond' in James Young's 1880 book *Reminiscences of the Early History of Galt and the Settlement of Dumfries Township*. In *Reminiscences*, Young mentions a cholera outbreak that hit the town in 1834 – only two years after the disease had first hit Quebec. At the time Galt was experiencing a tremendous growth in size, population, industry and farming. As Young notes, it was a "golden" era for the relatively new town. This growth

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<sup>6</sup> The Harbourfront Centre, "Fresh Ground, New Works: Andrew Hunter"  
<<http://www.harbourfrontcentre.com/noflash/freshground/2006/terrarium/hunter.php>>

also attracted travelling entertainment troupes that moved around the St. Lawrence Valley and New England. Such travelling entertainment would also be the cause of Galt's deadly cholera epidemic. Although written nearly fifty years after the fact, Young points the finger for the outbreak squarely at a travelling menagerie that came through in the spring of 1834.

While many areas of Upper Canada felt the devastation of cholera, Galt's was the only one I could find that traced its roots to a travelling entertainment troupe. I quickly went about trying to find any archival evidence of the story. I also contacted a renowned American Circus historian named Stuart Thayer who has tracked many of the menageries and circuses that travelled the area in the nineteenth century. In next to no time, Thayer provided evidence of the likely culprit – a troupe called the Burgess Menagerie, which toured Ontario in 1834 under the ownership of James Raymond. (Its prize possession and main attraction, he told me, was an enormous elephant named Hannibal).

My research on Galt's cholera epidemic followed the conventional methods of an academically trained historian. In public archives, books and journals I sought to understand these two very separate subjects – cholera and early circus history. While I could easily have turned this research into an academic article worthy of publication, my desire to reach a different audience provoked a brainstorming session with Hunter. Together, we decided to utilize one of the oldest forms of public history – the broadside ballad. Broadside ballads form part of the folk tradition of passing down stories through song and poem. Originally broadsides did not include any musical notations, but only a note that they were to be sung to a well-known tune. The sheets were usually adorned with woodcut images and sold in stalls by travelling peddlers. People would then paste the ballads on walls, in public areas, or in logbooks to learn them. While printing ballads was a practical career for many working class printers, they were also an art that balanced word and image.

By far, the most challenging aspect of my internship was actually writing a traditional broadside ballad. Hunter suggested that I look over a number of ballads and base my writing on one. Incidentally, this is how most ballad writers actually operated – by taking an already popular rhyme and changing the focus. Even still, I found the rhythm, meter and rhyming aspects to be very challenging. Even more difficult was

trying to include specific names and dates that would make the piece historically accurate and educational. While most ballad writers would have had the liberty to write whatever worked best for the tale, I was confined by the facts of the true event. Nonetheless, after five or so straight days of writing I had produced approximately thirty stanzas, which I then cut down to eleven of the best. The *Cholera Menagerie* ballads were then adorned with traditional imagery from the nineteenth century and printed on 11x17 paper.

Having taken a historical event and interpreted it creatively the next challenge was to find a suitable setting for distribution. Suitably, the Mill Race Festival of Traditional Folk Music was set to hit town during the first weekend of August, providing an ideal venue. While I was unsure of how people would react to my project, the response was overwhelming positive. Over the course of three days I posted the ballads around the downtown core, left them at information booths, and distributed them by hand to concertgoers. Along with the ballads, which I rolled up and tied with ribbon, I also made small buttons to affix to the bow. The result was an ideal little public history package. People could easily grab a ballad to throw in their bag and read it when they got home. Furthermore, as people began wearing the buttons and carrying around the scrolls, I found more people wanted to know just *what* the scroll was. To this end, I had people track me down throughout the weekend just to get their hands on a ballad.

More rewarding than any aspect of my project was the opportunity to reach the public in a new way. In addition to the didactic value of the ballad was the chance to discuss my project in person. Although I had feared that people would not understand or appreciate my 'take' on the town's history, the opposite proved to be true. Many Galt residents gave me accolades for the piece and thanked me for producing it. On more than one occasion I became so entranced with talking to people that forty-five minutes would quickly roll by. I met people from all over the world who shared with me their own experiences with history. This gave me the chance to ask some of those questions that had been pressing my mind since second term. Namely, where does the average person receive the bulk of their historical knowledge? The variety of answers I heard reinforced my faith in the *Cholera Menagerie* project. By thinking outside of the standard vehicles for historical transmission I was able to touch the public in a unique and rewarding way.

During my first week of classes at Western, a professor asked me when I would cease to be a history student and begin to be a historian. I could not provide an adequate answer then and I doubt I could now. I went into my program expecting that I would come out the other end with a better sense of my professional identity. But the truth is that I found more questions than I found answers, and that is alright with me. Public history is an ambitious field that offers a world of opportunity for those historians who are willing to look beyond the conventional. There is no *one* public and therefore there can be no *one* public history. In the last fifty years, history has made enormous strides to include more voices in our historical consciousness. There has also been a greater emphasis on oral history, particularly to tell the personalized stories of the past. Perhaps the next step is to accept both the popular and unconventional methods of historical expression. In doing so, we will not only reach a wider audience but also keep our discipline a meaningful one.