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Lejla MULALIĆ

Faculty of Philosophy

University of Sarajevo

Franje Račkog 1, BiH – 71 000 Sarajevo

lejla.mulalic@ff.unsa.ba

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POPULAR HISTORY IN THE CLASSROOM: CONSTRUCTING A NARRATIVE OF NATIONAL IDENTITIES IN BRITAIN

Abstract

This paper discusses the historical documentary as an increasingly popular and largely untheorised form of non-academic history. Placed between academic history and the popular medium of television and film, an authored historical documentary presented by a celebrity historian transcends various cultural binaries and demands to be considered on its own terms as a particular way of approaching history. Having in mind its subversive potential as well as its popular appeal, the paper is particularly concerned with the construction of national identities in the historical documentaries of Simon Schama (*A History of Britain*) and Michael Wood (*The Great British Story*), in order to elucidate the advantages of their use in the history classroom. Since every classroom exists within a particular socio-historical context, this discussion of British identities is positioned in the English Department's history class in Sarajevo, within the context of post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina as a reminder that we never teach in a historical vacuum. While comparing Schama's and Wood's approaches to history, a number of questions emerge concerning the role of the historian in the construction of particular historical meanings; the use of narrative to present historical information; and the relevance of the documentary's visual language in conveying specific interpretations of history. The paper attempts

to answer these questions and explain how critical engagement with a historical documentary can help students learn not only about the content of history, but also about the processes behind the meanings we consume, which, ultimately, reveal a great deal about us as consumers.

Keywords: historical documentary, Michael Wood, national identity, popular history, public history, Simon Schama.

Transcending Binaries

An urge to understand the world in terms of binaries may be interpreted as one of the strange afterlives of Cartesian dualism, however fiercely we may be opposed to it. One of the powerful binaries in the domain of history is based on the seemingly unbridgeable differences between academic and public, or popular, history. Building upon the metaphor of an afterlife, the binary opposition between academic and non-academic history may be seen as summoning the ghosts of the nineteenth-century debate on the nature of history, which insisted on the professionalisation of history as a scientific discipline. In doing so, it relegated history's imaginative features to the margins of the study of the past. The final decades of the twentieth century saw a massive debunking of many dominant cultural binaries and so-called grand narratives. One of these was the making of history as a discipline whose authority was derived from the binary model, which legitimised one pole and silenced the other. Therefore, rather than revisiting the debate on whether popular history deserves a label of legitimacy (understood in the Lyotardian sense as a label accorded to an established body of knowledge whose transmission is approved and regulated by a university or government policy [Lyotard 48]), we can significantly enhance our understanding of the workings of history and forms of its representation through a serious study of popular or public history. Problems occur, though, as soon as terminology is concerned because scholars do not agree on a single term to refer to the ways of "presenting accounts of the past to non-specialists" ("Public History – A Provocation"). This is demonstrated in the simultaneous use of the terms "public" and "popular," so much so that Jerome de Groot, editor of the collection of essays *Public and Popular History* (2012), does not clearly distinguish between them in his introduction. Rather he foregrounds "the flexibility, protean qualities and diversity–centrality of the set of concerns relating to history that we call 'public' or 'popular'" (2). Ludmilla Jordanova likewise admits that "the meanings of public history are both unclear and contested" since the concept of

the “public” is unstable by its nature, while “its generative qualities come from its richness.” Thus it “is better to embrace this rather than bemoan ambiguity” (“Public History – A Provocation”). Later, Jordanova shares a personal anecdote while telling a colleague of her interest in public history, to which he playfully responds: “I didn’t know there was any other kind,” alluding to the fact that history is always produced for the public (“Public History – A Provocation”). Rather than perpetuate the differences between key concepts, I will focus on what they share in the form of the large unmapped space of history found in museums, historical enactments, historical novels, heritage films, historical television documentaries, and the teaching of history and culture to students not majoring in history. The latter two are the focus of this paper, although all invite a thorough research of different forms of historical representation and their use in the public domain.

As well as through the profusion of popular forms of historical representation, the domain of history was further complicated by the rise of postmodern historical theory from the 1970s onwards, in particular the work of Hayden White, who questioned something previously considered unproblematic: the notion of history as narrative. Referring to the simultaneous rise of these trends in a talk given at the First Public History Prize Workshop in 2015, Jordanova points out the irony that the same notion of intellectual hierarchy, best exemplified in the binary opposition academic vs. popular/public history, stubbornly persists in the sense that historical theory is privileged over the popular “assemblage of information” (“Public History – A Provocation”), although both challenge the dominance of academic history. In the spirit of her “provocation,” I will transcend the “hierarchies of knowledge” (“Public History – A Provocation”) and focus on the need to understand and theorise popular forms of history as a much needed and vibrant dialogue between the past and the present. This will allow us to address issues such as “the nature of historical imagination, the representation of moral complexities in the past, and forms of identification with people, places, and processes in earlier times” (“Public History – A Provocation”). It is these issues, in particular the role of imagination and the primacy and neutrality of a realistic narrative mode as the main vehicle of historical representation, that Hayden White subjects to careful scrutiny, again foregrounding the artificiality of the “hierarchies of knowledge” and consequently the need for an interdisciplinary approach to these important questions.

The phenomenon of a soaring popular interest in history in the last couple of decades has transcended European borders to become both global and culture-specific. However, this paper looks into the particular context of a changing Britain and, to some degree, the post-conflict society of Bosnia and Herzegovina (born out of a ferocious war in the early 1990s) in the sense that the representation of British history is discussed within the context of an English Department classroom in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina. Even though these two potentially opposed socio-cultural contexts may constitute a dichotomy, their desire for history brings them unexpectedly close to one another, as will be shown in the following sections.

