

MALE RAPE, FEMICIDE, AND TORTURE: HOW *BORGIA*: FAITH AND FEAR DEMYSTIFIES THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE

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ABSTRACT

This article argues the growing interest in investigating how popular historical television series recreates and represents the past by comparing the creative and representational choices of Tom Fontana's *Borgia: Faith and Fear* (Canal+, 2011-14) with those of Neil Jordan's *The Borgias* (Showtime, 2011-13). The comparison aims to show how these historical television series have boosted the public's interest in the branding of Italy, the Italian Renaissance and, at the same time, managed to create a unique sense of historical engagement. I call this

phenomenon 'historicity,' that is, something that 'might have happened' given the violent milieu of the times.

Even though the creators and writers alter and adapt certain facts, they successfully manage to make the viewers 'travel through time' and emotionally engage them with the past, allowing them to meet—virtually, of course—the characters and experience events that shaped Italian and European history from 1492-1503. I intend to show how Fontana's *Borgia*, in particular, succeeds in de-mythologizing the Renaissance by shattering the mythical depiction of a golden age and focusing, instead, on the prevailing unbridled violence of the times. Fontana's narrative does not shy away from displaying the most atrocious tortures, disfigurements, femicides and male rapes. Although some of these scenes are certainly alienating and shocking, and may leave the audience uncomfortable and even appalled, they succeed in reawakening historical consciousness through affective engagement, narrative transportation, and the proximity effect.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Two lavish television productions about the Borgia family—Showtime's *The Borgias* (2011-2013) and Canal +'s *Borgia: Faith and Fear* (2011-2014)—speak powerfully to a growing trend of historical narratives, which Milly Buonanno labels a “temporal turn to the past” (2012: 199). The medium of television has often presented historical facts with at least some intention of educating the public. However, in more recent times, producers and consumers have expressed a growing interest in the remediation and re-enactment of the past, a tendency prompted by what Zvetan Todorov describes as a “compulsive worrying about the past” (2001: 61). Assuming that “television is the principal means by which most people learn about history today” (Edgerton 2001: 1)¹ and that “television serves as one of our culture's primary sources for historical consciousness” (Spigel 2001: 368), these productions have boosted the transnational and post-heritage popularity of the Borgia family and public interest in the “branding of Italy as the cradle of the Renaissances (Farinacci 2022: 149) and function as those cultural phenomena that fall under the label of “Renaissance Effect” (Belfanti 2019)

Building on the themes explored in Paul Cooke and Rob Stone's *Screening European Heritage: Creating and Consuming History on Film* (2016), which examines postmodern heritage cinema, and adapting them to television studies (taking into account the latitudinal shift and blurred distinctions between the two media), this article uses mixed methods research to explore the creators' and producers' aesthetic choices, textual narratives and productive strategies to appropriate, recast and ‘decenter’ the Italian Renaissance through transnational co-productions in the post-heritage global television market. It will also briefly address the impact of these idiosyncratic transnational reappropriations of Italian history on global audiences by defining their identities “as a transnational/Italian cultural product” (Bisoni and Farinacci 2020: 49).

1 Gary Edgerton (2000) introduced the concept of television as historian. Starting from the assumption that television is the principal means by which most people learn about history, Edgerton states that watching television creates the illusion of “being there” (8). The medium is personified because the viewers feel that they are not only watching history but experiencing it. Thanks to its inherent intimacy and immediacy, the medium becomes the message itself. According to Edgerton, the highest priority of television as historian is not so much to render a factually accurate depiction, but to animate the past by accentuating those matters that are most relevant and engaging to audiences in the present. He adds that this preference is economically driven and can result in an increase in viewing figures. However, the fundamental aim of most popular televised historians is to use elements of historical accounts to create a clearer understanding of current social and cultural conditions.

More specifically, the article briefly compares the creative and representational choices of Tom Fontana's *Borgia: Faith and Fear* (Canal+, 2011-2014) with those of another Borgia-themed series that was released in the same year, *The Borgias* by Neil Jordan (Showtime, 2011-2013), both conceived and produced beyond national borders.² I will pay particular attention to the creative strategies employed in Fontana's series to demythologize the Renaissance and the function of popular heritage television within the framework of the contemporary heritage industry. I aim to address the following two questions: What type of historical representation and specificities do these transnational television productions generate? How do *Borgia* and *the Borgias* enter in dialogue with the “increasing circulation and governance of heritage beyond national borders” (Lafrenz Samuels 2018: 8) and engage with the national historical heritage patrimony of transnational production companies? My study frames cultural heritage in global terms by applying heritage film theory (Higson 1993, Vidal 2012, Cooke and Stone 2016) to television studies. It also asserts the usefulness of post-heritage considerations (Monk 2001, Abbiss 2020)³ to delineate the ideologies and the aesthetics of period dramas, using post-heritage film theory as a critical term rather than a generic category, in line with Mittell's discursive approach to the conceptualization of television genres as “cultural categories” (2001: 3).⁴ Unlike the main characteristics of heritage cinema, neither of the two series on the Borgias builds on a nostalgic and idealistic view of the nation's glorious past (Cooke and Stone 2016; Higson 1993) to “offer an escape

2 I have chosen not to compare the two series on the Borgias with other productions set in the Italian Renaissance, such as *Medici: Masters of Florence* (Rai 1, 2016), *Medici: The Magnificent 1* (Rai 1, 2018-2019), *Medici: The Magnificent 2* (Rai 1, 2019) and *Leonardo* (Rai 1, 2021), as my study focuses on how the culture and history of Italy are rebranded outside the national border. These programs are Anglo-Italian co-productions, and as such do not fall within my theoretical premises.

