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Boundaries of (dis)belief: Past and present in period television drama and its cultural reception

Abstract

In recent years, the 'historical' or 'period' television drama has enjoyed particular success. Though always popular in Britain, these programmes now attract global audiences through streaming services. International creations have followed in the footsteps of British network television commissions, and streaming platforms have likewise capitalised on this trend by offering their own productions. The market for period drama seems as expansive as the genre itself. Historical television (both fiction and non-fiction) offers a representation of the past, as understood in the present. In so doing, it engages with boundaries of audience (dis)belief. The version of history realised on screen may conform to or challenge public interpretations. Straying from accepted perceptions is not always badly received; indeed, some programmes are labelled innovative for doing so. This seems largely motivated by genre — expectations of historical satire, for example, do not match those of period drama. This leads us to ask: what are the boundaries of the period television drama, who sets these, and why? While history on film has enjoyed a longer tradition of scholarly attention (such as Rosenstone 2006, and White 1988), history on television has not always been so popular. In recent years, however – in line with the legitimisation of television studies more generally – researchers have taken an interest in how and why the past is televised [Landsberg 2015; Hills et al. 2019]. To explore cultural understandings of the relationship between the period drama and history, I suggest three case studies: *Downton Abbey* (2010-2015), *The Crown* (2015-), and *Bridgerton* (2020-). The popularity of *Downton Abbey* has undoubtedly been instrumental in the last decade's swathe of period dramas: the blueprint for *The Crown* and *Bridgerton*'s success. All three have been markedly popular, are rooted in British history, and have seemingly stretched the limits of historical interpretation. These series, therefore, provide an excellent platform for discussing cultural perceptions of the past, the boundaries of (dis)belief, and the wider issues of televising history.

Keywords: history, television, audience, interpretations

To talk of history is to talk of the past. But it is also, for scholars of film, or television, or both, to talk of the present.[1]

So attest Mee & Walker in the introduction to their edited volume exploring history on screen [2014, p. 3]. This quotation gets to the core of filmic representations of the past: though presenting history, they inevitably involve the modern day. The obvious response is that history films or television (excluding actual historical material, of course) are present-day creations. However, the present affects historical productions in more ways than we might anticipate. In offering viewers a tangible experience of the past, history films and television flout strict divisions of then versus now. Some regard this with suspicion, like the 'historian-cop' poised to correct the inaccuracies of such productions [Sklar, cited in Edgerton 2005, p. 370]. Generally, however, most are receptive to following White's advice that researchers should mine history film and television not for authenticity, but to explore how and why the past is interpreted in wider culture [1988, p. 1199]. This is similar to growing acceptance among academics that all forms of history are, at their foundation, 'speculative' [Edgerton 2005, p. 375]. By virtue of existing in our present, we are excluded from fully understanding the past. Therefore, while forms of history may differ radically in intention or execution, they remain 'overlapping parts of the same whole' [Edgerton 2005, p. 370]. As Mee & Walker show above, film and television historians are reconciled to – if not actively interested in – the blurring of past and present. Aware of the diverse range of material that exists, many have dedicated attention to examining how different genres and sub-genres interpret and use the past. For example, Rosenstone has designated three main branches of historical production, each with its own standards: the period, 'mainstream' drama; the 'opposition or innovative history'; and the 'compilation documentary' [2006, p. 12]. While Rosenstone's categories are based on the history film, the focus here is on three period drama television programmes: *Downton Abbey* (2010-2015), *The Crown* (2016-), and *Bridgerton* (2020-). Used as case studies, these series will help to explore the boundaries of past and present as understood by period drama's producers and viewers.

Though public audiences are increasingly interested in all manner of visual and written historical material [Edgerton 2005, p. 362], the period drama – a hallmark of British television since the 1960s [Redvall 2019, p. 132] – has recently enjoyed the spotlight. Looking at the BBC in the past decade offers various examples, among which *Poldark* (2015-2019) and *Peaky Blinders* (2013) have proved particularly popular. In addition, other British channels have contributed to the canon. *Downton Abbey* stands out as ITV's most successful production – audience figures for its final episode peaked at 9.5 million (Sweeney 2015) – and the more recent *Victoria* (2016-) has also been well-received. These programmes, accessible through various streaming services, now boast global audiences. Companies beyond the United Kingdom have also capitalised on this trend. For example, American company STARZ has released – among others – *Black Sails* (2014-2019), *Outlander* (2014-), and *The Great* (2020-). The Anglo-American market for period drama seems as expansive as the genre itself. As more tune in, audiences develop a greater connection with the past.