Britain has undergone considerable changes since the Thatcher era in the 1980s, when the Victorian concepts of self-help and self-discipline were seen by some as antidotes to the political and economic crisis, embodied in images of riots and the closing of struggling industries. The country was caught between what was seen as an outmoded welfare “nanny state” and the neo-liberalist reification of the free market and individualism at the expense of state intervention (Adams 85, 92). The 1990s and early 2000s responded with a new set of challenges, and to use the “market-oriented language of our day, it looked as though more history was being produced and consumed than ever before” (Cannadine 1). A wide range of reasons for this phenomenon has been identified, including the arrival of New Labour in 1997, and their determination to eradicate the inhibiting past, symbolically denoted by the word “new”; the official passing of the British Empire into history in 1997 after Hong Kong was returned to the Chinese, which made the story of the empire open to different interpretations; the reduction of hours allocated to history teaching in schools as a consequence of educational reform; and the revolution in information technologies, which made historical information widely available and thus susceptible to various forms of public use (Cannadine 1). Given that these historical and social turbulences incite emotional responses from “subjects of history,” we witness a bewildering variety of popular forms of history, from nostalgic heritage films – a powerful source of visual pleasure in their meticulous physical reconstructions of a particular period, while still providing space for critical analysis of their absences and marginalised voices, and of the specific political meanings they produce – to novels about historical figures whose stories were previously untold – such as those of Anne Boleyn and her sister Mary – to historical documentaries like Michael Wood’s *The Great British Story* that privilege enactments and “history from below” over experts delivering lectures to an invisible audience.

On the other side of the political, social and cultural spectrum of Europe, the desire for history was generated by the fall of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, and the subsequent emergence of a number of new states, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, in the late twentieth century. All these factors legitimised the “need” to create new national histories, restore silenced national identities, find rightful precedents in the (ancient) past, and rescue them from oblivion by making them an integral part of contemporary life, from TV advertisements to history classrooms. The dichotomy Western Europe vs. Eastern Europe or the Balkans, just like other dichotomies discussed earlier in this section, is rendered irrelevant by the force of the presence of history in all spheres of life, and by our inability to understand the present without relating it to the concept of a meaningful past.

The History Classroom and Politics

Since the domain of public/popular history encompasses the teaching of history, the aforementioned political, social and cultural changes affected the educational system in Britain and in Bosnia and Herzegovina, thus demonstrating the deep entanglement of (history) education and politics. During Thatcher’s mandate, there was a fierce debate about a national curriculum and the place of history within a set of compulsory courses and it implicated teachers, academics and politicians. Teachers were worried about the proper selection of the content to be taught and the usefulness of chronology as the main principle of selection (Little 321). Academics claimed that “concepts and skills were unhistorical guides to syllabus construction and none more so than the notorious empathy” (Little 324). They recommended teaching chronologically with a firm grounding in British history, meaning events and people, rather than concepts. This is exemplified in the debate over what has greater significance for students: The Battle of Trafalgar or the Married Women’s Property Act (Little 324–325). The political view of the educational reform is best summarised by Margaret Thatcher: “a whole generation has been brought up to misunderstand and denigrate our national history ... for the blackest picture is drawn by our Socialist academics and writers of precisely those periods of our history when greatest progress was achieved compared with earlier times, and when Britain was furthest in advance of other nations” (Thomas qtd. in Little 326). In this way, subversive historians and teachers were held responsible for depriving children of their nation’s great past (Little 326). Amidst these debates, the History

Working Group drafted a curriculum that at least partly addressed the histories of Wales, Scotland, and Ireland in their own terms and emphasised the diversity of Britain's population from the earliest times, thus accentuating the concept of nation as problematic (Little 332). This draft was subject to many revisions during Thatcher's premiership and the issue of the history curriculum was actively discussed again in the 2000s under the supervision of the Conservative Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, who asked famous historian Simon Schama to join the new History Working Group. Schama welcomed Gove's enthusiasm for change, but they parted ways when it came to deciding how this change should be introduced, one reason likely being that Gove was trying to make the subject interesting for its own sake, while keeping a fixed ideological agenda (Rahim).

History teaching in Bosnia and Herzegovina is thoroughly defined by the context of a post-conflict ethnically divided society broken into two entities, one of which is further subdivided into ten cantons. While ethnic Serbs are the overall majority in the entity of Republika Srpska, the entity of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina is ethnically mixed. However, in the Federation the divisions are nowhere more apparent than in "the approximately 50 'two schools' under one roof" where both the Bosniak and Croat curricula are taught to different "schools' of students in either different shifts or separate floors of the building" (Perry 14). A similar example of an unsuccessful solution to the Bosnian problem with its "national group of subjects" is the initiative to offer separate identity subjects when there is a sufficient number of non-majority returnee students. These students then study separately from their majority peers, reinforcing the "us vs. them' dynamic of education in BiH" (Perry 14). There are, however, critical voices that continually draw attention to "the root of all these problems," namely "a reliance on monoperspectivity as a teaching method and curricular goal, driven by local political actors interested in maintaining political and territorial control by ideological indoctrination" (Perry 16). One such example is an analysis of the content of the so-called national subject textbooks in primary schools, aptly titled "What do we (not) teach our children?" published in Sarajevo in 2017. In this analysis, a group of scholars points out the manifold stereotypes and prejudices not just in the representation of our recent history, but also in the discussion of remote periods seemingly "untainted" by the 1992–1995 war.

Tensions over the contested history of Bosnia and Herzegovina are reflected in the teaching of history at all educational levels. Of particular relevance to this paper is the fact that students of English language and literature at the Faculty of Philosophy in Sarajevo¹ come from various parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina, bringing their personal experiences from their respective history classrooms. It is therefore a particular challenge to teach them British history and use this seemingly “neutral terrain” to touch upon sensitive issues of (national) identity, which connect different cultures and demonstrate the relevance of independent critical thinking about our place in the world.