3 In the early 1990s, Andrew Higson used the term “heritage film” to describe a particular body of costume dramas made in the United Kingdom since the 1980s, which have since “become associated with a powerful undercurrent of nostalgia for the past” (Vidal 2012: 1). According to Lowenthal, heritage “is not an inquiry into the past, but a celebration of it [...] a profession of faith in a past tailored to present-day purposes” (X). The post-heritage framework elaborated by Monk (2011) is guided by five central elements: interrogation, subversion, subjectivity, self-consciousness, and ambiguity. The consistent application of these five elements to the study of cultural history offers a sustained challenge to the assumptions of heritage criticism, revealing the post-heritage point of view of a production.

4 According to Mittell, genres are discursive practices and “cultural products, constituted by media practices and subject to ongoing change and redefinition (2004: 1). Mittell's proposed discursive approach, which describes the relationship as being born out of “instances of generic activity in interrelated sites of audience, industrial, and cultural practices” (Mittell 2004: 25).

from the present” (Holdsworth 2011: 103) or on the myth of the golden age in the Renaissance (Levine 1969). Instead, both series rely on a “much more fluid, hybrid and plural sense” of history (Vitali and Willemsen, 10). This perspective aligns with Stone’s definition of the “postmodern heritage film” as a product where “precepts of fact, truth and history carry the same status as invention, fable and myth, and any rigidity or distinction in relation to these terms collapses” (Stone 2016: 259), thus providing an innovative hermeneutic paradigm that is culturally relevant and historically conscious.

My study aims to show that the Borgia series undermines the notion that Italy’s glorious past was a time of unparalleled beauty and challenges the nostalgic tone of period pieces intended as an escape from contemporary issues. In fact, these series present the Renaissance as an inglorious, dark, unpleasant, and dangerous era, thus creating a deromanticizing countereffect and what I define as a ‘post-nostalgic’ heritage television product. These types of programs typically depict a deviant, vicious, and highly sexualized past, combining brutality and nudity to create a spectacular effect. The traditional heritage perspective tends to generate a nostalgic gaze of the past by portraying it as a time of stability, while its societal structures provide a teleological certainty that is absent in the present. Alternatively, the ‘post-nostalgic’ heritage framework that I propose here underlines the series’ remediation of a gruesome and deglamorized past, which paradoxically offers greater historical veracity and comes across as more reflective of the contemporary era. Thus, my analysis of the Borgia series is not only situated within a “counter-heritage” (Higbee 2013: 61) paradigm but also sets a “globally identifiable picture of Italian identity and culture” (Bisoni and Farinacci 2020) against a demythologizing transnational reappropriation. By deconstructing the traditional narrative and providing an alternative rendition, the series can be seen as a subversive form of cultural resistance that seeks to challenge the status quo and disrupt the dominant discourse. This approach adds to the debate about the denationalization of heritage products by suggesting that national heritage is not just national but part of a much broader transnational discourse. This framework also takes into account the contentious issue of “ownership” of the past and supports O’Leary’s definition of “world heritage cinema,” which “implies a transfer of ownership of a cultural heritage from a community, region, or nation to a generic humanity” (O’Leary 2016: 63). In this sense, it encourages interaction between different “imagined communities” (Anderson) that can learn from each other and share their knowledge and experiences.

Taking this framework into consideration, I will examine how *Borgia* provides a unique perspective on the past and an unmatched opportunity for national and translational viewers to engage with the period’s most troubled aspects, which are only partially covered in written sources. First, I will provide a brief overview of both series; next, focusing on Fontana’s *Borgia*, I will identify a number of scenes that exemplify the creators’ unsettling ‘post-nostalgic’ approach to revisit Alexander VI’s papacy and the lives of his offspring. I will then discuss the aesthetic and conceptual relevance of *Borgia*’s efforts to deromanticize the Renaissance by reframing it as a counter-heritage and ‘post-nostalgic’ television product and conclude by considering the power of visual representation in shaping the audience’s view of history and redefining how we consume the past in a postmodern, globalized world. Ultimately, my study challenges and deconstructs Samuel’s assumptions about heritage industry being a cultural product that “traffics” in history and “commodifies” the past. According to Samuel, the heritage industry turns real-life suffering into a tourist spectacle while, at the same time, creating simulacra of a past that never was (2018: 242). Conversely, I argue that ‘post-nostalgic’ heritage programs that sensationalize sex and violence deliver an anti-mythical—albeit authentic—image of the past. They give viewers a chance to learn more about the untold brutal past and become less prone to idealize history. This particular focus on historical television programs resists “broad theoretical perspectives” (Cardwell 2006: 77), using textual features and a production studies approach as the basis for my analysis.