At the core of most cultural reception is the belief that all historical productions (even blatantly fictional ones) wish to educate, an expectation which can foster both positivity and negativity. Broadly speaking, perceived authenticity inspires praise, while absence thereof invites critique. The 'historian-cop' may have retired, but general audiences have assumed the post; policing accuracy, therefore, remains prevalent. Though there is no comprehensive and accessible historical truth, that does not preclude viewers from looking for it. This article

will begin by reviewing key theories from secondary literature that inform its analysis, as well as outlining the methodology of its own research. It will then move to explore *Downton Abbey* (hereafter *Downton*), *The Crown,* and *Bridgerton* in turn, examining the role history plays in the production and reception of each.

Setting the Sound Stage for a Period Piece: Theories and Methodology
While publications that specifically address cultural perceptions of the past-present relationship in period drama may be scarce, literature on its component parts (televising history, costume drama, audience studies and so on) is abundant. Material therefore exists for this text to draw on in order to address key issues. How is period drama defined? How does the televising present interact with the historic past? With what expectations in mind might people approach period drama? Considering these themes sketches an understanding of the boundaries of time, belief, and truth against which the historical drama tends to be measured; certainly, they are recurring in reviews of *Downton, The Crown,* and *Bridgerton.* Defining 'period television' seems easy – perhaps deceptively so. 'Period', 'historical', and 'costume' drama are roughly interchangeable; upon hearing any one term, most could easily conjure up the same idea of something set, however loosely, in the past. Returning briefly to the STARZ examples mentioned in the introduction illustrates the breadth of period television. *Black Sails* acts as a prequel to Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island,* set in and around New Providence Island in the early eighteenth century. *Outlander*'s story (while made possible through time-travel) is grounded in strong historical settings: in the first five seasons alone, this includes 1740s Scotland; pre-French Revolution Paris; post-Culloden Britain; pre-Revolutionary War America; and post-WWII Britain and America. *The Great* perhaps strays farthest from traditional expectations of a period piece in its comedic exploration of the life of Catherine the Great. As its own tagline proclaims, it is only an 'occasionally true story'. Period television is varied, but what of period drama specifically? Brundson offers four key tendencies: the period drama legitimises television through adapting something with 'cultural respectability' (such as classic literature); employs actors who are well-established in the more respectable theatre world; benefits from significant financial backing; and concerns itself with the projection of social and national identities [cited in Chapman 2014, p. 136]. According to Chapman, a further trademark of period drama is its cultural reception as 'middle-brow' despite its significant overlap with soap opera, a genre not typically well-respected [2014, p. 132]. *Downton, The Crown,* and *Bridgerton* all fit this categorisation in one way or another; for instance, each is to some degree concerned with elite subjects and ideas of 'Englishness'.

The potential dynamics between historical drama and the past are varied. Some use history as inspiration: a story's background, not its agent. Such programmes employ what Dhoest labels 'surface realism', constructing a superficial historicity recognisable for public audiences [cited in Landsberg 2015, p. 67]. Similarly, Ellis highlights period dramas are not evidence-based histories but stories operating on 'plausibility', something dependent on society's 'prevailing beliefs' at the time [2014, p. 16]. While some programmes aim for this somewhat passive or neutral believability, others are what Landsberg terms 'historically conscious' productions which 'reconstruct' everyday, lived experiences of the past for modern viewers [2015, p. 67]. This approach parallels wider trends in television, a medium increasingly interested in personal rather than social arcs [Dahlgren 2005, p. 416]. This experiential quality is well documented in the secondary literature, as is the idea that historical productions often serve as educational [Edgerton 2005, p. 363; Warner 2009, p. 724]. However, some question how critically period drama presents its information. For example, Warner argues that the historical drama often takes the theory of history (how and why we perceive the past in given ways) 'for granted' [2009, p. 724]. In fact, non-historical shows

– science fiction programmes like *Dr Who,* for instance – are more likely to offer commentary (Warner 2009, pp. 726-727). Other cases since Warner's publication reinforce her argument. For example, *Outlander* constantly reflects on whether its protagonists can or should influence history with the knowledge afforded to them by time travel. Just as historical drama is diverse, so too is its engagement with the past. Naturally, no label or description will fit all productions. Nevertheless, they are useful in mapping the past-present relationship in history on screen. To develop this further, reflection on the audience's role and position is essential.