In an insightful analysis of historiographical nationalism across Europe throughout the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Stephan Berger identifies the ability of national history writing to subsume many of its potential rivals – both spatial, such as local, regional and global histories, and non-spatial, such as the histories of class, religion, race and culture – thus making them “effectively nationalised” (52). Repercussions of these trends have inevitably influenced the ways we learn about history at school, or while reading historical novels or national newspapers, looking at historical paintings or listening to music with national themes (Berger 52–53), whereby the issue of national identity is once again prioritised as crucial to history.

History and the Media

In an essay on the ways in which television can enhance history, Tristram Hunt, a broadcaster and historian, recognises that in “an era of devolution, globalization and social transformation” the success of television history can be explained by its profound interest in the “search for identification – national, familial, racial” (97). In a cautious promotion of television history, Hunt points out that at its best it invites us to question assumptions and “not simply ... luxuriate in a Merchant-Ivory glow” (99). He welcomes debate on various aspects of history, considering it a sign of the discipline being in “rude health,” but he also sees room for improvement in the way modern television treats the field

¹ Although many private universities in Sarajevo offer BA and MA study programs in English language and literature, the Department of English referred to in this paper is part of the state university (since 1951) and it attracts a large number of students from all over Bosnia and Herzegovina every year. This in itself cannot undo the effect of divisions, but it can provide an opportunity for teachers to challenge prejudices and stereotypes about different ethnic groups and a variety of meanings inscribed into the concept of the Other.

of intellectual history (Hunt 99), thus contributing to the debate in the most productive way.

The work of Ludmilla Jordanova, a Professor of Visual Culture at Durham University's Department of History, and Jerome de Groot, whose scholarship is a creative and theoretical interdisciplinary leap across the borders of discourses of heritage in contemporary culture, historical novels and history "proper," provide much needed landmarks in academic discussions of the potential of popular culture, which they claim has been "marginalised" (*Consuming History* 4) and "under-conceptualised" ("Public History – A Provocation").²

There are, nevertheless, many other scholars who recognise the relevance of dialogue. In the past two decades, there have been many conferences where experts in academic history and those professionally engaged in the media have discussed the ways in which these different approaches to history might learn from each other. Likewise, the Institute of Historical Research, then presided by historian David Cannadine, organised the "History and the Media" conference devoted to the subject in December 2002, in association with the History Channel; a symposium titled "Televising History: the Past(s) on the Small Screen" was held at the University of Lincoln in 2005, supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, with the intention to "examine in various ways the production and consumption of history on television ... and the role of the 'professional' historian and of producer/directors as mediators of historical material and interpretation" (Bell 7); and Jordanova and her colleagues organised the first Public History Prize Workshop in 2015 at the Institute of Historical Research to "profile public history and assess its importance, impact and role in contemporary historical studies" (Gerson).

Although the overview of the workings of popular history provided in the previous sections is by no means exhaustive, it sets the tone for a discussion of television history: a particular fusion between a documentary historical approach and the dominance of image – "television's visual imperative" (Winston 45). Winston's succinct statement that "the problem with television history is that it is television first and history second" (45) echoes many similar debates

² To illustrate the "rites of passage" of the newly emerging discipline, De Groot playfully remarks that his field of inquiry usually attracts "non-historians" from the fields of cultural and film studies, languages, politics, game studies, etc. However, this does not prevent him from going to historical conferences, being "something of a sneaky cuckoo" in drawing attention to "texts and artefacts historians would often rather ignore" ("Invitation to Historians" 601).

of “fidelity to the source,” particularly the one relating to film adaptations of (canonical) novels. In order to challenge the very basis of this dichotomy-based debate, Brian McFarlane emphasises the individuality of every act of interpretation, which “involves a kind of personal adaptation on to the screen of one’s imaginative faculty as one reads” (15). Likewise, television history, including historical documentary, is often dismissed because, by the very nature of its reliance on the image and the film-maker’s non-professional idea of history, it is further removed from the original past in comparison to written representations of events in history textbooks. Critics of television history often resent the dominance of a historian-presenter’s personal style in the documentary (such as in Schama’s *A History of Britain*), the film-maker’s/historian-presenter’s appeal to emotions rather than intellect, as well as the particular features of the film format, such as editing, i.e. “a double tyranny – which is to say, an ideology – of the necessary image and perpetual movement” (*Visions of the Past* 116). The implied presence of a massive audience that inevitably requires simplified content and, even worse, entertainment, is seen as the burden of popular media, deepening the chasm between the past and its film representation. In terms of the fidelity debate previously alluded to, a process of adaptation inherent to the transferral of (canonical) novels and history onto the screen is entirely rooted in a series of choices made by the film-maker about the particular reading of the novel/history he wants to convey. There can, therefore, be no single faithful rendering of the original as each person’s notion of the faithful is deeply personal. Every aspect of the adaptation, such as music, mise-en-scène or montage clearly modifies the meaning of the fictional/historical narrative presented, thus removing it from the single imaginary “original,” while at the same time giving it a completely new life. In the case of fidelity to history, the process of adaptation is further complicated by the fact that the original past is an intangible concept, forever out of reach, and available only indirectly through various subsequent re-presentations.

Well-known film theorist Robert Rosenstone draws our attention to a particular contradiction immanent to historical documentary. While the word “documentary” implies a direct relationship to reality, similar to written history, this form of historical representation nevertheless constitutes facts, by carefully selecting traces of the past and joining them into a narrative with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Journalists, historians, and the general public tend to trust the documentary more than the fiction film, which can be partly explained by

the use of authentic footage, talking heads of historians or witnesses of events, and an omniscient voice-over narrative that glues together what are apparently fragments of real history. However, this is, according to Rosenstone, a mistaken form of trust since documentaries too resort to images that are “proximate rather than literal realities” and often dramatise scenes in a way characteristic of fiction films, making a fiction drama more honest about its artificiality (*History on Film* 70–71).

