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Regency Era Englishness for the Netflix Generation: *Taboo* (2017-present) and *Bridgerton* (2020-present)¹

1. Introduction

The recent, fundamental changes in the field of film production and distribution have given rise to a great proliferation of British and American TV and streaming series, particularly on streaming platforms such as Amazon Prime, Netflix, Hulu, and Disney Plus. Strategies such as credit-skipping and auto-play immerse the viewer in an uninterrupted flow of narrative which itself generates new consumption patterns of TV narratives and greatly contributes to their popularity (cf. Jenner 2018, 125). In fact, due to their quality as cinematic, high-budget spectacles, TV and streaming series have even become the dominant modes of film reception in recent years (cf. 5). In what scholars see as "an over-crowded media environment" (Buonanno 2018, 4), there is an exceptionally high demand for new TV fiction, and the rich tapestry of British history has provided ample material for the whole industry, with series like *The Crown* (Peter Morgan, 2016-present), *Bridgerton* (Chris van Dusen, 2020-present), and *Taboo* (Stephen Knight, 2017-present) as the most prominent examples. As fictionalized narratives about the past, these series also incorporate specific treatments of national identity, one of the central concerns of films dealing with history in general (cf. Chapman 2005, 6) and thereby a promising field for academic investigations from the perspective of Cultural Studies. This contribution assumes as its point of departure that filmic texts are pervasive and widely consumed cultural products that represent negotiations of national identity and comprise an important part of the public debate on national identity and belonging.

In fact, the Regency era, as Charlotte Higgins comments, "occupies a vastly disproportionate place in the British, and increasingly the global, imaginary" (2022). Therefore, this article will look at the way English national identity has been constructed, maintained, and subverted in *Taboo* and *Bridgerton*. Both series are set in early 19th-century England and contain fictional narratives firmly rooted in the genre conventions of the adventure period drama and the period melodrama respectively, but they also include historical characters.

This article will claim that recent TV and streaming series create a Regency Englishness which, while retaining some of the elements popularized by the Austen adaptations, moves far beyond the traditional 'heritage' depiction. The series incorporate various strategies to furnish Regency Englishness for a younger audience

1 Following the unexpected passing of Prof. Dr. Oliver von Knebel Doeberitz, this article is published posthumously in its original form and without any additional changes from the author after acceptance.

and thereby attempt to engage with the current cultural moment in order to capture "the attention and time of an increasingly sliced and diced aggregate of viewers and subscribers" (Buonanno 2018, 5). The paper will claim that both series employ ethnic markers and historical inaccuracies, in particular, as a crucial strategy in constructing their protagonists with an appealing identity that addresses the concerns of contemporary audiences and therefore furnishes the 'product' with a global appeal that resonates thoroughly with its target groups and can also be regarded as part of more recent developments in 'global television' (cf. Lobato 2019, 100). Through this reconfiguration of Regency Englishness, then, the series contribute to re-positioning a marketable brand of Englishness as a commercially attractive signifier of difference within the global popular media landscape of the 21st century.

2. National Identities, Film, and Regency Englishness

British Cultural Studies' predominant view on both individual and collective identities employs a constructivist framework, combining influences of postmodernism, poststructuralism, and also postcolonial approaches (cf. Marchart 2018, 171). Consequently, identity is regarded as a discursive construction that is continually reproduced in discourse and that is shaped by social status, class, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation, but also by the idea of national belonging (cf. Bechhofer and McCrone 2009, 192; Hearn 2009, 145). As a form of collective identity, national identities are also of a dynamic nature, since they exist parallel to and also compete with other forms of collective identities such as gender, ethnicity, sexuality, class, religious affiliation, social status, and age, and they are therefore subject to a plethora of (shifting) meanings, shaped by the presence of diverse political, cultural, ethnic, and social factors (cf. Calhoun 1997, 43).