Many assume that by using the past, period productions wish to teach history. This is surely what fuels interest in pinpointing anachronisms, even in clearly fictional drama. Inaccuracies are not always poorly received, however. This seems largely motivated by genre: if a programme is marketed as comedy, fewer accusations of inauthenticity generally emerge; or, better put, anachronisms are more likely to be accepted. Another common trade-off is language. In order to be understandable to the modern viewer, the language must of course be comparable, translatable, or familiar, even if this means stepping out of a given historical setting. To raise this point is not to suggest we all learn Old English to better immerse ourselves in the Anglo-Saxon set *The Last Kingdom* (2015-), nor Franco-Italian to truly understand the adventures of *Marco Polo* (2014-2016). Rather, it is to underscore that all historical representations make certain compromises from the very first, and these are implicitly accepted by most viewers. Yet, policing the 'truth' of history on screen remains rife; and if the audience-cop perceives challenges to cultural norms, this can be disruptive. Warner suggests that this is because revisionism is less frequent in the public sphere:

> Within the history profession the revision of history is constant and, to an extent, uncontroversial. [...] However, in the wider society this process is significantly more traumatic – the revision of history can threaten the interpretations that people rely on for their identities. (2009, p. 730)

Although new interpretations may not always be welcomed or accepted among academics, the idea of (sometimes significant) revisionism is not taboo. Indeed, this is often the point of research: to improve on past knowledge, to address a gap, to refute a popular claim. In contrast, questioning cultural interpretations of history can be more 'traumatic', as it threatens to disrupt how people view the world. If wider societal understandings of history are challenged, so too are the lessons that we have learned from them (Warner 2009, p. 732). How period dramas are seen to use history is far from unimportant, then, but even dangerous.

As Esser underscores the usefulness of combining creator and audience interviews to assess the cultural reception of programmes (2013, p. x), this article has deliberately cast a wide net for sources to include both the 'official' and unofficial, from creator to critic to audience. It refers to quality publications in the United Kingdom and the United States, makes use of fan reviews on websites like *IMDb, Rotten Tomatoes,* and *Metacritic*, and even cites YouTube videos. One important omission is material from social media. This is for the simple reason that the volume of data generated by these platforms warrants its own study. Moreover, the material on review websites is arguably more deliberately 'published': offering and encouraging commentary is these sites' core premise. Furthermore, such sites try to regulate users and data to ensure fair scores and verifiable information (*IMDb* n.d.; *Rotten Tomatoes* n.d.; *Metacritic* n.d.). In combination with the other highlighted sources, they allow for a fuller examination of *Downton, The Crown,* and *Bridgerton* as case studies on the boundaries of period drama, who imposes these, and why.

Pressing 'Play' on Historical Drama: Ideas of Past and Present from Creator to Critic

Downton Abbey (2010-2015) follows the aristocratic Crawley family and their servants from 1912 to 1926, exploring both their personal journeys and the wider socio-cultural context. During its initial broadcast, it was extremely successful both domestically and abroad. It attracted a strong American audience after it was broadcast on PBS' *Masterpiece* channel and has since continued to gain popularity around the globe through streaming services like Netflix and Amazon Prime. Its *IMDb* (n.d.) user score sits at 8.7 out of 10; on Metacritic (n.d.), critic opinion is 'generally favorable' with a score of 80 out of 100, while user scores show universal acclaim at 8.2 out of 10; and *Rotten Tomatoes* (n.d.) shows critic and audience ratings of 86% and 93%, respectively. In many ways, *Downton* is the odd one out of the three programmes featured here. While it has been exported to other countries through streaming, it was not created for this market. Furthermore, while all three programmes undoubtedly foreground elite subjects as principal characters, *Downton* dedicates a significant portion of its runtime to the stories of the working class. *Downton* can certainly be credited with reviving interest in the period drama, especially a 'new' kind. While it receives the least amount of criticism for how it portrays the past – that is, critiques of 'inauthenticity' are less vehement than for *The Crown* or *Bridgerton* – the common criticism of its 'soapiness' nevertheless addresses the past-present boundary, as it disapproves of the influence of a modern genre.

