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## Historical Documentary and the Use of History<sup>1</sup>

David Ludvigsson, *The Historian-Filmmaker's Dilemma. Historical Documentaries in Sweden in the Era of Häger and Villius*, Uppsala University Press, Uppsala 2003. 411 s.

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 attempt a complete account of Swedish audiovisual history but, rather, concentrates on two of its major figures since the 1960s. Olle Häger and Hans Villius both held PhDs 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 team and would doubtless have been world famous had they worked in an English-speaking country on international themes. They collaborated for 35 years, producing over 200 programs together. Ludvigsson writes about “the era of Häger and Villius” and, indeed, the two historians really did become an institution. Villius became best known to the public. Although he sometimes appeared as an on-screen presenter, it was his distinctive voice-over narration that made the greatest impact on viewers and made him the voice of history in Sweden.

David Ludvigsson's study can be placed in 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 in the culture of Swedish history, thereby creating a background for Häger's and Villius' filmmaking.

In recent decades, historians' interest in audiovisual narration has increased. 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 to 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 in 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 stories of the past. Especially the European tradition of historical documentaries has been unmapped territory.

Ludvigsson's main interest lies in the question how history is used in historical documentaries – and in Häger's and Villius' programs in particular. 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 the “historian-filmmaker's dilemma”. Häger and Villius had to reconcile contradictory demands in their effort to work according to their professional standards as historians while simultaneously expressing their ideas in a form that would appeal to the audience. Ludvigsson argues that filmmakers face 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 who were involved in producing the documentaries. He has also drawn meticulously on archival documents, manuscripts, production files, photographs and letters. Although the archival work is impressive, the complete absence of any analysis 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 typical of all Scandinavian countries. The economic circumstances often provided implicit limits that influenced the kind of themes that were selected. Such circumstances are seldom visible in the sources. While Häger and Villius made some excellent programs on international themes, the fact remains that most of their audiovisual history dealt with domestic issues. Swedish history was perhaps inexpensive to restage. What counted most was the fact that the Swedish Broadcasting Company had national aims and wished to emphasise themes of national importance.

The division into three types of considerations give rise to another question. Ludvigsson has demonstrated the importance of cognitive, moral and aesthetic considerations in his analysis of the films. 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 that their aim was to contribute to the contemporary debate on Swedish aid to developing countries. They wished to

1. This review is also published in *Film & History*, see Hannu Salmi, “The Historian-Filmmaker's Dilemma. Historical Documentaries in Sweden in the Era of Häger and Villius”, *Film & History. An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies* 2004:1, pp. 95f.

show that not so long ago Sweden had been one of the poorest countries in Europe, dependant on the help of the international community. Häger and Villius wished to point to the otherness of the past, to something that had been forgotten. This is undoubtedly an example of a moral, and political consideration. 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, which took the form of tragedy and was composed almost in accordance with Aristotle's *Poetics*. Ludvigsson agrees implicitly with this point: his 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.

To conclude, I would like to 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 will certainly be helpful to everyone interested not only in historical documentary but in Scandinavian culture and history as well.

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