As mentioned above, popular culture and its multiple representations of national identities in feature films, TV or streaming series, popular music, and on social media websites, offer a rich source for the construction of national identities. The power of these representations of national identities in popular culture in shaping how both individual and collective identities are perceived and negotiated has been given ample attention in recent scholarly research (cf. Edensor 2002, 17; cf. Eley and Suny 1996, 7; cf. Rosie and Petersoo 2009, 122). However, the impact on global audiences of representing national identities on screen is difficult to fathom, since, as Higson claims, "different audiences engage with or prioritise different aspects of the films as texts, and rework them within their own frames of reference" (2011, 38). Moreover, staging the past in contemporary period drama shows us a past that is "always in the process of being re-invented; for the past is remade from the perspectives of current cultural and social ambitions, politics, desires, market strategies, and historiography" (Pucci and Thompson 2003, 2).

Investigating the presence of British history and engagement with questions of British national identities in global popular culture, the last decade has proved to be productive terrain. Several feature films as well as TV and streaming series centre on the life of the upper classes and on royalty: *Downton Abbey* (2010-2022), *The Crown* (2016-present), *Victoria* (2016-2019), *Victoria & Abdul* (2017), or *Diana* (2013). The

BBC TV series *Taboo* (2017-present), and the US TV series *The Terror* (2018-2019) deal with Britain's colonial history. Whether produced by large Hollywood film studios or by the BBC, these commercial products rely on 'selling Englishness' as a "reasonable business strategy" (Higson 2011, 25).

In fact, Regency England, roughly the period between 1810 and 1820, has been given a very prominent role in filmic engagements with British history. The period itself is often seen as a watershed decade, as the final moment "before the fall into a modern world of mass culture and state regulation" (Crang 2003, 114). This makes it an enticing era for nostalgic desires for an allegedly 'simpler' past, and the portrayal of Regency England also offers a sense of relief to the audience, because the rigid moral conventions no longer suppress individual choice (cf. Parrill 2002, 7). In his survey of Englishness in British film, Higson differentiates three "dominant iconographies of Englishness:" "traditional heritage England," "mundane urban modernity," and "monumental metropolitan modernity" (2011, 81). Indeed, due to the popularity of Jane Austen adaptations since the mid-1990s, in particular, depictions of the life of this "traditional heritage England" have become a staple of popular culture's engagement with the late 18th and early 19th centuries, turning the writer and her texts "into a full-blown mass-cultural commodity" (Sadoff 2010, 85). In fact, the mania for Austen adaptations, especially in the early 2000s, has propelled Regency England to the very top among depictions of historical periods in contemporary popular culture (cf. Pucci and Thompson 2003, 5). In her exploration of Austen adaptations of the early 2000s, Sadoff argues that "as filmmakers seek to consolidate previous audiences with new demographics by age and national location, Regency characters have been updated, narrative tone freely adapted, cultural setting and point of view altered" (2010, 89). Set in the same period, Georgian England, the recent TV series *Taboo* and, more explicitly, the streaming series *Bridgerton* can be regarded as part of this cultural (and commercial) trend.

Scholarly attention to representations of Regency England on screen since around 2000 has been predominantly concerned with aspects of gender, class, and history, as well as with processes of adaptation and consumption patterns (cf. Sadoff 2010). Moreover, scholars have also tackled the representation of English national identity in Austen adaptations, arriving at often critical conclusions (cf. Peters 2018, 75). For example, Thompson contends that Austen can be regarded as "the very embodiment of a white Englishness" (Thompson 2003, 23) and that contemporary filmic adaptations with their focus on tradition perpetuate "a preservation of a purely white England" (2003, 23), while other critics suggest that "her work is used to sustain a reactionary and deeply conservative vision of Englishness" (Crang 2003, 112).

Surveying the rich landscape of Austen adaptations at the turn of the millennium, scholars have introduced the idea of the 'post-heritage' film, "a kind of historical costume drama that uses the past in a deliberate or explicit way to explore current issues in cultural politics" (Pucci and Thompson 2003, 3). This quality of post-heritage, this article argues, reaches a full-blown quality with depictions of what I will call 'post-Austen Regency Englishness' in *Taboo* and in *Bridgerton*. In the following, this contribution will explore the new quality of Regency Englishness in these more recent TV and streaming series and will also highlight to what extent they broaden the

thematic scope of representations of this particular period in contemporary popular culture.