2. THE 2011 BORGIA BOOM

The Borgia family exploded onto our screens in 2011, capitalizing on the commercial success of *The Tudors*⁵. *Two unrelated series were released that year: The Borgias* (Showtime), by Neil Jordan, and *Borgia: Faith and Fear* (Canal+), by Tom Fontana. The unlikely airing of two transnational co-productions about the same historical topic in the same year offers a prime opportunity to examine how history is remediated in fiction beyond national borders and consumed in popular culture by international audiences. The series had been concurrently in development for years, but the producers knew nothing of each other’s projects: “they were announced literally within

5 For more information on *The Tudors*, see Wray (2011), Parrill & Robinson (2013), and Glynn (2016).

a day of one another” (Roxborough 2011). Concerned about the fact that two programs about the Borgias would compete for the same audience, Fontana and Jordan attempted to unite their projects. However, their completely different views on source material and the degree of historical accuracy that they wanted to portray resulted in their keeping the projects separate. Fontana wanted to stay as close as possible to recorded history; he even conducted research on fifteenth-century documents written in Latin. By contrast, Jordan was more interested in entertaining his audience, which he did by diverging from recorded history.

Jordan’s *The Borgias* premiered in the United States on Showtime, on April 3, 2011, before being released internationally, while Fontana’s *Borgia* was launched in Europe in the fall of the same year. On the networks that had purchased the Showtime series (British Sky Broadcasting in the United Kingdom and ProSieben in Germany), *The Borgias* appealed to a mainstream, commercial audience. *Borgia*, on the other hand, was aimed at a more high-brow audience and targeted European public broadcasters: Canal+, Atlantique, and EOS.

Showtime’s *The Borgias* is a three-season series that scholars refer to as “quality television” (McCabe and Akass 2007), “complex tv” (Mittell 2015), and “prestige drama” (Buonanno 2018: 9) for its distinctive hallmarks. These include “originality, experimentation, cutting-edge, controversial topics, complexity, visual distinctiveness, film style, genre mash-up, creative freedom, artform status” (Buonanno 2018: 10), high-quality entertainment, a high budget, “sexposition”, violence, intrigue, lavish costumes, and an all-star cast. The narrative follows the Borgia family’s ascent to power, with a particular emphasis being placed on the amoral conduct of Rodrigo Borgia – Pope Alexander VI – and the unique bond between his children, Cesare and Lucrezia. The script relies heavily on the rumors that created the myth⁶ of the infamous Borgia family. Although *The Borgias* remained high in the ratings, Showtime canceled the final season and a two-hour wrap-up film in 2013, probably because of high production costs. Series creator and executive producer Neil Jordan explained this decision as follows:

6 The “black legend” of poison, incest, and murder that surrounds the Borgia name is a direct result of the political situation at the time, when papal power quickly passed to Julius II, an old enemy of Alexander VI and, by extension, of his family. It also involved the power struggles between the Papal States and other political entities in Europe. The history of the Borgias is furthermore linked to the Black Legend of early modern Spain. This “characterization of Spain by other Europeans as a backward country of ignorance, superstition, and religious fanaticism that was unable to become a modern nation” (Greer, Mignolo and Quilligan 2007: 1) influenced writings on the Borgias as their connection to the Spanish kingdoms was clear.

For a variety of reasons, we won’t be doing a fourth season, but, “The Prince” [the final episode], when I wrote it and shot it, did seem like the end of a journey for the family. Whatever bonded them as a family dies in this episode, and the center of the drama for me was always the family (cited in Braxton 2013).

Despite the cancellation, Showtime’s Head of Entertainment David Nevins continued to praise Jordan’s talents, saying “this is what premium television can do — take stories that can’t be contained in two-hour movie and blow them up to make an amazing series. *The Borgias* is Auteur Television at its best” (cited in Keene 2013). Jordan’s auteurial stamp is most evident in his insistence on exposing the moral decadence of a society, sympathizing with deviant characters, and showing us all that is titillating about the past, even if this requires a complete re-writing of the facts. Like many scripted shows on narrowcast channels, *The Borgias* contains a great deal of typical cable TV sex, nudity, and violence, while simplifying and adapting history to contemporary sensibility and taste.

Although both series are illustrations of “Tudors-style sexed-up pop history” (Palmer 2013) and ‘post-nostalgic’ counter-heritage television programming, *Borgia: Faith and Fear* presents a more authentic Renaissance period precisely because of the authors’ and the producers’ decision to de-romanticize it by recasting its most horrific traits. Thereby, *Borgia* deconstructs the myth of a golden age when culture and civilization thrived. This utopian image is a nineteenth-century construction that viewed the Renaissance as the beginning of Western civilization’s liberation from dogma and bigotry, prior to the Age of Reason (see Burckhardt 1958). However, as later studies have shown, the Renaissance was far from idyllic: it was a period of ceaseless and destructive warfare, torture, and gore (Lee 2015, Fletcher 2021).

Historian Alexander Lee claims that, despite the tendency to consider the Renaissance a period of cultural renewal, refinement, and creative beauty, these achievements were counterbalanced by a dark, sordid, and even devilish reality. The ugly side of this period is easily overlooked because its art, literature, and cultural achievements are so seductive. Owing to the illusion of “unblemished perfection” (Lee 2015: 5), its horrific aspects have been overlooked for centuries:

Corrupt bankers, greedy politicians, sex-crazed priests, religious conflict, rampant disease, and lives of extravagance and excess were everywhere

to be seen, and the most ghastly atrocities were perpetrated under the gaze of the statues and buildings that tourists today admire with such an openmouthed adoration. It would have been all but impossible for the greatest monuments of the Renaissance to have come into being had its foremost artists, writers, and philosophers not been mired in every kind of depravity and degradation. If the Renaissance was an age of cultural angels, it was also a period of worldly demons (4).