It is this curious similarity between seemingly disparate discourses that is particularly relevant in the context of the classroom because it elucidates the intricate mechanisms of contemporary popular culture, which is largely dependent on the image and specific narrative patterns. Although some are not convinced that television history should be used “as an educative medium” on account of “the passivity foisted upon the viewer” (*Consuming History* 152), disregarding the relevance of the visual media as a pedagogical tool may make our students culturally illiterate in the world outside the classroom. For precisely that reason, it is imperative to teach our students historical and film literacy – i.e. the ability to disentangle the layers of meaning of both the written word and image – and in doing so empower them to watch and read critically, regardless of what form of history they are studying. In the following sections, I will discuss two historians and their respective historical documentary series created largely for television audiences in order to explore their potential as a teaching tool within a broad spectrum of courses dealing with British history and culture. The aim is not to problematise just the content of history, but also the ways in which history is represented and used in the public space, within a larger context of identity debates whereby students are introduced into the domain of historical theory.

Seductive Subjectivity – Simon Schama’s History

Bearing in mind the tension-ridden relationship between history and the media on the one hand, and the particular socio-historical context of the history classroom at the Department of English in post-war Sarajevo on the other, the use of Schama’s documentary series as a teaching aid may help the teacher achieve several important goals as a part of a wider discussion of national identities. First, it allows the teacher to problematise the role of the historian in the representation of history, i.e. the issue of historical truth and objectivity; second,

value-laden vehicle used by the presenter-historian; and third, the relevance of visual literacy as part of a general historical literacy is brought closer to students as a way to deepen their understanding of the present, which is considerably dominated by the image.

As De Groot claims, “Simon Schama’s *A History of Britain* (BBC1 2000, 2001) [...] provided the catalyst to push history from a standard part of television programming to being a media phenomenon, and made the historian into a public figure in an unprecedented way” (*Consuming History* 17). It can be rightfully argued that Schama’s documentary series inaugurated a new era of popular history presented by a reputable professional historian, who assumes the role of storyteller to present a personalised interpretation of the national story. Due to Schama’s overriding presence in the documentary, his narrative is entirely enveloped by his somewhat patrician accent and informal dress, usually a leather jacket (*Consuming History* 18), as well as an annoying yet strangely attractive twitching of his body as he passionately delivers his “insider knowledge” of people from the past. The combination of a deliberately informal appearance and a charming eloquence with echoes of a privileged education makes him a people’s historian, but at the same time suggests that his interpretation of the past is grounded in the ivory tower of academia, thus achieving an effect of both closeness and authoritative remoteness. Since these aspects of the documentary often go unnoticed by younger students, drawing their attention to the appearance and style of the presenter as necessary ingredients of the *content* of the history presented, rather than just formal “accessories,” might be a good way to introduce them to the issue of objectivity and neutrality in the representation of history, and to Hayden White’s concept of “the content of the form,” of which more will be said later.

When asked at the beginning of the semester what history means to them, my first-year students at the Department of English of the University of Sarajevo, excluding rare exceptions, often betray great anxiety and disillusionment. This is due to the complex and generally conflict-ridden political situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the politicians’ constant invocation and appropriation of history in the interest of one particular ethnic group. Another contributing factor to their discomfort is their parents’ painful memories of the recent war. Alternatively, they readily and mindlessly provide slogans, such as that of history being life’s teacher. Both types of answer demonstrate either resistance to history, or a formalised, impersonal concept of it as authoritative knowledge

of the past, neither of which invites students to engage with history in a more critical and creative way. With that in mind, they should be encouraged to recognise the relevance of the historian-presenter's style to the production of historical meaning, in the same way they analyse an actor's performance in a feature film. This may help them demystify the concept of the historian as a mere conduit of facts and instead recognise a person with a number of identities, all of which irrevocably influence the way he/she views history. Students will not just watch and listen to Schama – they will discuss how his appearance and mode of address affect the meaning of the past he is anxious to convey and how, as Bell and Gray claim, his charisma and the power to beguile is crucial to his authority and legitimacy (123).

In the DVD's "Promotional Message," Schama explains the need for such a history in 2000 as rooted in Britain's urge to know where it is heading in terms of its relationship with Europe and the world in general: the knowledge that can only be possible if you know where you came from. This firmly positions his history in the context of stories of belonging and the native soil. The audience loves these stories for their personal biographical note, which creates and nourishes an illusion of identification with and ownership of history that would otherwise be cloistered in the towers of academia. Initiating a discussion of these issues may be a good way to introduce students of English to a survey of British history, as it will immediately pull them inside this history and make them feel like co-historians, rather than passive recipients of huge blocks of facts. This is especially the case when students belong to a different culture, making them twice removed from the "original" British past. However, it is necessary to pierce this bubble of identification by problematising the dangers of intimacy with and appropriation of history, and draw their attention to the role of the historian as suggested earlier in this section.