3. Dark England: *Taboo*

The television series *Taboo* was created by Stephen Knight and Tom and Edward Hardy, and it was screened in the UK in 2017 on BBC One and made available on the streaming service Amazon Prime which ensured a global distribution. It consists of eight episodes and was advertised as a historical crime drama. The series is set in 1814 and centres on the adventures of James Delaney (Tom Hardy) who has arrived back in London after a twelve-year-stay in Africa. Delaney is styled as the solitary protagonist typical of the TV adventure genre and representative of current TV's "antiheroic trend that has fuelled intriguing viewing pleasure as much as intellectual speculations and ethical dilemmas" (Buonanno 2018, 10). He enters into a confrontation with the powerful East India Company over a piece of land on the West coast of North America, which Delaney has inherited from his father who had made a dubious trade with the local Native American tribe.

While the classical score of the opening credits still alludes to the convention of the heritage film, the visual content depicting people underwater in the aftermath of a shipwreck foregrounds death and disaster and is of a decidedly gothic nature. Indeed, with its gritty, Darwinian portrayal of London's 'dark underbelly' and in its use of scenes set in a stormy, rainy, and even hostile countryside, *Taboo* departs radically from the iconography of the heritage film with its focus on touristy scenery (cf. Higson 2011, 143). The series departs from this tradition not only by focusing on the criminal underworld of Regency London in its many forms, but also by a rejection of the sanitized version of national identity that is primarily located in a rural environment, as espoused by the aforementioned flurry of Austen adaptations. This can, for example, be gauged from the very beginning of the first episode. When Delaney arrives in London, an establishing, wide-angle shot, so abundantly used in previous Austen adaptations to stage country houses and rural scenery, presents the skyline of early 19th-century London, albeit hardly visible because of torrential rainfall and accompanied by thunder that even drowns out the extradiegetic music (E1, 00:01:58), eliminating any sense of the picturesque. In the following, the analysis of Regency Englishness will focus primarily on Delaney's character, the social, ethnic, and sexual markers of identities, the protagonist's attitude towards slavery, as well as on the portrayal of the upper class to explore the creation of a decidedly post-Austen Englishness so prevalent throughout the series.

Regency Englishness in *Taboo* is present on many levels and permeates markers of class, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. Most prominently, the series contains a protagonist who is located on the very fringes of English society. James Delaney is the son of an Englishman and a Native American mother of the Nootka tribe, bought by his father with gunpowder and later kept at Bedlam Asylum in London. To the knowing reader of English fiction, her character shows some similarity to *Jane Eyre's* Bertha Mason, the West Indian wife of Mr. Rochester. Thus, Delaney's very existence is a token of the crimes perpetrated by the English throughout the British Empire and their

treatment of indigenous societies at the colonial periphery. The hybrid ethnic identity of Delaney is mirrored by his precarious social status. Born to his wealthy merchant father, he is nevertheless shunned by his class, due to his unconventional behaviour and his 'dark' past in the colonial fringes of India and Africa, which testifies to current TV's reliance on characters "endowed with moral ambiguity, damaging flaws, enduring strength, unapologetic wickedness" (Buonanno 2018, 10). Nonetheless, with regard to the portrayal of the protagonist, Regency Englishness in *Taboo*, it appears, shows, in its hybrid nature and in the series' focus on foregrounding Delaney's non-conformity, similarities to identity constructions in contemporary society, and it is also entirely in line with current British film-making's concern with showing diversity in British history (cf. Higson 2011, 242). It is far removed from the established images of an exclusively white, heterosexual, and middle- or upper-class identity so prevalent in the traditional heritage film of the 1990s and early 2000s.