Margaret Fletcher has recently taken a similar approach, maintaining that “the popular story of the Renaissance – like many versions of modern Western history – tends to focus on genius and glory at the expense of atrocities” (Fletcher 2021: 11).

The current historiographical emphasis on demystifying the image of the Renaissance informs Tom Fontana’s depiction of the period and confirms the categorization of *Borgia* as a ‘post-nostalgic’ counter-heritage piece. Fontana notes that the Renaissance was a highly ambiguous era, adding that “it was the age of Leonardo Da Vinci and Michelangelo, of enlightened creativity and unparalleled intellectual achievement. But it was also the age of Machiavelli, of rampant lawlessness, incessant war, and unspeakable depravity” (Fontana, IMDb). Thus, he acknowledges that his show is a mixture of intrigue, violence, murder, lust, politics, faith, incest, betrayal, and redemption. Nevertheless, this story is also as compelling and enlightening as the age in which it took place⁷. As a result, his version of the past features individuals who engage in manipulative, pathologically aggressive sexual activities and violence. The torture scenes certainly highlight the period’s intense brutality and ultimately deromanticize the Renaissance; in doing so, they distance *Borgia* once again from the traditional heritage film industry’s tendency to glorify the past and downplay its true horrors.

7 Discussing his show and the time in which it was set, Fontana continues: “At the center of the Vatican [...] was a man whose name would become synonymous with ruthlessness, and whose reign as Pope would be remembered as the most infamous chapter of the history of the Catholic church, Rodrigo Borgia. His four children [...] would provide Rodrigo with a challenge as great as the political maneuvering of his political and religious rivals. [...] Though a man of faith, Rodrigo was also in thrall to the pleasures of the flesh. Not only did he have to deal with the plotting and conspiracies of his fellow cardinals and the representatives of the great powers, but he was locked in a struggle to contain the bitter sibling rivalries that threatened to tear his family apart.” (Fontana, IMDb)

3. *BORGIA: FAITH AND FEAR*

Borgia: Faith and Fear is a collaborative, European historical drama and a prime example of the relatively new brand of transnational co-productions that have become a viable global alternative to documentaries and docudramas⁸. Filmed in the Czech Republic and Italy, *Borgia* was produced by Atlantique Productions, a subsidiary of Lagardère Entertainment, for the French premium-pay service TV Canal+ in association with EOS Entertainment. *Borgia* premiered on Sky Cinema 1 in Italy in July 2011. A second season followed in March 2013, aired on Canal+ in France, which broadcast the third and final season in September 2014.

The narrative of *Borgia*, which recounts the family’s ascent from 1492 (the year Rodrigo was elected pope) to 1507 (the year of Cesare’s death), looks beyond the “black legend of the Borgia” (Duran 2008: 72) without justifying or concealing the family’s conduct. In Fontana’s interpretation, the Borgias are neither wicked monsters nor the misunderstood victims of unfair, long-lasting defamation by their enemies. The series depicts the Borgias’ shortcomings and transgressions with intensity, though always within the context of the individuals’ motives and circumstances. Although it has abundant gore and violence, it also devotes significant time to a study of the characters’ motivations for any crime. Only Juan is depicted as purely evil, whereas the other characters’ redeeming traits feed our allegiance to them, in line with one of the signature styles of complex television.⁹ As Alexander VI, Rodrigo fights

8 The twenty-first century has seen many flourishing, internationally produced and distributed television series that rely on their international appeal to attract a modern, post-national audience. These productions share important features, such as internationally known stories and stars, the explicit use of sex and violence, characters seeking power and vicious retribution, on-location shooting, and a mix of historical fidelity and fictionalized plots. Some of those worth mentioning include *Rome* (2005–7, BBC/HBO), *The Tudors* (2007–10 Showtime), *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* (2010, Starz), *The Borgias* (2011–13, Showtime/Take 5/Octagon/Mid Atlantic Films), *Camelot* (2011, Starz/Take 5/CBC/Ecosse/Octagon), *Da Vinci’s Demons* (2013–, Starz/BBC Worldwide), *The White Queen* (BBC/Company/Czar Television, 2013) *Marco Polo* (The Weinstein Company/Netflix, 2014–16), *The Crown* (Left Bank Pictures/Sony, 2016–), *Medici* (Lux Vide/Rai, 2016–19), and *Leonardo* (Lux Vide/ Rai/ Sony, 2021–).

9 One of the defining trends of complex television (Mittell 2015) is the popularity of morally ambiguous antiheroes. Viewers actively define their relationship with a morally ambiguous character, which provides the pleasurable cognitive and affective challenge viewers expect from quality TV. These antiheroes combine admirable traits (professionalism, intelligence, or courage) with less honorable characteristics (violence, meanness, deceit, cruelty). Our relationship with morally ambiguous characters does not automatically lead to sympathy (Vaage 2015: 6) but might increase our fascination with or interest in a character (Smith 1995). For example, learning more about the motivations of morally flawed characters can increase our interest in them, but it still does not require us to sympathize with them (Mittell 2015: 163).

to maintain and strengthen his family's position as foreigners in Italian politics while making sincere efforts to reform the Church. Cesare is initially torn between his priestly responsibilities to gain the Pope's favor and his growing military aspirations: the latter ultimately prevail. Lucrezia struggles to reconcile her religious calling with her desire for marriage, all the while being used as a pawn in the political maneuverings of her father after he became pope. While the narrative clearly portrays the Borgias' actions as being motivated by violence and amorality, it also attempts to justify their depravity as an inevitable evil under the circumstances. Over the three seasons, the siblings' character arc is best described as the descent of naive individuals into corruption and ruthlessness due to forces beyond their control. Thus, the first season depicts Lucrezia as tormented by the pressure of a political marriage but seeking solace in religion. After committing a number of serious crimes and learning from her mistakes, in season three, Lucrezia becomes a confident, devout, and secure woman. Cesare, instead, grows from a stubborn, tormented teenager into the ruthless megalomaniac genius of Machiavelli's *Prince*. Cesare's escalating brutality is the result of his father's authoritarian demeanor and inflexible demands, which damage his psyche.

