

How to Rewrite History on the Screen: Bridgerton (2020)

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Abstract

This article aims to explain, with an example, how historical dramas, under the scope of culture industry, rewrite history on the screen through distorting it. For this purpose, in the first chapter, it is defined who the subject that interprets and recreates the past is. Then, in the second chapter, a Netflix series, *Bridgerton* (2020) is taken as a recent example in connection with the previous chapter to reveal the instrumental historiography at the back of the production. Thus, it becomes possible to enlighten the intention and the motivation of such a historiography along with the mechanism that tries to make individuals believe fiction rather than facts. In conclusion, an evaluation is given on the example while especially focusing on the consequences of the instrumental historiography that the series has.

Keywords: Historiography, historical consciousness, culture industry, Netflix, Bridgerton.

Tarih Ekranda Nasıl Yeniden Yazılır: Bridgerton (2020)

Özet

Bu makale, kültür endüstrisi kapsamı altındaki tarihi dramaların, tarihi tahrif ederek onu ekranda nasıl yeniden yazdıklarını bir örnekle açıklamayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu amaçla, ilk bölümde, geçmiş yorumlayan ve yeniden yaratan öznenin kim olduğu tanımlanmaktadır. Ardından, ikinci bölümde, bir Netflix dizisi olan Bridgerton (2020), önceki bölümle bağlantılı şekilde, bu üretimin arkasındaki araçsal tarihyazımını açığa çıkarmak için yakın zamanlı bir örnek olarak alınmaktadır. Böylece, bireyleri gerçek yerine kurgulara inandırmaya çalışan mekanizmayla birlikte, bu türden bir tarihyazımın amacını ve etkisini aydınlatmak da mümkün hale gelmektedir. Son olarak, sahip olduğu araçsal tarihyazımının sonuçlarına bilhassa odaklanılarak, örneğe ilişkin bir değerlendirme sunulmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Tarihyazımı, tarihsel bilinç, kültür endüstrisi, Netflix, Bridgerton.

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Introduction

Especially in the last two decades, historical dramas have become more influential than other sources that lead individuals to think about history. With their influence, history has gained a strong seat in everyday conversations as if past events directly touch our lives. However, it seems most viewers much consider what historical dramas offer than what actually happened in the past. Falling into the charm of vocal and visual stimuli, they do not even doubt that the history flowing on the screen may be defective. The level of ratings also additionally persuades viewers to believe the truthfulness of everything they watch. They, thus, take historical dramas as references rather than representations and do not hesitate to refer to historical dramas while justifying their claims on history. But when these given monologues are nothing but illusions, then individuals become misled in constructing historical consciousness.¹

After viewers fall prey to illusions and move away from facts, they transfer them to real-life experiences, which lays from everyday conversations to political attitudes. Then by the prevalence of these relevant illusions, a leaning that directs individuals to accept the history on the screen as the past emerges. Persuading individuals to be part of such an experience gives the subject who misleads viewers an opportunity to reshape historical consciousnesses according to its intention. Here the interpreter offers a material including both the efforts of *interpreting* and *recreating* history. If the viewer does not resist but adopt the given content, history, therefore, becomes rewritten for every single individual with regards to particular contents.

As for this article, it aims to explain such experience, namely *rewriting history on the screen*, by using a recent example. For this purpose, in the first chapter, it is defined who the subject that interprets and recreates the past is. Then, in the second chapter, a Netflix series, *Bridgerton* (2020) is taken as a recent example in connection with the previous chapter to reveal the instrumental historiography at the back of the production. Thus, it becomes possible to enlighten the intention and the motivation of such a historiography along with the mechanism that tries to make individuals believe fiction rather than facts. In conclusion, an evaluation is given on the example while especially focusing on the consequences of the instrumental historiography that the series has.

The Instrumental Historiography on the Screen

Whatever the viewer encounters on the screen in regard to human life experiences, she watches something referring to either the past, or the present, or the future. Therefore, every moving image material –explicitly or implicitly– relies on a certain historiography behind it (Bondebjerg, 2020, pp. 28-31, 44-51; Greiner, 2021, pp. 17-37; Kellner 2010, pp. 14-18; Witek, 2020, pp. 574-600).ⁱⁱ While this is true for all categories, historical dramas take a step forward. This is because the historiography at the base of a historical drama directly determines its characteristics; in addition, hermeneutical positions taken to interpret the past are the most important part of this historiography.