Besides the hybrid identity of the protagonist, Regency society is sketched as ethnically diverse, with the German brothel mistress Helga (Franka Potente) who raises the mixed-race child Winter (Ruby-May Martinho), the black lawyer George Chichester (Lucian Msamati), Delaney's Maori sailor comrade (Danny Ligairi) and many others. Homosexuality is treated as an established presence in Regency society. Helga offers the protagonist both women and men to sleep with (E1, 00:23:58), and the actress Lorna Bow (Jessie Buckley) is kissed by a woman (E3, 00:52:48), whereas the caretakers of Delaney's father's illegitimate son claim that their sacrifice in raising him has prevented the child from having to "suck cock in St Giles" (E1, 00:18:38). Moreover, the series includes the depiction of a Molly house (E3, 00:30:52), a meeting point for male gay Londoners, in which Delaney speaks with the crossdressing Godfrey (Edward Hogg), who works as an office clerk with the East India Company. Thus, *Taboo* stages a thriving London underworld, in which male same sex attraction is pervasive, despite the fact that it is officially prohibited. Strikingly, the ethnic and sexual diversity of London society is largely restricted to the lower classes and precludes the ruling elite. The movers and shakers of the East India Company (EIC) are almost exclusively shown to be elderly white men, similar to the portrayal of the court.

Slavery appears as a major topic in *Taboo*, most prominently in Delaney's intention to hold the EIC responsible for the drowning of slaves off the West African coast, visually featured in the opening credits of the series. Having once been an employee of the EIC and having taken part in shipping slaves to America, Delaney shows deeply-felt repentance after his return to London and helps to investigate the EIC's criminal dealings. In the figure of Delaney, Regency Englishness thus appears shaken and troubled by colonial guilt, dramatized not only by the plot, but also by the accompanying music and by frequent close-up facial shots to reveal his pain at the sight of slavery-related events (cf. E2, 00:29:30). One could even argue that the figure of Delaney metaphorically represents the nation's sense of guilt and shame in the 21st century, yet another example of how popular culture negotiates current ideological issues in post-Austen historical period drama. The series, therefore, comprises a 'decolonized' version of Regency Englishness and thereby answers to criticism of the image of literary portrayals and their filmic adaptations, as, for example, famously highlighted by Edward Said in his complaint about the absence of slavery in Austen's

novels (cf. Crang 2003, 113). It also continues an (albeit cautious) tradition of including these problematic aspects of British history in filmic stagings of Regency Englishness, as attempted by Patricia Rozema's adaptation of Austen's novel *Mansfield Park* (1999; cf. Lynch 2003, 72).

In order to further explore the nature of Regency Englishness and its relation to colonialism in the series, it is revealing to take a closer look at the depiction of the very top of English society, the Prince Regent (Mark Gatiss), the fictional representation of the later George IV. Depicted as a grossly obese person with a double chin, unclean skin, extravagant dress and victim to his often-bizarre whims, the Prince Regent is fashioned as the very embodiment of decadent, overindulgent consumption. The first appearance of the Prince Regent starts with a scenic view of the façade of his dwelling, before the viewer follows servants and visitors through the magnificent halls with their marble floors, exquisite furniture and abundant lighting (E2, 00:13:29-00:13:49). The presence of colonial issues is highlighted in every single appearance of the Prince Regent through decorations in his room, ranging from stuffed African animals including a life-size zebra (E2, 00:14:20), a giraffe (E3, 00:07:41), and an ostrich (E5, 00:35:14), to leopard and lion skins, sumptuous bowls of tropical fruit, and bouquets of exotic flowers (E2, 00:14:38). Thus, the very centre of royal power is shown as being inextricably bound up with the affairs of the British Empire. The Prince Regent, who in one scene even breakfasts on a colossal ostrich egg (E5, 00:35:18), appears as the greedy consumer nourishing himself on the resources of the colonial periphery. He also presents a stark antidote to the repenting, anti-colonial outsider Delaney, which, on the level of narrative, corresponds to the pattern of binary constellations of typical TV narration (cf. Bignell 2008, 94). Espoused by the Prince Regent, as well as the leaders of the EIC, the representation of the elites in *Taboo* unites all the negative, discriminatory elements linked to Britain's colonial past. Besides, in pressurizing Delaney to comply with their demands and by addressing his responsibility as a 'British subject,' they are also the ones who instrumentalize national identity for private gain (cf. E1, 00:50:30).

Finally, it is revealing to explore to what extent critics and commentators have treated the question of Regency Englishness in *Taboo*. Not surprisingly, commentary on the series' depiction of the workings of the British Empire attracted most attention. The show's creator Stephen Knight spoke about his intentions to reveal the EIC as "the equivalent of the CIA, the NSA and the biggest, baddest multinational corporation on earth, all rolled into one self-righteous, religiously motivated monolith" (Knight, qtd. in BBC 2014). Historians, however, have complained about the historical inaccuracy in presenting the EIC as involved in the transatlantic slave trade (cf. Major 2017; Sing and Copping 2014).