According to Monnet-Cantagrel, the series has a quality pedigree and an "auteur seal" (2021: 125) that must be credited to Tom Fontana, who has built a reputation in film and other media¹⁰. Television thus benefits from a transfer of legitimacy through its cinematic lineage. *Borgia's* intellectual approach derives from the literary source of its screenplay, the diaries of Johannes Burchard, the Papal Master of Ceremonies, which are a primary source material on the reign of Alexander VI. Although it is widely accepted that these diaries were fed by fifteenth-century rumors and popular fantasies, Burchard's eyewitness memoirs provide important insights into the private lives of Rodrigo Borgia and his children, as well as a rare perspective on the religious and cultural life of the Renaissance. Historical figures in Burchard's diaries include the monk Girolamo Savonarola, Leonardo da Vinci, and Niccolò Machiavelli, who plays an important role in the series and is portrayed from a unique vantage point¹¹.

10 Fontana wrote and produced the films *St. Elsewhere Homicide* and the series *Oz*.

11 Niccolò Machiavelli was first introduced to Cesare Borgia on a diplomatic mission in his role as Secretary of the Florentine Chancery in 1502. During this time, he sent dispatches to Florence and observed closely his behavior. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli uses Borgia as an illustration of the dangers of acquiring a principality at the expense of another. Pope Alexander gave him the power to set up, but most

Borgia ran for three seasons, with a total of 38 episodes being aired. This long format allows for a slower narrative pace and greater historical detail. Audiences who are unfamiliar with the period may have felt daunted by the vast number of characters and the complexity of the plot, but these aspects reflect Fontana's desire for historical verisimilitude, or 'historicity.' The same reasoning lies behind his decision to use an international cast to convey Renaissance Rome's multicultural nature. This artistic choice resulted in Rodrigo and Joffre being interpreted by Americans, Cesare by an Irishman with an English accent, and Juan by a French actor. Lucrezia was played by a Russian actress and her mother Vanozza by a Spanish one. Such contemporary multiculturalism is hard to portray in other media, particularly written texts. Fontana defied the urge to oversimplify the plot or adapt the facts to modern sensibilities, which often results in the type of historical misrepresentation that we see in Showtime's *The Borgias*. A good example of this is the way in which these series present Lucrezia's first husband and marriage at just 13 years of age. According to Bradford: "Lucrezia's marriage to Giovanni Sforza was celebrated with due pomp and festivity in the Vatican on 12 June 1493" (2004: 28). In Jordan's version of the facts, Giovanni takes the newlywed Lucrezia to his home in Pesaro straight after the wedding ceremony, where he violently rapes and abuses her until she flees with the aid of Giulia Farnese, the Pope's concubine. However, according to historical sources (including Bradford, Hibbert, Mallett, Meyer, and Strathern), Lucrezia never left Rome and the marriage was later annulled owing to a lack of consummation, as Fontana shows. In fact, Bradford writes that Alexander had ordered that the marriage was not to be consummated before November, "either out of consideration for his daughter's age or, equally likely, to enable him to have it dissolved on the grounds of non-consummation in case it no longer suited his plans" (2004: 30). Regardless of which series portrays this event more compellingly, the different versions of Lucrezia's marriage demonstrate that the makers interpret history and its protagonists differently. Lucrezia seems freer in Fontana's production for Canal+, and just as cunning and ruthless as her brothers, or even more so. Instead, Showtime portrays her as a kindhearted, innocent young woman whose only wish is for

of the time he ruled Romagna with talent and tact. Cesare's rule ended quickly, though, when his father died and a rival to the Borgia family became Pope. The use of the Borgias by Machiavelli is controversial. Some scholars think that Machiavelli's Borgia served as the model for modern state crimes. Others have historically contextualized it, attributing the admiration for such brutality to the widespread criminality and corruption of the time (see Holman 2018).



FIGURE 1, 2, 3. *BORGIA*, SEASON 1 EPISODE 1

kind, compassionate treatment. Historical sources imply that Lucrezia had political acumen and used this to her advantage. Fontana's production thus appears to characterize Lucrezia with more historical accuracy, portraying her as stubborn and even Machiavellian.

Another feature that adds to *Borgia's* historicity and places it in what I refer to as a 'post-nostalgic' heritage television paradigm is the depiction of authentic, extreme violence that

makes for uncomfortable viewing: animal brutality, disfigurement, mutilation, male rape, and femicide, among other things. As early as the first episode, we witness the most heinous crime against women: a gruesome femicide. The victim is the beautiful wife of Roman nobleman Orsini, who is caught in flagrante delicto with Juan Borgia, Pope Alexander's son. Narrowly escaping death, Juan flees through the window soon after Orsini barges in and tries to attack him. A different fate awaits the wife: a disturbing—albeit historically authentic—sequence shows Orsini beating his wife to death with the iron fireplace poker. He then tosses the poker onto her corpse and exits the scene, leaving the bloodshed for the servants to clean up.