      Downton consciously combines British period drama standards with the pacing and 'style' of American programmes in order to confer 'a contemporary feel' on the past [Redvall 2019, pp. 131-132]. *Downton*'s writer and creator Julian Fellowes opted for this approach as he believed the standard British model to be too slow [Redvall 2019, p. 138]. In this way, *Downton* sets itself apart from traditional period dramas. Chapman argues it distinguishes itself further from other examples by not prioritising aesthetics over plot or characterisation [pp. 137-138]. Likewise, it is not a literary adaptation but an 'authored' drama [Chapman 2014, p. 136]; Fellowes, single-handedly responsible for the programme's scripts, could not be more central (Kamp 2012). Moreover, taking inspiration from soap operas means *Downton* is in many ways more 'progressive' than most of the canon, as evidenced by its range of characters and social themes [Chapman 2014, p. 138]. These deviations from the period drama norm have been both praised and criticised. The Critics' Consensuses, short summaries of critical reception on *Rotten Tomatoes* (n.d.), almost give the impression of enjoying the programme against some better judgment. Half the seasons are described as 'soapy', though the script, cast, and costume keep *Downton* worth watching. 'Melodramatic' also appears in the descriptions for series three and six, implying *Downton* as occasionally too extreme in its dramatics. Of the first 25 ten-star user reviews on *IMDb* (n.d.), five positively mention the show's use of history. Two refer to *Downton* as either educational or accurate, and the remainder commend it for exploring history through fiction (and vice versa). One reviewer comments:

> I believe it is to his credit that Fellowes doesn't belabor or preach to us on the issues of the day, rather he looks at how people live [...] in the shadow of historical events because they do not control them, but instead are caught up with events in how they impact their lives. (*IMDb*, n.d.)

To this reviewer, then, *Downton*'s focus on the fictional rather than the historical narrative is a real strength. It does not ignore history; but nor does it prioritise it at the expense of the characters' stories.

      Having been off-air for six years, *Downton* benefits from a scholarly interest that *The Crown* and *Bridgerton* cannot yet boast. One particularly interesting article sees *Downton*

as a case study for the 'compatibility' and overlap between scholarship and fan culture (Upchurch, p. 28). Beyond this, it campaigns for scholars to capitalise on the popularity of such programmes to reach wider audiences (Upchurch, p. 28). This goes beyond the idea of the historian as a corrector of period drama and points to what they can learn from audiences as well as teach. Ji & Raney's research (2014) concentrates on perceptions of morality in *Downton*, but some of its analysis and conclusions could be broadened out. For example, they discuss moral foundation theory, which states that instinct (not developed judgement) is what underlines views of morality [p. 228]. One wonders to what extent reactions to history on screen might also be instinctive. Ellis' argument on the difference between history and story seems to support this theory, as it states the public will immediately judge historical interpretations by plausibility, using basic knowledge from broader cultural understandings. Furthermore, Ji & Raney conclude that viewers are more likely to comment when they see morals being violated rather than upheld [2014, p. 231]. Again, this could be applied to the limitations of history: are audiences more vocal when they see their version of the past challenged than confirmed; if so, why? After the release of the first series and subsequent criticisms of the programme's inaccuracies, *Downton's* creator Julian Fellowes initially reacted with anger: 'They think to show how smart they [the programme's critics] are by picking holes in the programme and to show that their knowledge is greater than your knowledge' (cited in Press Association, *The Guardian* 2011). He later partially reneged on this comment by proving that some perceived inaccuracies, such as using 'boyfriend', were supported by historical evidence; while admitting that other critiques, like drawing attention to an aerial appearing in a shot, were justified (cited in Press Association, *The Guardian* 2011). While this example proves that audiences will speak up when they see history being challenged or wronged, it does not illustrate that they are more likely to do this than comment positively. Qualifying that would take a much larger study. However, it is certainly evidence of the push-and-pull between producers and viewers of period drama over whose version of history is correct and desirable.