To sum up, both protagonist and antagonists in *Taboo* appear to be heavily involved in aspects of colonial exploitation, exhibiting a binary opposition between repentance and greedy consumption, with the sympathies of the viewer channelled towards Delaney's position. By crafting both the EIC and the British establishment as prime agents in the slave trade, the series incorporates contemporary debates about Britain's involvement in the slave trade, which have grown, especially after the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States. Thereby, *Taboo* offers a scathing critique

of any notions of imperial nostalgia in contemporary British political culture. This ideological positioning as moral critique of Britain's imperial past is in line with the BBC's understanding of itself as an institution with a responsibility to educate the public (cf. Voigts-Virchow 2004, 17) and that has attracted right-wing criticism for its allegedly progressive agenda. Besides that, *Taboo* is also produced as a slick entertainment product that, in providing a popular outlet to stage moral shame about Britain's historical crimes, is designed to appeal to global audiences equally critical of Britain's imperial past.

4. Regency Englishness 'Light:' *Bridgerton*

Following in the footsteps of the hugely successful series *Downton Abbey* with its depiction of English upper-class life, *Bridgerton* is an American streaming series on the platform Netflix, starting in 2020 and spanning two seasons to date, each with eight episodes. Created by the American producer Chris Van Dusen and produced by the television company Shondaland, *Bridgerton* is based on Julia Quinn's eight Regency romance novels of the early 2000s, dealing with the story of the fictional Bridgerton family. Directed at "the millennial cohort that makes up the majority of the subscriber base of Netflix" (Matrix 2014, 119), the show quickly became one of Netflix's most successful streaming series. As an American production, *Bridgerton* comprises, as Andrew Higson puts it, 'culturally English filmmaking,' "films that are in some way self-consciously engaging with English culture" (2011, 25). In her voice-over narration, the mysterious Lady Whistledown (Julie Andrews), whose identity is uncovered at the very end of the first season, informs the viewer about the dealings of the participants of the London season, presenting the life of the upper class and their intense focus on marriage policies destined to enlarge the family's material position and influence. With its staging of mass-market romance with global appeal, the series targets a predominantly female audience.

Apart from the detailed rendering of romance, *Bridgerton* makes only passing reference to the social, cultural and political context of Regency England. Occasionally, the characters talk briefly about English intellectuals and writers, such as John Locke (cf. S1, E4, 00:33:35), Lord Byron (cf. S1, E1, 31:35), and Mary Wollstonecraft (cf. S2, E1, 00:22:50), and there are a few casual nods to early 19th-century history (cf. S1, E2, 00:17:37), but England itself is hardly mentioned at all. While the setting is frequently re-established by a totalizing shot depicting the London cityscape, the camera quickly zooms in on Grosvenor Square, the home of the Bridgerton family, while the seats of the city's political and economic power remain conspicuously absent (cf. S1, E1, 00:00:25). In fact, the establishing shot has St. Pauls as the only easily recognizable building safely lodged in the far distance. The series' opening credits, on the other hand, centre on a tree by a river, with a myriad of rose-coloured blossoms opening up, and they also depict church spires and rooftops behind green, sun-lit pastures, evoking the idea of 'merry old England' and thereby drawing on the traditions of the classic heritage film (cf. S1, E1, 00:08:22). The city as such appears absent, reducing London to a collection of amusement venues, town houses, palaces or idyllic river scenes in perpetual sunshine. Thus, England itself remains a largely empty

signifier, which allows for easy consumption by global audiences little familiar with the complexities of British history.