This compelling sequence employs a variety of stylistic conventions and editing practices of the horror film genre that contribute to heightening the repulsion for this revolting crime and cognitively pairing it with torture and repugnance. It opens with a classic "jump scare," traditionally a quiet scene interrupted by a sudden, loud action taken by a character. In this case, the husband—ominously holding a fireplace poker in his hands—abruptly opens the door, interrupting Juan and his lover's passionate kiss. A handheld POV camera follows the horror, and rapid and disorienting cuts create confusion and agitation. The woman's close-ups enhance immediacy and intensity, drawing us into her terrified state and compelling us to empathize with her suffering. In keeping with classic genre conventions and their penchant for gore, the sequence also features haunting extra-diegetic musical accompaniment and concludes with a bird's-eye view (coupled with a Dutch angle) of the lifeless woman covered in blood, lying at the feet of her executioner. The accompanying musical passages enhance the force of the scene both when present and when not; the notes dissolve when the husband turns to beat his wife to death, at which point we hear only diegetic beating sound effects. In fact, the lack of music is equally powerful in this sequence, as its disappearance allows the audience to focus on the brutality.

This scene reflects *Borgia's* 'post-nostalgic' and demythologizing approach to post-heritage television and illustrates the pervasiveness of femicide at the time. Crouzet, Pavann, and Vigueur (2018) recently argued that Renaissance women were punished for adultery and for participating in contemporary cultural and political innovation. The authors take the cases of three women, all wives of influential Italian Renaissance lords, who were beheaded for adultery on their husband's orders between 1391 and 1425. By condemning them to death, the husbands demonstrated their authority



FIGURE 4. CREDIT: NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY/SCIENCE SOURCE

over the women's fates. Colin maintains that "frequent domestic violence was an undeniable aspect of early modern Italian society" (2021: 145). This type of assault was a serious threat as "twenty-one women in the sample of 658 confirmed homicides (~3.5%) died at their husband's or lover's hands" (Colin 2021: 141). Although Colin's study focuses on the homicide of both genders in early modern Bologna, she describes cases of sex- and romance-related femicide that were triggered by "either a husband's jealousy over his wife's perceived sexual infidelities or a lover's unwillingness to accept that his relationship with a prostitute was not mutually emotional" (147). Colin furthermore writes that "these men killed their wives or *meretrici* because they felt aggrieved at their inability to properly enforce the hierarchies of man and woman that undergirded early modern marital relations" (147). According to her research, hegemonic masculinity and dominant patriarchy were socially acceptable aspects of love

and marriage in the early modern period, and femicide occurred within the romantic context when that dominance was insufficient or challenged.

Another study that is useful to cite here is Trevor Dean's (2004) examination of domestic violence and assaults in Bologna in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. From the voluminous records of the criminal court of Bologna, the author concludes that, when women were the victims of homicide, there was a strong likelihood that the killer was the husband (usually a 50:50 ratio). He argues that levels of domestic violence were high: "typically, wife-battering happened in the home, with the husband apparently seizing on whatever sharp object was at hand – often a bread-knife, sometimes scissors – and dealing several blows to the upper parts of his wife's body (the head, neck, arms and shoulders), causing bloodshed, the element that prompted prosecution" (528). Hence, although historical records suggest that Orsini's wife died differently, *Borgia's* depiction of the aftermath of an adulterous affair is true to the 'hidden' zeitgeist of the Renaissance, no matter how disturbing and 'post-nostalgic' we may label it. For this reason, *Borgia: Faith and Fear* succeeds in evoking a sense of historicity and making the characters feel 'verisimilar' in a way that few period pieces can.

The graphic description of torture methods, which were common in medieval and early modern Europe, is another feature of *Borgia's* 'post-nostalgic' approach to history. In episode 5 of season 1, a traitor is sentenced to one of the most extreme and gruesome methods of execution: death by sawing. This method saw the offender hung upside down while a large saw was used to cut them in half from the crotch toward the head. This cruelty allowed enough blood to reach the victim's brain and keep them alive until the saw hit the main arteries in the abdomen.¹²

What is most astonishing about this sequence is the fact that the Borgia Pope himself ordered the execution after discovering the spectators' enjoyment of watching dogs fighting over a human head near the Vatican. Accounts of the dog fight made it to Florence, and then spread across the world. The Pope thought it would taint the Vatican's image and thereby deter people from visiting Rome, spending money, and contributing to the Vatican's coffers. Thus, the Pope could not allow the organizers of the dog fight to go unpunished and had to set an example to prevent a recurrence. In

12 At the time, this method of execution was commonly used in the Middle East, Europe, and parts of Asia. It was also practiced throughout the Roman Empire and was regarded as Emperor Caligula's preferred method of punishment (see Taussig 1984).