In an interview with Mark Lawson, Schama was asked about the fact that people had taken issue with his history being presented from a single perspective (white, male, Jewish, British living in America), to which he responded that the potential trap of a single perspective is avoided by foregrounding the subjectivity of his history as its greatest asset. He further explained that politically and "ethnically correct" histories, such as those made in the US, would certainly include men, women, ethnic minorities, the old and the young in a perfectly arranged "salad of opinions," but he would rather have people take issue with him as "the most compelling history is the most shamelessly personally en-

gaged” (“Interview with Mark Lawson”). Rather than a rigorous search for facts, history is represented as a life-long passion for storytelling, and although this self-identification is meant to present Schama as an opponent of the traditional academic “dry-as-dust” approach to history, it actually conceals a different sort of conservatism – that of narrative as a non-problematic mode of representing history. Hayden White points out the ideological and political implications of the choices behind the process of shaping historical facts into a coherent and meaningful narrative. The narrative form is already filled with different contents and thus invalidates the concept of narrative as a value-free mould into which historians place pieces of knowledge found in the facts themselves (White ix, xi). Rosenstone makes a similar point with reference to historical documentaries as primarily narratives with a distinct beginning, middle and end, a model typical of the realist novel. The kind of realism we, therefore, get in the realist novel, historical documentary or any sort of narrative history is manufactured, rather than found, and this is an idea that students find particularly confusing. This can be partly explained by the fact that narrative is believed to be “simply there like life itself ... international, transhistorical and transcultural” (Barthes qtd. in White 1). Furthermore, the historical narrative derives its authority from its completeness – hence the demand for closure in history, which is, according to White, a demand for moral meaning, “a demand that sequences of real events be assessed as to their significance as elements of a moral drama” (21). Erudite but often impenetrable postmodernist theoretical discourse on historiography can hardly feature in a documentary series, but this form of popular history provides a space within which it is possible to problematise many theoretical issues in a much more immediate and approachable, but still not simplistic, way as I will demonstrate in the following examples.

When commenting on the title of his series, Schama points out the playful indefinite article as well as the instability inherent in the title’s last word, as the British have always been a problematic nation, constantly in a state of flux and change. That, however, does not prevent him from imprinting “our”/“British” identity onto the dwellers of a 5000-year-old Neolithic village in the Orkneys. The patriotic tone of the first episode effectively situates Britain as an “object of desire” and a “civilization thousands of years older than Rome” (“Beginnings”). The village of Scara Brae is no longer lost in the obscurity of non-narrativised prehistory but gains a distinctly British identity, whereby the historian-presenter uses the full potential of the Roman geographic concept of Britannia to refer

to an imaginary golden age that preceded the emergence of disparate British identities in later political and ethnic reconfigurations of the British Isles. Furthermore, Schama urges viewers to imagine real people living in those stone dwellings, enjoying gossip and family meals and even decorating their houses. The climax of his presentism is reached when he says that in Scara Brae you can find “everything you could possibly want from a village, except a church and a pub” (“Beginnings”). Apart from being a great teaching aid in explaining the notion of presentism to students, with all its inherent advantages and disadvantages, this part of the series redeems the unfilmable period of prehistory from complete oblivion and returns it to its rightful place in the history syllabus. Many history textbooks fail to do this, as they designate the Roman conquest as the beginning of the relevant, teachable history of Britain. On the other hand, students should be encouraged to identify the specific narrative pattern that Schama imposes on this fragment of history so that it gains the contours of the story of a lost civilisation, i.e. a familiar dramatic plot. Some issues to consider in class are: why prehistory is largely absent from British history textbooks, and how Schama manages to incorporate it into the story of “who we are” and “how we got here,” thus relating it firmly to the notion of Britishness rather than retaining the concept of the primitive unknowable people who were succeeded by advanced civilisations; to what extent our empathy is dependent on his particular construction of an image and idea of the prehistoric dwellers of Scara Brae as “people who had style”; and how Schama’s particular style and approach contribute to the (national) identity debates characteristic of the early 2000s, and even more so after the Brexit referendum in 2016. The meaning of Britishness and Britain’s complex relationship with continental Europe throughout history can therefore be introduced through Schama’s presentation of Stone Age Britain.

Another episode relevant to national identity is Schama’s narrative of the conflict between Henry II and Thomas Becket, i.e. the clash between king and church in medieval England. The extension of the story over an entire episode and the incredible amount of creative and narrative energy invested to make the two men seem alive and relevant to history is highly indicative of Schama’s prioritisation of two important themes. One is the power struggle between church and king as one of the cornerstones of the development of English statehood; the other is the pragmatic worldly spirit of the great swarming city – Becket’s London – that anticipates the emergence of capitalism in later centuries, as well

the birth of the empirical philosophy that will always be an important part of the collage of British identity. Thomas Becket is a genuine Cockney, “street-smart and book-smart” (“Dynasty”), whose transformation from a lover of drink and women to a devoted champion of the church’s independence is convincingly brought to life, rounded off by a close-up of lice crawling inside the hair-shirt they found on his murdered body. Henry II is represented through the repetitive image of a falcon whose sinister cry embodies the struggle for power. This theatrical approach to what otherwise might have been just another clash between a king and his disloyal subject attaches a new meaning to this episode of history and demonstrates to students how certain historical facts can be narrativised and visualised to become central to the story of Britain. The reason my students become passionately interested in this part of English history is Schama’s favouring of the personal, i.e. the conflict between a whimsical bad-tempered king and his spectacle-loving friend, over the religious, national and political layers of the story. The two characters are represented through suggestive images of a falcon, a doe, a louse and a map of medieval London as a bustling centre of commerce, which almost makes it a modern bestiary. A genuine dramatic effect is achieved through imposing the (narrative) dynamics of a turbulent love relationship or betrayed partnership onto the “dry-as-dust” story of a medieval king and his disobedient archbishop. Teachers may also bring to students’ attention the relevance of the *mise-en-scène* and editing, which includes the juxtaposition of the aforementioned animals and their symbolic meanings; the contrast between the darkness of the hallways that dominate the representation of English churches and the whiteness of the abbey in Pontigny, where Becket spent his time in exile; and a quick-paced juxtaposition of Becket’s and Henry’s faces as they are represented in frescoes and statues, figuratively brought to life through Schama’s impersonation of their voices, shouts and even the curses they allegedly delivered. The construction of a specific historical meaning effected in this way might be additionally deconstructed through pointing out that the linear narrative style, however “natural” and understandable, is more likely to “close the minds of the viewers to any possible alternative view,” as it does not foreground the notion of history as “a process, especially one of interpretation, provisionality and differing perspectives” (Bell and Gray 128). In other words, rather than an objective account of eleventh-century England, this is Schama’s interpretation of that particular fragment of the past.³ Acknowledging the ten-