By far the most obvious and attention-generating strategy of the producers lies in the creation of an ethnically hyper-diverse Regency society, symbolized, above all, by a counterfactual mixed-race Queen Charlotte (Golda Rosheuvel). Non-white actors are given prominent roles within the series: the protagonist in the first Season, the Duke of Hastings, is played by Regé-Jean Page, a British actor born in Zimbabwe. In Season 2, the Indian sisters Kate and Edwina Sharma are played by British-Indian actresses Simone Ashley and Charithra Chandran. Chris Van Dusen, the American producer of the show, explained the decision to create a society that is "multi-hued, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, where the color of your skin didn't determine whether you were highborn or if you were lowborn" (Van Dusen qtd. in Friedtanzer 2021). The series here employs a strategy of current popular and highbrow entertainment: the historically anachronistic casting of non-white actors and actresses in literary adaptations, period drama or historical adventure films such as in David Lowery's *The Green Knight* (2021, with Dev Patel as Gawain) or in Joel Coen's *The Tragedy of Macbeth* (2021, with Denzel Washington as King Macbeth). Whereas the Austen adaptations of the early 2000s were still accused of 'faux historicism' (cf. Lynch 2003, 88), *Bridgerton* does not even attempt to represent historical accuracy. In its portrayal of a black queen and non-white families at the centre of British power in the early 19th century, the series self-consciously denies attempts at crafting an 'authentic' Regency Englishness. Instead, the viewer is confronted with the demise of race as a potent signifier of identity. Moreover, *Bridgerton* also evades the accusations levelled against the earlier Austen adaptations, with their portrayal of an exclusively white English identity.

It is only in Episode 4 of Season 1 that the viewer is given a glimpse of how this alternative society came about. In a conversation between the young Duke of Hastings and his grandmother, both being black, the elderly lady explains:

Look at the Queen. Look at our king. Look at their marriage. Look at everything it is doing for us, allowing us to become. We were two separate societies, divided by colour, until a king fell in love with one of us. Love, Your Grace, conquers all. (S1, E4, 00:21:01)

In line with the conventions of melodrama, romantic love appears to be the unifying force, obliterating the need for structural change. Moreover, the series here incorporates not just the history of the US, in which the "two separate societies" of black and white Americans are caught up in a fraught relationship up to this very day, but it can also be regarded as a reference to current developments in British royalty, most notably the 2018 wedding of Prince Harry to the black American actress Meghan Markle. By sidestepping the conventions of historical accuracy, *Bridgerton* employs an 'alternative history' approach. The series thereby stages a version of Regency Englishness that is appealing to younger audiences, and is thereby firmly located in the mainstream section of the entertainment market, in contrast to the majority of Austen adaptations of the early 2000s with their niche status and their target group of academically educated, middlebrow audiences. In her analysis of period drama, Martine Voiret contends that "with its play on costume and disguise, the historical drama encourages multiple identifications. The genre invites the spectator to try out the different roles presented

by the various characters" (2003, 230). The presence of many non-white characters in *Bridgerton*, it can be argued, offers this playful negotiation of Regency Englishness to a non-white, global audience. It also furnishes the product with an emphasis on showing diversity and optimizes its 'zeitgeisty' flair.

The 'colour-blind' cast has attracted both praise and criticism from critics and commentators. Some applaud this fictional disentangling of race and power, as apparent in the presence of a mixed-race queen, and welcome that "bosom-heaving Regency romances are no longer assumed to be the sole province of white people" (Han 2022). Other reviewers, however, take issue with it, claiming, as Carolyn Hinds does, that "you can't say that race isn't of consequence when the world these characters inhabit was created in part through racism" (2021). One could even argue that the series, with its refusal to take on problematic aspects of Regency Englishness and its ideology on race, represents a deeply conservative, reactionary antidote to the ubiquity of current American social justice activism with its emphasis on 'critical whiteness.'