Contrary to common belief, the past is not actually something over, instead, it is always open to retroactive reinterpretations. However, the factor that who the interpreter is, in most cases, is more important than the existence of such opportunity.

Behind a historical drama, as like every moving image material, there is a subject who creates it and thereby who –directly or indirectly– answers a set of questions including the ones regarding historiography. Whether the subject is an individual or a collective oneⁱⁱⁱ, the historiography of a historical drama then actually corresponds to an effort of reading, writing and witnessing history (in terms of both approach and content). The decisive question here is if the intention of the interpreter *arbitrarily* determines the process and conclusions of this effort.

The intention of the interpreter who produces under the scope of culture industry has three multi-layered aspects.^{iv} The first is to persuade the viewer to consume the moving image material as itself a commodity (Adorno, 2002a, pp. 96-98). The interpreter should present here something *appealing* to its possible customers rather than something *ordinary*. The second is to make the *advertisement* of the whole given social system and to direct the viewer to consume the commodities the production marks directly or indirectly in its plot (Adorno, 1991, p. 61; 2002a, pp. 126, 131-133). The third is to impose the viewer various thinking and acting forms over fictional characters, in order to contribute to the hegemon effort of making her coherent with the social relations of the existing society (Adorno, 2002a, pp. 110-118; 2002b, pp. 76, 103). Besides a conscious choice, this is also a must for the approval of mainstream authorities, on which the success of the interpreter depends. Therefore, the

intention of such an interpreter is always *instrumental* and thereby unreliable; the subject sacrifices *the concern of truth* on behalf of the intention.

The intention of such an interpreter thus arbitrarily determines its interpretation. In other words, its interpretation is under the grip of its intention. Sometimes, this is also not sufficient enough. The past, that is, what is interpreted, sometimes contradicts with the intention despite an instrumental interpretation. Then something else, something *alien* to the hermeneutical effort becomes needed. In such cases, the interpreter, aside from the interpretation, would eliminate some facts or make some additions till the plot on the past fits the intention. Since there is no concern to sustain any loyalty to facts from this point on, the experience becomes a *recreation* rather than a mere interpretation.

Recreating the past provides the interpreter with an opportunity to invent new “facts”. Hence, facts are combined or replaced partially or completely with these invented ones. Then, a fictional past arises, by which the interpreter offers the viewer an *alternative* history to construct her historical consciousness on a particular content. The interpreter, therefore, seeks her to be persuaded to the content on the screen, where, essentially, its intent is shown rather than a representation of the past. This whole process demonstrates the attempt to manipulate the viewer watching the monologue.

The recent examples clearly show that the interpreter could distort history till the viewer becomes hardly accepting the narration.^v One of the recent examples showing such recreation is *Bridgerton* (2020). *Bridgerton* offers the viewer a fictional Regent era Britain while putting the plot instead of history.

Bridgerton (2020)

Bridgerton is a historical drama based on the novel series of Julia Quinn with the same name. It was first released on Netflix on December 25, 2020. After many positive reviews by its subscribers for the first season, Netflix (2021) immediately announced the new season for 2022. Also, Chris Van Dusen (2021), the creator of the series, informed viewers several months ago that the plot of the series has been begun to be renewed for the third and fourth seasons. So that it seems *Bridgerton* will be discussed more in the next days among the products of culture industry.