³ In a similar playful fashion, Keith Jenkins explains that students who study sixteenth-century 381

sion between these concepts may lead students to critically engage with the distinction between past and history. The past, i.e. actual events, has gone and history is what historians, film directors, museum curators, novelists and other interested individuals make of it, in a variety of different media such as books, academic journals, museum exhibitions, feature and documentary films, and novels (Jenkins 8). This can be seen in Schama's transformation of the factual traces of the eleventh-century conflict between church and king into a genuine historical drama.

The power of the image as a special form of non-verbal language reigns supreme in the part of the documentary dealing with the Reformation in England. Rather than acknowledge the Reformation as "a historic inevitability," which is how it is represented in most textbooks, Schama dwells on ghosts from the past: i.e. the lost splendour of Catholic worship. In doing so, he challenges the argument that "print is deep, images are shallow; that print actively argues and images passively illustrate" ("Television and the trouble with history" 24), because the best way to represent iconoclasm is to focus on the suppressed images of Catholic England. A computer paint-box is used to reconstruct the beautifully decorated Long Melford Church, which was entirely whitewashed in the frantic advance of iconoclasm. The effect of colour and music on the viewer is mesmerising and the power of the image to argue, if not more persuasively, then certainly in a significantly different way from the printed word, re-creates an emotional experience of the most dramatic change in British history. Justin Champion rightfully argues that the historical accuracy of Schama's reconstruction remains questionable (163), but this filmic interpretation captures the moment of hopeless longing of ordinary men and women for the familiar warmth of the Catholic Church, however fraudulent it may have been in some of its practices. The vivid colours that fill the empty walls and columns, as well as the faces of saints, enact the past coming to life, thereby blurring the border between past and history and creating an illusion of unmediated access to hidden parts of the former. An appeal to emotions and the senses, rather than archives and the printed word, is central here to the experience of a part of British history that is largely contested, since it involved the creation of a Catholic minority and an entirely new cultural and political identity for what was to become modern

England for their History A-level and use one main textbook – Geoffrey Elton's *England under the Tudors* – do not gain an A level in English history but an A level in Geoffrey Elton, since their understanding of history is essentially Elton's reading of it (Jenkins 9).

Britain. Students might reflect on the (emotional) potential of the image and colours to influence or challenge an interpretation of the past by encouraging empathy for marginalised voices in history. Likewise, the generally accepted notion that the reformation in England was largely responsible for the birth of an English national identity – making the nation politically and religiously independent of Rome, and the English language the language of the Bible – is hereby deliberately complicated by the “usurping” presence of its medieval Catholic identity as an inseparable layer in the national narrative. The visual enactment of these issues sensitises students to the complexity of national narratives in a way that a printed argument struggles to. Moreover, it can stimulate them to discuss the significance of the visual aspects of their own culture. In the case of post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina, this is especially sensitive as religious buildings are powerful markers of identity in an ethnically divided country and the meaning of many historical monuments, especially those commemorating the Second World War and resisting ethnic labelling, is constantly contested and politicised.

Local and Colourful: The History of Michael Wood

A different face of popular history is encountered in the documentary series *The Great British Story: A People's History* by Michael Wood, broadcast on the BBC from May to August 2012. Students can greatly benefit from a comparative analysis of Schama's and Wood's approaches to television history, as it provides them with an insight into two distinct ways of transforming the past into history. This comparison should not be undertaken with the purpose of ascertaining which approach is better, but rather to learn how to appreciate a multiplicity of approaches and their inherent strengths and weaknesses. The role of the presenter-historian as a mediator in this process of televising history and the specific use of film techniques should be the basis of comparison in order to shed more light on the questions of how, why, and for whom this history is produced. Finally, students might be given an assignment to make a brief video using their mobile phone cameras, which would allow them to assume the role of historian, conduct research and briefly introduce an important historical building, event or person from their own community, by using different methods of representing history. Their videos could be shown and discussed in class, and students should write reflections on how this particular experience changed/affected their own attitude to history and their community. This enables students to en-

gage creatively with the process of presenting history and to gain a better understanding of the resources and possibilities particular to television/film history. In the case of Bosnian students, this assignment and the aforementioned comparative analysis may encourage students to overcome their resistance to, and mistrust of, history by demonstrating the various ways in which language, both written and visual, can be used to achieve a specific political, ideological or socially responsible purpose in the public space. Accordingly, they should be encouraged to watch and read critically, rather than passively adopting the dominant “us versus them” mindset typical of post-conflict societies.

A brief discussion of the title of the series and its author-presenter will shed more light on the key differences between Schama’s and Wood’s representations of history. The definite article in Wood’s title, in contrast to the indefinite in Schama’s, as well as the patriotic tone inherent in the word “great,” which playfully invokes the concept of Great Britain but points rather to the politically correct and inclusive concept of Britain, suggest a particular ideology of representation. While Schama foregrounds the subjectivity of his historical interpretation in his title, Wood, though dominant on the cover of the DVD, is seemingly absent from the invocation of his. He accentuates instead a multiplicity of histories successfully merged in a single national narrative whose greatness is derived from its ability to celebrate its differences, although he does not openly acknowledge the fact that it is the historian’s omnipresent persona that selects and orchestrates the representation of differing national identities. Furthermore, Wood is more of a people’s historian than Schama, whose academic background gives credibility to his identity as a populariser of history. A full-time film-maker, Michael Wood has since 2013 been a part-time Professor of Public History at the University of Manchester. He is the first person to be awarded this position at that institution (“Michael Wood: My Manchester Story”), making him a pioneer in the process of professionalising this popular form of history.