Besides the hyper-diverse ethnic makeup of the series' rendering of early 19th-century society, Regency Englishness in *Bridgerton* is primarily defined by the rigid rules of courtship and marriage, providing a crucial link to the main theme of previous Austen adaptations. *Bridgerton* centres on staging the limited role women could take in polite society, and it shows how young women, in particular, have only the choice of a marriage to keep a respectable social position and be provided for. Whereas some women conform to these conventions, such as the female protagonists Daphne Bridgerton (Phoebe Dynevor) and Edwina Sharma, opposition and female emancipation are espoused, in particular, by Daphne's younger sister Eloise and her rejection of the 'ton.' Thus, *Bridgerton* stages the injustice of traditional English society, while it also offers modes of resistance and convictions that resonate with a contemporary audience and its sense of moral outrage about early 19th-century customs. It is, above all, this state of being under perpetual supervision that the upper-class young women depicted have to endure and that offers recognition and identification for the audience, itself used to the policing of boundaries surrounding femininity, beauty standards, and appropriate feminine behaviour on social media platforms such as Instagram or Facebook. With their demand of public visibility and with the outstanding role of gossip, both the promenade and Lady Whistledown's pamphlets in *Bridgerton* resemble the mechanisms of social media pressure in contemporary Western societies, underlining the way the series is constructed to address current concerns. The series also fosters processes of identification for its (mainly) female audience through its incorporation of current popular music (such as Robyn's "Dancing On My Own" or Harry Styles' "Sign of the Times"), which is presented in a classical score in both intradiegetic and extradiegetic fashion and greatly enhances the feel of the present, even in the highly-formalized dancing routines of the 'ton's' festivities (cf. S2, E6, 00:17:55).

To a great extent, the popular success of *Bridgerton* lies in its abundant use of costume spectacle. In her treatment of Austen adaptations, Julianne Pidduck acknowledges that, "an economy of realist period detail, this mise-en-scene orchestrates a longed-for experience of gracious nineteenth-century living, what have been called 'museum pleasures'" (1998, 385). Furthermore, Thompson claims that Austen adaptations

present an aristocracy as attractive to nominal or residual democrats, an aristocracy at the point of its moralization and aesthetization into an abstract hierarchy, an aristocracy of the plucky, of the good, and the elegant, in which we can perceive morality as style. This operation turns on the transcoding of class from brute exclusionary practice to class as elegance and grace, to class in a commodity culture. This is an Austen superimposed with the look and feel of Ralph Lauren nostalgia for an available aristocracy, old money and class in the consumer sense of the term. (2003, 23)

This desire to re-create the 'elegant' lifestyle of aristocratic living holds also true for *Bridgerton*, whose use of monumental flower bouquets seems unmatched. Here, the series caters to a commercially successful version of Englishness in contemporary film and TV which "tends to draw on upper-class English traditions of aristocratic wealth" (Higson 2011, 28) and follows in the footsteps of TV series such as *Downton Abbey*. Clearly, when exploring the fashioning of Regency Englishness in *Bridgerton*, the rules of polite society and the social decorum take centre stage. Together with the architecture and the interior of the grand houses, this is still what contemporary viewers, familiarized with these aspects of costume drama by the many Austen adaptations since the mid-1990s, regard as the most appealing aspect of this period of English history. With its innumerable balls, soirees, river diversions and promenade walks, *Bridgerton* caters excessively to this aspect of demonstrating the rigid standards of early 19th-century polite society as well as their sumptuous lifestyles.

In fact, consumption takes centre stage in *Bridgerton*. This is, above all, espoused by the frequent display of the female characters' shopping practices to obtain the latest fashion, echoing Thompson's above-cited observation of a display of 'commodity culture' in popular filmic Austen adaptations. In contrast to the consumption practices in Austen adaptations, however, *Bridgerton*, by staging a hyper-diverse ethnic upper class and its excessive consumption patterns, bears a close proximity to the ideology of contemporary free market capitalism and its emphasis on the flows of goods that allow for unrestricted consumption regardless of cultural, religious, and ethnic distinctions (cf. Pfeiffer 2021, 543). The characters' excessive hunt for fashionable clothes highlights consumption as a crucial marker of a person's identity and also echoes global capitalism's ideology of constant innovation and the illusion of unrestricted choice as a sign of the alleged freedom of the consumer (cf. Caplan and Ricciardelli 2016, 24; Carroll 2010, 203), while, at the same time, obscuring aspects of the modes of production, which are hardly ever touched upon in the series. William K. Carroll writes about neoliberalism as "the political paradigm that converts [...] structural power from a contingent and contestable accomplishment to a seemingly permanent reality, within which market-driven politics holds sway" (2010, 204). Infusing a Regency setting with the tenets of current neoliberal capitalism, its mantra of frictionless, unlimited consumption, in particular, could be said to invest our contemporary economic conditions with a similar air of eternity, and this anachronism might escape many viewers of the series, thereby perpetuating and naturalizing the ideology of 21st-century economic practice.