The first four seasons of *The Crown* cover the reign of Queen Elizabeth II from 1952 to 1990. While reviews and ratings have fluctuated slightly between the four instalments, the overall scores indicate approval and success. On *Rotten Tomatoes* (n.d.), for example, both the critic and audience score sit at 90%; its *IMDb* user score gives an average of 8.6 out of 10; and *Metacritic*'s critic and user scores both indicate 'universal acclaim' (at 84/100 and 8.7/10, respectively). In terms of its historical narrative, *The Crown* is the most recent of the three programmes discussed here, meaning it is uniquely placed for scrutiny by those who lived through the periods it depicts. Unlike *Downton* and *Bridgerton*, it tells the personal stories of real, still-living individuals. Thus, *The Crown* challenges the boundaries of past and present in a different way, something recognised by series creator Peter Morgan. Speaking in 2020, he expressed caution about where to bring the show up to in 'real time', saying: 'You need at least a decade, in my view, to separate yourself from the events that you're writing about' [quoted in Bentley 2020]. Presumably, he is referring to achieving some sense of objectivity as a writer, but the lack of detail here does allow room for interpretation. What is clear is that he perceives a particular dynamic between his programme and history which requires managing. At its most basic, *The Crown* follows the personal journey of one character and her family; since that character is a reigning head of state, however, it is a unique story. The mix of unlocking access to both a historical setting and character is what Dahlgren has labelled 'arational', a mode of engagement that involves both 'head' and 'heart' [2005, p. 418-419]. There is no doubt that that *The Crown* seems to offer some degree of authenticity in its official description, which credits 'masterfully researched scripts' as lifting the curtain to 'reveal the private journey behind the public façade' (n.d. *IMDb*). However, Stanford Abbiss argues *The Crown* continually shores up its ambiguity

and encourages its audience to make up their own minds [(2019, p. 13)]. Others, in contrast, do not believe *The Crown* does – or should – afford its viewers that liberty.

Although accusations of inauthenticity have emerged in relation to previous seasons, series four of *The Crown* – which dealt with the relationship of Prince Charles and Princess Diana, and the Thatcher government – has received particular attention at fan, critic, and even governmental level. In November 2020, the British Culture Secretary Oliver Dowden urged Netflix to advise viewers that the programme is, in fact, fictional (BBC News). This call has met with mixed reactions. One cast member agreed that creators should highlight *The Crown* is 'not a dramadoc' [(quoted in Harrison 2020)]. Though Rosenstone has disproved the notion that the documentary is inherently more truthful for academic audiences [(2006, p. 17-18)], the idea evidently remains fixed in wider culture. One reviewer on *IMDb* reinforces this, stating there is 'only one way to do justice to history and that is as a documentary' (n.d.). However, other cast members and critics have spoken out against Dowden [(Harrison 2020; Lewis 2021a)]. Writing for *The Guardian,* Higgins (2020) defended *The Crown* as 'a tight weft of fiction woven round a very sparse warp of fact'. This metaphor works well: the series is underpinned by real events but primarily deals with the imagined, unprovable realities of its characters. Higgins cites the Princess Diana-Prince Charles storyline as especially controversial because it presents both provocative characterisations and events which still feel contemporary to many. Her conclusion seems justified: cultural interest in Princess Diana has not dissipated in the twenty-three years since her death and this undoubtedly fuelled sympathy towards her character. 'Character' and 'storyline' may feel like uncomfortable terms to use, but characters and storylines they are: however inspired by our reality, they are still imagined, constructed, diegetic. Whether this needs to be explained to the viewer is quite another matter.