FIGURE 5,6,7,8. *BORGIA*: SEASON 1 EPISODE 5

this framework, the gruesome execution was significant in reasserting the Vatican's reputation, upper hand, and power. The cinematography in this sequence reveals another crucial, sociocultural aspect of Renaissance society and the human psyche; the interplay of the crowd's POV shots and reaction shots illustrates the social ramifications of crime and punishment, and the morbid pleasure the crowd gains from witnessing another's misfortune. This phenomenon has been dubbed *schadenfreude*¹³, which usually occurs when we witness and take delight in the adversities of others. It has permeated civilization for centuries and stems from deeply rooted latent emotions. Expressing these emotions in group gatherings causes a mob mentality that, in turn, tends to feed that very emotion. Scholars have argued that such mentality can sanction "unacceptable types of brutality" (Ruggiero 1978: 251), but this observation ignores the—albeit dormant—psychology that resurfaces when we witness the suffering of oth-

13 Smith (2013) has argued that *schadenfreude* is "a natural human emotion, and it pervades our experience" (XVIII).

ers, especially during public executions. Mob mentality is not necessarily the driver behind the pleasure derived from gory executions; instead, it triggers the mind's existing disposition to *schadenfreude*.

In line with current psychological research on *schadenfreude* (Dasborough and Harvey 2017, Kalra and Narang 2019, Smith 2013, Watt Smith 2018), some scholars argue that public executions provided catharsis and psychological relief to the onlookers in that they knew that they were not those being executed. Perhaps it reinforced the economic, religious, social, and political stability that the offender had undermined. Regarding *Borgia*, this ghastly public execution reiterates the power of television to deliver content that demystifies the era's unblemished reputation, which is frequently glossed over in written texts. The cinematic rendition of the execution sequence illustrates this argument.

The execution of Friar Girolamo Savonarola in episode 4 of season 2 offers another perspective on *schadenfreude*. A Dominican friar from Ferrara, Girolamo Savonarola became the moral dictator of Florence when the Medicis were tem-



FIGURE 9, 10, 11, 12, 13. *BORGIA*, SEASON 2 EPISODE 4

porarily expelled in 1494. He earned a reputation for his insistence on austerity and aversion to all forms of pleasure and recreation. A renowned prophet and a fervent preacher who was obsessed with sin, he awaited God's vengeance on humanity. Not unsurprisingly, Savonarola attracted many powerful enemies, notably Pope Alexander VI, who had legitimate concerns about Savonarola's denunciation of the

Curia's moral laxity and material excess. The Pope forbade his preaching before excommunicating him for heresy, and eventually had the friar imprisoned, tortured, hanged, and burned alongside two of his closest companions¹⁴. Savonarola's execution in *Borgia* poignantly highlights people's delight in assisting the punishment of someone who has defied social order, in this case the Pontiff of Rome. The scene alternates long shots of the friar with POV shots of the cheering crowd, panning slowly across the Florentine crowd in Piazza della Signoria as they sadistically cheer at the sight of the three bodies. Singing and dancing around the fire, they throw stones at the corpses with contempt.

This is precisely the type of historicity that typically interferes with entertainment as it portrays events in a brutal way, making for unpleasant and 'post-nostalgic' viewing.

Borgia's historical verisimilitude continues in episode 8 of the first season, ominously entitled "Prelude to the Apocalypse." It depicts the rivalry between Marcantonio

14 For further information on Savonarola see Dall'Aglio (2010) and Weinstein (2011).



FIGURE 14, 15, 16, 17, 18. *BORGIA*, SEASON 1 EPISODE 8

Colonna and Cesare Borgia, whose families have long been at odds, culminating in a horrific act that would affect even the most desensitized viewer. The Borgia brothers had already assaulted Marcantonio, severing one of his fingers, when Cesare went on to taunt Marcantonio, asking if he could still gratify himself with only four fingers. Marcantonio takes his revenge when the Pope, who drastically underestimates the animosity between the families, sends Cesare on a peace mission to the Colonnas. Once in Marcantonio's castle, Cesare is stripped naked, tortured, and thrown into a cell. After humiliating him for several days, Marcantonio eventually gives Cesare new clothing and invites him to dine. Once he has ascertained that the food is not poisoned, the ravenous Cesare begins to devour it. Unexpectedly, Marcantonio delivers an odd speech about the sensual nature of food and the body's reaction to physical stimuli. He then mentions his missing finger and gestures to his guards to hold Cesare down on the table; what follows is the appalling scene of Cesare's rape by the hands of Marcantonio.

The superb cinematography of this sequence adds to the tension and increases the viewer's discomfort and disgust.

Low lighting, jarring camera movements, and reverse angles juxtaposing Cesare's terror with Marcantonio's sadism portray such dehumanization and horror as to change our perception of the Renaissance. In this increasingly corrupt society, forgiveness is rarely a virtue, and retribution the most widespread and conventional modus operandi. Marcantonio's tragic demise perfectly illustrates such vengeance. In episode

11 of the first season, fittingly entitled “God’s Monster,” Marcantonio is captured by the papal guards on the charge of treason and imprisoned at the Castle of the Holy Angel. In retaliation for being raped, Cesare instructs his loyal hitman Miguel De Corella to torture rather than kill Marcantonio. This involves severing his testicles and leaving him to die. Hence, far from being a magnificent era of art and elegance, *Borgia* reveals how the Renaissance plunged into viciousness and savagery, and only the strongest and most powerful survived and prospered.