Although professional recognition is important to Wood, he is anxious not to neglect his engagement with ordinary people. He hosts public events at which he talks about the value of history to young people, whose “huge appetite to learn” (“Viral History’s Paul Bradshaw talks to Michael Wood”) is the driving force of Wood’s educational mission. This grassroots educational impulse does not feature so prominently in Schama’s approach, yet in Wood’s documentary it creates a student-friendly atmosphere as it gathers a large number of people of different age, gender, class, race and nationality, all of whom are in pursuit

of local histories and the ways in which they affect the composite history of the British nation. An eager teacher, Wood emphasises that people uninterested in their history are people without memory, which is a “form of mental illness” (“Viral History’s Paul Bradshaw talks to Michael Wood”).

Although his informal appearance and the ease with which he talks to people in the street, in a pub or in their homes suggest spontaneity and a more direct access to the historical knowledge of local communities, we should not overlook the fact that this spontaneity and collective engagement are staged and carefully orchestrated by the author-presenter and artistically defined by the producer and editors. Similarly, the dominant narrative pattern is that of discovery and quest (Bell and Gray 129), enabling Wood to reconcile his interest in personal/family/local history and the imperative to entertain the viewers. This particular aspect enables students to grasp fully Jenkins’ idea of the impossibility of an unpositioned history (Jenkins 82), both in its written and performative (i.e. film) forms. The video assignment referred to at the beginning of this section will introduce students to the issue of positionality, when they face decisions such as whether to opt for an “omniscient” narration as a way of presentation; whether to interview people in the street, their classmates, or experts; and whether to offer a coherent narrative or deliberately accentuate the lack of knowledge or consensus about the chosen theme.

Having explored the key differences between Schama’s and Wood’s representations of history, I will now discuss the transformation of Wood’s educational approach into a foundation myth that becomes central to his version of the British national narrative. In an interview with Paul Bradshaw, Wood explains his long-term fascination with Anglo-Saxon England as the last discernible trace of a just and advanced English society, which was brutally crushed by a foreign nation. This underlying notion of genuine Englishness embodied in the magnificent lawgiver and educator King Alfred the Great dominates the part of the documentary series titled “The Norman Yoke.” Accordingly, Wood inscribes the notion of flexibility into Anglo-Saxon rulers by emphasising that they ruled four different nations as well as the Vikings, meaning that they had to recognise the differences between ethnic groups and facilitate dialogue as early as the tenth century. In line with that idea of “ethnic correctness,” which Schama proudly disowns, Wood’s documentary teems with actors whose manifold accents and ethnic identities clearly enact the diversity that Wood places in the late Anglo-Saxon period, thus arguing that multiculturalism in Britain

is not a late twentieth-century phenomenon. Along with declaring the forging of Britain's ancient multicultural identity, he proclaims the English as the keepers of that national heritage. In the episode addressing the fourteenth-century Scottish wars of independence and the famous Declaration of Arbroath (a record of "English crimes" and "the greatest statement of the Scottish nationhood ever made" ("The Norman Yoke")), the English are conveniently excused from responsibility. In the words of Michael Wood, "attack on the Celtic peoples of Britain" was essentially a "furthering (of) a Norman project" because "the rulers of England were not English" ("The Norman Yoke"). This is a fine example of the construction and reconstruction of national identities. As Edgerton argues, ever since the ancient Hebrews and Greeks the master historical narratives have been dominated by heroes and villains, to whom the audience immediately responds. Television as popular history has retained this narrative model, albeit with considerable sophistication, so that "our small-screen morality tales about the past are far more seamless [...], thus rendering these formulaic elements invisible to most viewers" (Edgerton 8). Accordingly, the English oscillate between being keepers of early multiculturalism and cruel colonisers of Scotland in a way that does not disturb the magic of the story.

Drawing on the rich reservoir of local history, Wood, unlike Schama, diverts the viewer's attention from great historical figures and descends into the intimacy of ordinary lives, the so-called "history from below." As he casually talks to the residents of Dagworth Hall by the River Gipping in Suffolk, we learn that the original owner of the estate, a respectable Anglo-Saxon farmer called Bramer, was violently snatched from the comfort of his daily life in 1066 and summoned to fight in the historic battle of Hastings. He was killed and his property was awarded to a certain Guillome Grose, a Norman. The family presently occupying the house clearly acknowledges the connection with their Anglo-Saxon predecessor, while the informal arrangement of the *mise-en-scène* suggests a very natural emotional bond with the past, all of which might be compared to the way in which Schama exploits the emotional potential of pre-Reformation churches.

In addition, a comparative analysis of Schama's and Wood's recreations of the Reformation story for a television audience reveals the key differences between these two historians. While Schama in a fascinating, albeit god-like, way superimposes colours on the whitewashed walls of the Long Melford church with the help of a computer paint-box, Wood takes us to a church in the village of

Llancarfan near Cardiff and inconspicuously observes a cheerful crowd of local children, teachers, conservators, and the elderly as they uncover the defaced images of saints, the seven deadly sins, and mythical dragons. This community event is the consequence of a recent discovery of pre-Reformation paintings on the church's walls, and it focuses on the children as they learn about medieval pigments and play with the egg yolk used to bind the pigment to feel the touch of old colours rather than on the authority of professional historians. A lost fragment of history is here reclaimed and embraced as a living bond between the past and the present, while the resources of the quest and discovery narrative pattern are used to imprint in the minds of the viewers the relevance and the communal spirit of history. As Jerome de Groot claims, “the key to the phenomena of local history is the sense of the importance of personal interest and fulfilment,” and “the action of historical investigation is liberating and rewarding” (*Consuming History* 63).