While Higgins outlines what some were angered by, she does not explore why. For this, it is best to turn to the critics themselves, such as Sir Simon Jenkins (2020). In his opinion, the latest series too liberally mixed fact and fiction. His evidence is a list of inaccuracies composed by historian Hugo Vickers which constitute 'eight complete fabrications [...] all caricaturing the royal family in the worst possible light.' To Jenkins, these are particularly upsetting because they are avoidable. Tellingly, he states that contemporary history must not be allowed to set itself on the wrong path – misinterpretations should be pre-empted and resolved while suitable people are here to do so. Yet the implicit concern of Jenkins and Dowden is not the pursuit of historical truth, but that *The Crown* might encourage people to feel negatively about the real British royal family. Warner argues: 'If the history of a person, a nation or a society is disturbed, then the person, nation, or society will also be disturbed' [(2009, p. 731)]. *The* Crown's protagonists represent all three. If one believes that the monarchy merits a particular place and reputation in modern British society, *The Crown* 'misrepresenting' these individuals is disrespectful, even dangerous. Therefore, in agreement with Dowden, Jenkins sees a need for establishing a clearer line between fact and fiction. This is misguided on two levels. As previously discussed, *The Crown* is mostly concerned with the personal and private, the exact details of which are unknown and thus have to be invented. Its fictional aspect is clear. Secondly, this grossly underestimates audience intelligence. To assume 'seeing is believing' undermines the critical awareness and thinking of the public, who are capable of recognising fiction and evaluating media. The contrasting opinions of Dowden, Jenkins, and Higgins are in fact proof of viewer freedom and ability to interpret *The Crown*. As Monk reminds us, there is no such thing as a 'homogenous audience' [(cited in Bondebjerg 2016, p. 14)], nor a universal audience intention or reaction. Further evidence of this is that critique of *The Crown* is not limited to those worried about viewer miseducation; for example, there are some who are concerned about its potential to act as a 'vehicle of Britain's colonial amnesia' in how it treats its characters of colour (Sarkar

2020). Against the backdrop of calls to decolonise school curriculums, and the proliferation of postcolonial studies in the humanities and beyond, this view reinforces that the boundaries of belief or engagement are changing. Undoubtedly, it constitutes a very different disapproval from Jenkins and Dowden.

Bridgerton (2020-) follows the eponymous fictional family during one social season in early nineteenth-century England. Originally predicted to be watched by 63 million households (Otterson 2021), 82 million had tuned in by the end of January 2021 (Porter 2021). As Netflix defines a 'view' as anything which is watched for at least two minutes, not all 'viewers' in fact took in the whole series (Otterson 2021). Nevertheless, *Bridgerton* did break the traditional streaming pattern of an initial frenzy which tapers off after a fortnight or so; instead, viewing patterns remained stable (Porter 2021). Despite this popularity, *Bridgerton* is – by the reckoning of critic and user reviews – the least favourably received of the three programmes discussed here. Interestingly, it seems that the bulk of poor reviews comes from the general public rather than official critics. On *Rotten Tomatoes,* for example, the average critic score is 89% while the average audience score is 72% (n.d.). Similarly, its *IMDb* (n.d.) score sits at 7.3 out of 10 (taken from over 82,000 ratings, an impressive figure given only seven months have passed since its release). On *Metacritic,* its audience score is even poorer: while critic ratings average at 75 out of 100, the user score is 5.6 out of 10 (n.d). In many respects, it seems to be a polarising programme: while many champion its approach to sex, gender, and race, there are also strong opponents. Only critiques involving explicit references to history are included here. As will become clear, past and present are even more intertwined in *Bridgerton* than *The Crown* and *Downton Abbey. Bridgerton* is set in Regency-era London, a fact established in its first sentence: 'Grosvenor Square, 1813'. Yet showrunner Chris Van Dusen's intention was to 'reimagine the stuffy world' of the period drama (quoted in Valentini, 2020). Though respectful of and inspired by period pieces, he felt compelled to make *Bridgerton* different. The past depicted is not a distant one: elements are deliberately constructed to show a history that is very much in conversation with the present day. This supersedes Edgerton's 'useable past' [(2005, p. 268)]; arguably, it is an example of Eder's 'reflexive' mode of learning, which promotes 'more dialogic approaches to history and the opening up of controversies' [(cited in O'Leary 2016, p. 11)]. Far from avoiding presentism, *Bridgerton* actively revels in it, shown in its approach to music, costume, and casting. Dhoest's 'surface realism' seems suitable here: *Bridgerton* uses just enough of the past and the conventions of the period drama to be recognisable. Of course, Van Dusen highlighting *Bridgerton*'s intentions has not protected it from the audience-cop. While some praise its differences, many disapprove, and still others find it does not go far enough.