Finally, it is worth reflecting upon how processes of distribution and reception of the series have an impact on its content and its representation of national identity. As studies on the reception of series on Netflix in various regions of the world reveal,

cultural proximity is a main criterion for the success of a particular streaming series in global markets (cf. Jang et al. 2021, 4). Therefore, the superficial presence of markers of a specifically English identity, as shown above, are not surprising. This 'national identity light' can thus be regarded as a strategy of magnifying global audiences, which provides cultural proximity, especially in *Bridgerton's* treatment of historical gender inequality, while at the same time satisfying global capitalism's desire for the production of difference (cf. Higson 2011, 91).

5. Conclusion

Both *Taboo* and *Bridgerton* have won wide acclaim, especially in popular responses, with their respective versions of hybrid, diverse, and hypersexualized Regency Englishness. Freed from the restrictions of having to adapt texts from the English literary canon, *Taboo* and *Bridgerton* present versions of Regency Englishness that fit the category of the post-heritage film and that also decidedly move beyond the modes of filming national identity espoused by the Austen adaptations of the 1990s and early 2000s. Apart from their considerable genre-specific differences, comparing the representation of Regency Englishness in *Taboo* and in *Bridgerton* discloses sharply diverging ways of employing English history in a current commercial filmic product.

As a BBC production, *Taboo* centres on the depiction of the social, ethnic (and also sexual) margins of Regency England, and, in its gritty realism and its denial of the representational strategies of the picturesque, it radically deconstructs the familiar image of Regency England in the 21st-century public imaginary. Despite his anti-heroic demeanour, Delaney's hybrid ethnic and cultural identity, as well as his condemnation of racial and sexual discrimination, make him appear as a contemporary, 'enlightened' figure who fights the racism of bigoted elites, condemns slavery, and acts as the moral persona in line with the values of the viewers of the series. It is not too much of a leap to claim that Delaney's attitudes, to some degree, even espouse a form of 'woke' Englishness that mirrors contemporary debates in social justice activism, but that can simultaneously be offered to the global marketplace. By implementing this ethnic and sexual diversity, *Taboo* articulates identity constructions that conform to the ideological assumptions of 21st-century identity politics. Moreover, by doing away with historical accuracy to link the early 19th-century East India Company with the West African slave trade, *Taboo* foregrounds the negotiation of colonial guilt in the series.

The Netflix production *Bridgerton*, on the other hand, has opened up an escapist 'Regency Englishness light' as a highly successful commercial brand by conquering the mainstream market and the highly-coveted target group of younger viewers. This was enabled by the hybrid nature of the series which employs some familiar tropes of cinematic Regency England but makes no pretensions to historical accuracy and is largely devoid of England's social and cultural context. Instead, by sticking to the conventions of the soap opera, by employing a post-race, alternative history approach that remains silent on colonial oppression and ignores current debates on race and 'critical whiteness,' by foregrounding practices of lush consumption in line with current ideologies of unrestricted flows of goods in globalized settings, by spicing up Regency Englishness with present-day pop references, and by offering original ways of self-

identification for a young, mainly female audience immersed in social media culture, *Bridgerton* has tapped even more successfully into the present cultural moment.

To conclude, both series stage different versions of Regency Englishness for a mass audience familiar with new modes of consumption of TV narratives in the age of streaming. Their treatment of English history, especially their historical inaccuracies, caters to viewers' tastes and also appeals to an international audience, which is helpful in achieving global impact as part of more recent developments in the business schemes of TV channels and streaming services and their hunt for new markets and globally successful narratives (cf. Buonanno 2018, 5; Matrix 2014, 130). To date, new seasons for both *Taboo* and *Bridgerton* have been announced (cf. Brown 2021; Fullerton 2022), and a new Netflix adaptation of Austen's novel *Persuasion* also appeared in the summer of 2022. The depiction of Regency Englishness, it seems, remains a precious cash cow in the field of popular entertainment. At any rate, the next re-invention of the early 19th century and of English national identity is sure to follow.

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