The local Anglo-Saxon history further comes to life through an elaborate re-enactment with a distinct metafictional touch, as we see actors taking a break between shots, putting on their costumes and joking. It is by “reinserting the body” through the metafictional intrusion of reality into the fictional world of documentary history, the unrelenting close-ups of re-enactors’ and amateur civilians’ faces, and their impassioned quotation from parish records that “the empty landscapes of the past live again” (“Affect and Empathy” 598). By exposing the “stitches” in the historical narrative, Wood, unlike Schama, problematises history and foregrounds the fact that it is a process open to interpretation and subject to examination and assessment of evidence and accounts (Bell and Gray 129). However unsettling, this view of history inevitably emphasises that it is man-made, although based on facts, and should therefore be properly contextualised. Similarly, the context in which history is taught should be acknowledged and its relevance clearly demonstrated. This is nowhere so apparent than in the case of multiple identities. This is one of the defining features of Britain from its earliest history, but is equally true of Bosnia and Herzegovina where waves of settlers, the rule of colonisers such as the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires, and the reconfigurations of national identities in the twentieth century created both conflict and the complex beauty of a multi-layered identity. Wood’s documentary might be used as an incentive for students to interview their own family members about the history of their family name and the movement of their ancestors through history, so as to bring attention to the *process of con-*

struction of identities, which is typical of all cultures and creates an unexpected bond between Bosnian and British history.

The Necessity of Popular History

Public space is virtually dominated by various forms of popular or public history, including historical documentaries, which demand our attention because they primarily tell us stories about ourselves. These stories mobilise potent feelings and often invoke moral lessons to be learned by the consumers of history. Their dependence on emotions does not, however, make them entirely opposed to a loosely formed cluster of scholarly ways of addressing history, in which emotions are not non-existent but simply relegated to the margins of historical discourse (*History in Practice* 166). Exploring these margins writ large in historical documentaries can reveal a complex affinity between academic and popular history and teach us how to approach both forms with a critical stance. Even the concept of “lessons from history” need not be entirely rejected, but can be recontextualised in such a way that it requires answers to questions such as: For whom are the lessons intended? Can we all understand those lessons in the same way? And how reliable are historians as teachers of those lessons?

Instead of ignoring or dismissing popular forms of history as “glossy edutainment” (Hunt 94) that should not be allowed to enter university classrooms, we should accord them due scholarly attention because “these historical products bear within them a potentiality for reading against the grain, or introducing new ways of conceptualizing the self and social knowledge; and in this they might be valuable for their defiance and dissidence” (*Consuming History* 5). It is precisely the idea of dissidence from the established modes of historical representation that encourages students to rethink the origins of these alternative interpretations and their “usability” in contemporary culture. By teaching them historical and film/visual literacy within a broad spectrum of culture-related courses, we empower them to become avid and critical readers of culture, on whom nothing is lost and who, therefore, have a much better understanding of their own position within that culture. In a fragile post-war society, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, the vast subversive potential of popular history should not be overlooked in spite of the twin pressures of neo-liberal ideology, to make our students employable, and – the imperative of leading nationalist political parties – to use education to imprint a single national/ethnic/cultural/linguistic identity on the mind of every student.

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POPULARNA POVIJEST U UČIONICI: KONSTRUIRANJE NARATIVA O NACIONALNIM IDENTITETIMA U BRITANIJI

Sažetak

Lejla MULALIĆ

Filozofski fakultet

Sveučilišta u Sarajevu

Franje Račkog 1, BiH – 71 000 Sarajevo

lejla.mulalic@ff.unsa.ba

U ovom se radu razmatra povijesni dokumentarac kao specifičan oblik prikazivanja povijesti čija popularnost sve više raste, premda još ne postoji dovoljno razvijena teorijska svijest o tom obliku neakademske povijesti. Pozicioniran između akademskog proučavanja prošlosti i popularnih medija poput televizije i filma, autorski povijesni dokumentarac, iza kojeg stoji poznati povjesničar, nadilazi različite kulturne dihotomije i zahtijeva da mu pristupimo kao zasebnom obliku povijesti. Imajući na umu subverzivni potencijal te popularnost te forme, u ovome se radu posebna pozornost posvećuje konstruiranju nacionalnih identiteta u dokumentarcima Simona Schame (*A History of Britain*) i Michaela Wooda (*The Great British Story*) kako bi se istakle prednosti njihove uporabe u podučavanju povijesti. Budući da svaka učionica egzistira unutar specifičnog društveno-povijesnog konteksta, ovo razmatranje britanskih identiteta pozicionirano je unutar kolegija o britanskoj povijesti na Odsjeku za anglistiku u Sarajevu, u širem kontekstu poslijeratne Bosne i Hercegovine, što ujedno predstavlja i podsjetnik da nikad ne poučavamo u povijesnom vakuumu. Pri poredbi Shamina i Woodova pristupa povijesti nameće se niz pitanja u vezi s ulogom povjesničara u konstruiranju specifičnih značenja prošlosti, uporabe pripovijesti za predočavanje znanja o prošlosti i značaja vizualnog jezika dokumentaraca kod uobličavanja interpretacija povijesti. Ovaj rad nastoji odgovoriti na ta pitanja i objasniti kako se studenti, kroz kritičko promišljanje povijesnog dokumentarca, mogu upoznati ne samo sa sadržajem povijesti već i s procesima u pozadini značenja koja konzumiramo, čime se, u konačnici, otkriva mnogo toga i o nama kao konzumentima.

Ključne riječi: povijesni dokumentarac, Michael Wood, nacionalni identitet, popularna povijest, javna povijest, Simon Schama