As previously discussed, certain historical elements are deemed more dispensable than others. Music as a creative element is often malleable. *Bridgerton*'s soundtrack features modern songs rearranged in a Classical style; era-appropriate music; and other instrumental pieces from after 1813 (Macdonald 2020). This has been mostly well received: only two of the first 25 one-star user reviews on IMDb mention their irritation at this choice, compared to four positive mentions in the ten-star reviews. Stronger indications of audience approval are evident in the over 230,000 likes on the show's official Spotify playlist, and the 350% increase in streams of Vitamin String Quartet, who play many of the Classical-modern covers (Tangcay 2021). Reactions to *Bridgerton's* costuming have been more varied. Designer Ellen Mirojnick has openly stated that she concentrated on fulfilling the directors' vision rather than loyally reproducing Regency-era dress (quoted in Hampton 2020), and director Julie Anne Robinson has confirmed that fashion was never intended as a focal point (Andreeva 2021). Even so, this has not stopped both amateur and professional fashion historians from analysing the costumes' authenticity. For instance, Karolina Żebrowska and Bernadette Banner – two

prominent YouTubers in dress history, each with over a million subscribers – contributed to the discussion. Banner (2020) commented: 'It was a design choice. [...] It's not to do with actual historical events, so there is a bit of leeway, I think'. Żebrowska's video ultimately concluded that though the costumes were a 'historical mess', they 'kinda work' (2020). Between music and wardrobe, it seems that many are willing to overlook, if not appreciate, creative liberties. 'Surface realism' can be acceptable. When other elements are changed, however, the same reception is not guaranteed.

By far the most provocative 'anachronism' of *Bridgerton* is its racially diverse cast. Its creators have not shied away from acknowledging that present-day ideals motivated this: they wished to improve upon the white-dominated period drama and present a cast that more fully represented society (*BBC News* 2021). Its actors have championed this (Lewis 2021b), and Netflix's diversity and inclusion chief considered it a positive step towards representation both off- and on-camera (Bakare 2021). Moreover, this approach even engages with historical debates, as Van Dusen cites contentions that Queen Charlotte was mixed race as inspiring this 'what-if' interpretation wherein a Black Queen Charlotte married King George IV and single-handedly raised the status of people of colour in Britain, even conferring aristocratic titles on some (quoted in Jacobs 2020). According to its producers, *Bridgerton* is not colour-blind because race is a part of its very premise (Jacobs 2020). In a sample of one-, five-, and ten-star user reviews on IMDb, 33 out of 75 directly commented on the casting. In the ten-star reviews, all sixteen mentions were positive or neutral: for example, some actively enjoyed the casting ('it added a nice touch') while others were willing to accept it as part of the fantasy ('This wasn't ever meant to be a documentary'). At the bottom end of the scale, nine of the first 25 one-star reviews mentioned the casting as factoring into their decision. Some did not object but felt *Bridgerton* did not deliver in other senses. Two mentioned the programme did not sufficiently address the issue in-text, and another took care to point out that the casting was not what drove their poor review. Predictably, some saw this decision as borne by 'political correctness', the transference of American modern-day ideals to a British past, or plain historical inaccuracy. This data is sorted by 'helpfulness', meaning other IMDb users approved it as useful. If the one-star reviews are sorted from least to most helpful, ideas of 'wokeness', 'political correctness', and misguided 'revisionism' become much more prevalent. This article has no interest in measuring the 'truth' of these programmes either to prove or disprove audience claims. At this juncture, this becomes uncomfortable as many of the negative reviews are, plainly, bigoted. To deny the existence of people of colour in Regency England is incorrect. Insisting that period drama uphold its standards of all-white casts is misguided and yet a prevailing opinion on how the genre should interact with the past, as one review shows:

> Producers of 'Historical' fiction should have a morale [sic] responsibility to portray historical periods as accurately as possible otherwise our children and young people, who may never have studied the dramatised time period, will be taught wild inaccuracies about our past. They will believe this American 'Woke' version of Regency England as is portrayed. (n.a. 2021)