Bridgerton's intriguing plot takes place in the Regency era of Britain. The Regency era was a period between 1811 to 1820, when King George III assigned his son as a prince regent due to his illness.^{vi} Therefore, the king who was not fit to rule the country only by himself had made the prince its proxy for about ten years. These ten years are accepted as a unique period in the history of Britain by many historians (During, 2009, pp. 335-354; Erickson, 1986; Joanna, 1966, pp. 109-195; Smith, 1999, pp. 132-146). Its uniqueness especially comes from the fact that the regent prince, carrying out the orders of the king (during the times his health allowing), also began a mini-Renaissance in the fields of fine arts, literature, and architecture among the upper classes of the society.^{vii} Through this revival, the high society of the era was reshaped, which had taken the name of the *ton*, or *le bon ton* in due course. Compared with the classical high society, the *ton* became the centre of the competition affecting both politics and especially daily life.^{viii} Hence, Quinn might choose this period for its story due to the reason that the known history of the Regency era is full of ambiguities and more open to fiction, in contrast to the other eras.

Bridgerton's story mainly focuses on debutantes and their rivalry to match with the right partner for a marriage offering them more power and richness. The harsh and rough rivalry of these young women begins with their presentation to the royal family and the whole *ton*. Thus, the families of bachelor men are informed that the young women from upper class families in the presentation have reached maturity and they are now ready to build their own families. It means bachelor men are being invited to get closer to the candidates they choose and ask them for a pre-marriage friendship in the rhythm of the daily life in the *ton*. So that men also compete to match with the right debutante for their prestige and other benefits. Only a marriage could completely end this bustle both for the debutante and the bachelor.

Marriage is regarded in the series as one of the building blocks of the *ton* if it is not the first.^{ix} That is why the road to marriage is reflected as a *passive war* with its own particular rules, in which both debutantes and their families and also bachelor men and their families should make their best to guarantee a marriage fitting to their will. In this passive war, many unpleasant events such as intrigues and slanders also occur. They are generally accepted as the usual parts of the fight because everything is allowable as long as it is not rejected by the notables of the *ton*, especially, by the queen. All these unpleasant events serve as the ground for the plot to make scenes much interesting and thereby abuse the suspense of viewers (Kulak, 2020, pp. 49-50).

Bridgerton could be criticized from many different points such as abusing the suspense of viewers by directing them to several inconclusive gossips.^x However, there is another characteristic of the plot that is more obvious and more effective than all. It is about the reflection of the status of black people in the 19th century of Britain, which openly distorts history.

Throughout the episodes, the series introduces many black people in the upper positions of the society and the ton. While reflecting them in the scenes, *Bridgerton*, let alone the still ongoing slavery, does not even refer to racial discrimination. It just ignores them and shows the viewer that black people (including servants) are all happy with their life in its imaginative alternative history. However, as in every product of *mainstream* culture industry, this is not an innocent practice building the past according to its own fiction. As is especially seen in several specific scenes, the plot directs us to be persuaded that this was also what happened in the past. Or it just simply offers to replace facts with fiction.

The first episode begins with a scene displaying a group of people, in which there are both well-off white and black people walking around. It may seem an ordinary beginning to the viewer at first, but the following scenes show that it is the opening of the colour-blind cast. In the fourth episode, from the mouth of a black woman called Lady Danbury, the viewer learns that the colour-blind cast is not something done randomly but consciously. She says: "Look at our queen; look at our king; look at their marriage; look at everything it is doing for us, allowing us to become. We were two separate society divided by colour until the king fell in love with one of us." Here the phrase "one of us" mentioned by Lady Danbury refers to Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, that is, Queen Charlotte, who was the wife of King George III and the mother of the prince regent. Therefore, in the past of the series, the fact that King George III fall in love with a black woman has led to abolishing the importance of racial identities, at least for the upper classes. This is the ground on which the series is based to build up its colour-blind cast and thus make it possible to narrate the love of the white debutante (Daphne Bridgerton) and the black bachelor man (Simon Basset).

This *mainstay* of the historiography of *Bridgerton* relies on the claim arguing Queen Charlotte was not white but black in reality. The first person who put forward this claim was Joel Augustus Rogers. In his Volume I of *Sex and Race*, Rogers (1967, p. 206) tries to justify it through interpreting a portrait by Allan Ramsay in 1761 and a depiction by the English writer Horace Walpole. He claims that the features in both reflections must belong to a black woman.

Although Roger could not show any tangible evidence to prove his claim against the official archive with numerous documents, portraits and family paintings, he succeeded to begin a debate. Also, the attempts to find the black ancestors of the queen following Rogers has made the claim popular, despite the lack of any worthwhile findings.