Historians agree that violence between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries is undisputed and “a cultural issue” (Davies 2013: 3). As Muchembled and Birrell write, “everybody was violent at the end of the Middle Ages and in early modern times [...] The brutality of human relations was a universal social language, considered normal and necessary in the West until at least the seventeenth century” (2012: 8, 21). Most violence occurred in defense of honor, since

the law of shame ruled this world [...] If dishonour fell on an individual, it contaminated all the members of his ‘clan’, his close family, relatives, neighbours, friends – even the whole village or urban district [...] In this context, violence was both legitimate and obligatory in order to escape shame (Muchembled and Birrell 2012: 26).

Likewise, Cohen’s *Love and Death in Renaissance Italy* portrays violence, jealousy, love, and murder as the driving forces of the time. The book details Cohen’s meticulous research at the Archivio di Stato in Rome on several trials (*processi*) regarding domestic dramas affecting the lives of ordinary people that exemplify Renaissance Italian society’s dark side. Those accounts depict early modern Rome as a place of extreme brutality, unrestrained vice, gory retribution, sexual assault, and rape.

Although non-fiction provides valuable insight into the social dynamics of the period, it fails to elicit “history’s affective turn” (Agnew 2007: 299), which is a hallmark of the audiovisual. While I concur with Agnew’s argument that historical “reenactment constitutes a break with more traditional forms of historiography” (301), I disagree that “as a form of affective history [...] reenactment is less concerned with events, processes or structures than with the individual’s physical and psychological experience” (301). On the contrary, I believe that viewing leads to historical immersion and psychological involvement, promoting the construction of an entirely new

way of consuming history. This distinctive practice is what I call an ‘affective screened historical experience,’ a notion that evokes Collingwood’s definition of screened history as “a sympathetic identification with the past” (1946: 215) and a precondition for historical understanding. A key benefit of historical series like *Borgia* is that viewers can emotionally engage with the screened past by immersing themselves in history and vicariously participating in the dramas and atrocities of the period.

4. CONCLUSION

The principal argument that I have raised in this article is that it has never been more important to investigate how televised historical drama recreates and represents the past; as Robert Rosenstone (2003) acknowledges, “the increasing presence of the visual media in modern culture and the vast increase in TV channels seems to ensure that most people now get their knowledge of the past, once school is over, from the visual media” (10). Scholars of screened history recognize “the power of the mass media to shape perception and to affect interpretation of the past” (Weinstein 42). The Canal+ series *Borgia: Faith and Fear* is an excellent case study for examining how a contemporary television program portrays the Italian Renaissance and the papacy of Alexander VI and what impact historical fiction can have on audiences’ perceptions of the past. This subsequently affects the collective memory of the public domain. By focusing on specific aspects of production and offering a textual analysis of *Borgia*, this article reveals the usefulness of post-heritage considerations in framing the analysis of period dramas. In line with this approach, my case study shows how a popular contemporary television series chooses to reappropriate and recast the Italian Renaissance beyond the national borders, “as a transnational/Italian cultural product” (Bisoni and Farinacci 2020: 49) for a transnational audience.

My study also demonstrates that the *Borgia* series undermines the idealized view of Italy rooted in its glorious past, creating a deromanticizing countereffect and what I define as a ‘post-nostalgic’ heritage television product. Within this new framework, *Borgia* offers a counter-heritage portrayal that subverts and deconstructs the dominant heritage discourse and recasts the Renaissance as a gruesome and anti-mythical period.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of *Borgia* is precisely its historical authenticity. No effort is made to romanticize

the past in consideration of contemporary sensibilities, and appalling behavior is depicted almost without criticism or any need to moralize it. Events that would be scandalous today, such as popes and cardinals having illegitimate children and concubines, are depicted as common occurrences. Although the series includes numerous violent and sexual scenes, these are not unrealistically fabricated and as such have a strong impact on the audience. Instead of adapting the past to suit modern tastes, the writers deliver scenes showing authentic, brutal methods of punishment. Audiences may be appalled, but the producers anticipated this reaction. As Lee insightfully argues,

if we look behind the façade of beauty [...] the true character of the Renaissance becomes clear. Far from being an age of unalloyed wonder, it was a period of sex, scandal, and suffering. Its cities were filled with depravity and inequality, its streets pululated with prostitutes and perverted priests, and its houses played home to seduction, sickness, shady backroom deals, and conspiracies of every variety (2015: 352).

In line with Lee's study, *Borgia* shows us a 'post-nostalgic,' sordid, and vicious past where power, politics, perversity, and corruption simmer beneath the elegant surface. It is precisely this 'crude' authenticity in the depiction of every aspect of the Renaissance that encapsulates the sense of historical awareness prompted by *Borgia: Faith and Fear* and strongly contributes to a more canonical historiographical understanding.

The final sequence of the first season brilliantly encapsulates the overwhelming weight of the Renaissance's brutal essence, which visually 'crashes' the Pope. Alexander's bird's-eye view, as the culmination of a crane shot, elicits conflicting and unexpected reactions from the audience. This sequence disavows the biased notion of the Renaissance as a golden age of elegance and beauty by exposing a more authentic—albeit uncomfortable—side of the period and disempowering the most powerful figure of the time: Christ's representative on earth. Finally, this sequence epitomizes the overlooked value of 'post-nostalgic' historical dramas like *Borgia*, which depict all aspects of the past and do not hesitate to demythologize one of history's most acclaimed epochs.



FIGURE 19. *BORGIA*, SEASON 1 EPISODE 12

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TV Series

Borgia (2011-2014)

The Borgias (2011-2013)

The Tudors (2007-2010)