In this one review, three key issues are raised. Firstly, historical accuracy should not be a feature but a duty of period drama. It proves that historical fiction is often assumed to be educative (though inferring *Bridgerton* as intended for 'children' with its age rating of 15 and warnings for sex, sex references, sexual violence references, and violence, is misleading). Lastly, it identifies present-day 'American' ideals as a corrosive influence on the presentation of the British past. For other commentators, *Bridgerton* does not fully commit to presenting a world

where race has no social, cultural, or political significance; nor deal with the ramifications of a sudden equality between races (Komonibo & Newman-Bremang 2021; Kini 2021). For Kini, *Bridgerton* is only 'dipped in color' and overlooks race in a way that not only seems implausible in-text but is insulting to the lived experiences of real people of colour. Komonibo and Newman-Bremang speculate that *Bridgerton*'s creators may have felt unwilling to address race for fear of making racism the driving force behind all the character of colour's stories; however, they point out that this is not inevitable. These conversations of representation in period drama precede *Bridgerton* (Manivannan 2020)*,* without a doubt, but the show's popularity has brought the divisive issue once again to the fore.

        Bridgerton shows that the boundaries between past and present and belief and disbelief can be moveable in the name of artistic vision. What critique of some elements reveal, however, is that if promising to break out of traditional moulds, the detachment must be radical. For some, *Bridgerton* has not delivered on this promise and is therefore disappointing; yet for others, it has already gone beyond plausibility. Establishing a useable past in conversation with the present is clearly a fraught task. Stating that audience engagement with television is influenced by current socio-political climates as well as personal biases is in no way revolutionary. Still, bearing in mind that it dominates their engagement with historical television, too – no matter how much the intention of chasing 'accuracy' is cited – is paramount.

After the Credits: Conclusions and Suggestions

Scannell has commented that not all audiences recognise or care about how programmes are made: '[...] we are not aware of the manufactured character [...] except when they malfunction' [2005, p. 55]. While the 'malfunction' he describes refers to technical difficulties, this can be applied to the idea of inaccuracy in period drama television. Inaccuracies challenge the idea that any history programme, regardless of genre, intends on educating its viewers about the past. Yet this is reductive, as the relationship between television and history is much more nuanced than that. Creators are not united in their intentions, nor can we speak of a cohesive audience. Both general and individual ideals of past and present and fact and fiction are not fixed. Nevertheless, these concepts continue to haunt historical television, even if defining what they are and how to manage them seems difficult. Bondebjerg excellently summarises the tensions of history on screen [2016, p. 16]:

> We seem to have a kind of double vision on the historical: on the one hand
> history is something far away, a distant and very different world, with other
> values and norms; and on the other, history is somehow part of our present,
> helping to define a collective sense of social identity. In a way, we cannot
> help but project our contemporary mentality onto the past, either critically
> or in a more nostalgic mode, as a contrast to our modern form of life.

Historical productions must strike a balance between provoking interest in the past without alienating present-day viewers [O'Leary 2016, p. 80]. Simultaneously, they are usually expected to avoid blatant presentism, even as the audience is encouraged to put themselves in another's shoes. While lack of clear demarcations perhaps complicates definitions, it offers much more room for analysis. Rosenstone (2006) and White (1988) are right to recommend asking what historical productions tell us about cultural understandings of the past, and audiences are key sources. Uncovering viewer opinions may previously have been difficult to achieve (Richards 2009); but in 2021, with masses of online data, this is no longer true. Though omitted here, social media platforms – as Ji & Raney prove (2014) – offer a wealth of information. Going forward,

using sites like Twitter to examine cultural reception would prove fruitful. Reckoning with these sources is, in many ways, uncomfortable for the historian. Undertaking such research would encourage interdisciplinary work; a particularly apt process for such a layered topic as cultural reception of the period drama. That it challenges the discipline is proof of progress, and it helps us take another step further away from the 'historian-cop' to instead consider how we 'move through the window' to the past ^(Gallimore 2014, pp. 260-261). Will audiences move with us? That remains a question for the future.

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