In fact, even if the queen was black, nothing much would change for the flow of history. The scenario supposing the queen as black also does not support the historiography of the series; the series just exploits Rogers' claim. In such a scenario, what is reasonable is to argue that the queen was strictly hidden from the public because of racial discrimination, when considering the official archives consisting of different documents, portraits and family paintings reflecting the queen as white. So that in both cases, the historiography offered is defective according to the theoretical justification depending on *provable* facts. In order to understand this better, the atmosphere of the 19th century in Britain must be exposed.

From 16th to 19th century, British slave merchants had been one of the significant forces in the Atlantic slave trade, and in parallel to that, slavery was very prevalent among British colonies (Morgan, 2004, pp. 86-111; Sherwood, 2007, pp. 5-27, 83-143; Thomas, 1997; Walvin, 1986, pp. 26-46). However, any legislation approving slavery had never been introduced in the mainland (Edwards & Walvin, 1983, pp. 22-25). It does not mean there was no slavery in the mainland, but it was *de facto* being carried out. Although there were judicial decisions such as Mansfield Judgment in 1772^{xi} that condemned slavery, incidents regarding slavery were often being condoned by authorities if they were not officially recorded. It was not until the Slave Trade Act 1807 that slave trade was prohibited in the empire, which was because of the strong opposition and resistance against slavery both home and abroad. After a while, the Slavery Abolition Act 1833 was also put in force and then slavery was completely abolished in Britain. But the centuries-long effects of slavery revealing itself mainly in racial discrimination had remained for a long time.

As for the Regency era, the known population of black people were very small in the cities of the mainland, even in London (Myers, 1996, pp. 7-8; Panayi, 2010, p. 20; Walvin, 1986, p. 47). Although slave trade was prohibited by the sign of King George III, slavery had not been completely abolished yet. The incidents especially beginning in the mid-eighteenth century that black people run away from their masters and thereby forced authorities to become free were still continuing (Walvin, 1986, pp. 62-63). Thus, a small free black community was expanding under the shadow of apparent racial discrimination. But there are two factors to

think that this community were disadvantageous in terms of population growth: the black population was mostly men, and racial discrimination made marrying black and white people almost impossible (Edwards & Walvin, 1983, pp. 20); after the Slave Trade Act 1807, the entrance of black people to the mainland began to be prevented. When thinking these factors with the other aspects of racial discrimination, it is not hard to imagine the poor living conditions of the black community of those days (Edwards & Walvin, 1983, pp. 26-27; Panayi, 2010, pp. 20-; Walvin, 1986, pp. 64-66).

Besides many living in poverty at the outskirts of cities, there were also a few privileged black people. Some of them were fortunate to follow a path similar to people like Ignatius Sancho and Olaudah Equiano, who were both successful intellectuals and merchants. But for most of them, there are two main prototypes to consider: the first is about the black people such as Dido Elizabeth Belle, who were born due to the marriages of rich and strong white people with local black people in the colonies. Although these children could not escape from racial discrimination, they were reluctantly accepted by the people of the upper classes because of their family status. The other is about the black people such as Joseph Antonio Emidy, who was under the protection of rich and strong white people. These were mostly talented people like artists, musicians, writers, soldiers etc. who were freed or raised by some “sensitive” white people. They were usually mentioned with the relevant white people because they were not seen as independent individuals but a kind of senior employees, whose social acceptance was endowed by strong white people.

Considering the atmosphere of the 19th century in Britain, the historical facts show that there were a few black people in London, while most of them were living in poverty. Besides them, only a very limited number of privileged individuals were in better conditions. However, they were isolated from the high society of the upper classes due to racial discrimination. So that there was obviously no condition for a *colourful* environment similar to *Bridgerton's* scenes.

Conclusion

Bridgerton finds the viewer in a period when racial discrimination is getting stronger in Western societies. On the other hand, the protests and actions against racism in the last three years show that the struggle against such discrimination is also growing. The incidents in 2020, such as the anti-racist protests throughout the U.S. representing a massive reaction against

the murder of Georg Floyd and the anti-racist actions in the U.S., Canada and the UK ending with the overthrow of the statues of racist figures, were especially important. These incidents are the proof that the reactions take the form of social outbreaks from time to time due to the antagonist character of the struggle between oppressed identities and white-supremacist politics. However, such social outbreaks always harm the interests of the *dominant* subject who is virtually responsible for racial discrimination. Whether it has been still maintaining its attitude or has already left it behind, the subject would prefer to pretend as nothing happened, if otherwise is not beneficial. Therewith, it could try replacing the memories of the past with something other than the reality in order to break the continuity of the conflict and alleviate its intensity. It seems productions such as *Bridgerton* contribute to this effort.

Bridgerton offers the viewer an alternative history, which is completely blind to the harsh realities of slavery and the accompanying racial discrimination in the early 1800s in Britain. While many people struggle for a mass effort today to reckon with this past full of blood and tears, the series chooses another path. It ignores all the terrible things that happened and put an imaginary milestone marking the equality of colours. Thus, it contributes to the effort that tries to keep the slavery past of Britain out of sight and thereby to soothe the reactions against racism in society. Such an attitude could not be taken as “innocent” because it supports, albeit shy, the attitude of *historical denial*. Instead of supporting to reckon with the past, it joins the chorus aiming to cause individuals to forget the past and to construct historical consciousnesses without what was really happened. Despite all unfreedom and discrimination their ancestors experienced, the series offers black people a fictional freedom for the lived past.

Individuals persuaded by the series then use the given monography in constructing part of their historical consciousnesses. Meanwhile, similar productions also coincide with this practice and consolidate it. Accepting a history different than as happened has both short and long terms consequences. It is like a process of waves eroding rocks. While the eroding depends on the intensity of waves, waves damage rocks every time they beat them. Perhaps, the best example ever is about the historical understanding of Western societies on WWII. Today, many people suppose that the US was the sole or major power that defeated Nazi Germany, and thus, they act as if the USSR did not exist (*Americans and Europeans ignore USSR's role*, 2016). When considering the changing statistics from 1945 to 2000s about this attitude, there is much reason to think that hundreds of historical dramas, and therefore

Hollywood influence, has played a large part in creating this perception.^{xii} When bearing this example in the mind, despite all provable facts, it might also not sound surprising one day that majority thinks there was no racial discrimination in the UK after the first days of the 19th century.

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The author declared that there were no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship or the publication of this article.

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ⁱ For an exposition of the role of moving image materials on the construction of historical consciousness, see Bondebjerg, 2020, pp. 31-40.

ⁱⁱ For some of Adorno's examples on the historiography of moving image materials, see 2005, pp. 104, 194.

ⁱⁱⁱ In other words, a team consisting of writer, scenarist, director, etc.

^{iv} Radical popular products are the exception here. For the term radical popular product, see Maddison, 1982.

^v Here the debate on *Chernobyl* (2019) might be considered as an example. See Žižek, 2020, pp. 229-230.

^{vi} Plus, from the perspective of the working classes, it was "the heroic age of popular Radicalism" (Thompson, 1991, 693) and especially of Luddism (Venetia, 1999, p. 16).

^{vii} For the things done in the fields of fine arts, literature and architecture, see Stella, 1971, pp. 44-61, 93-110.

^{viii} For a detailed exposition of the ton, see Stella, 1971, pp. 61-76; Venetia, 1999, pp. 1-24.

^{ix} For an exposition of marriage and bachelor life in the Regency era by considering Georgette Heyer's literature, see Kloester, 2010, pp. 51-59, 70-72, 76-77.

^x Another one is the status of women in the Regency era. While the series introduces many strong woman profiles in the plot, this was an era of heavy patriarchy. For example, see Stella, 1971, pp. 67-68.

^{xi} For a discussion in detail on the Mansfield Judgment, see Cotter, 1994, 31-56.

^{xii} There are even people who think that the US fought against the USSR in WWII (Hashmi, 2020). Again, historical dramas, showing the conflict between the US and the USSR more than the war between Nazi Germany, has an important role for such a perception.