

Fact Through Fiction: A Case Study of Televised Historical Drama's Influence on Audiences' Perceptions of the Past

Author: Katherine Anne Donahue

Persistent link: <http://hdl.handle.net/2345/3857>

This work is posted on [eScholarship@BC](#),
Boston College University Libraries.

Boston College Electronic Thesis or Dissertation, 2014

Copyright is held by the author, with all rights reserved, unless otherwise noted.



BOSTON COLLEGE

THE COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION

FACT THROUGH FICTION:
A CASE STUDY OF TELEVISED HISTORICAL DRAMA'S INFLUENCE
ON AUDIENCES' PERCEPTIONS OF THE PAST

A SENIOR HONORS THESIS

BY

KATHERINE ANNE DONAHUE

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULLFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF

BACHELOR OF ARTS

APRIL 2014

© COPYRIGHT BY KATHERINE ANNE DONAHUE

2014

Abstract

Never before has it been so important to investigate the way in which televised historical drama recreates and represents the past, for, 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” (p. 10). Therefore, this research uses the popular PBS *Masterpiece Theatre* program *Downton Abbey* as a case study to examine the accuracy of depictions of historical periods in contemporary television programs with the intent of discovering the impact of historical fiction on audiences’ perceptions of the past and, subsequently, on the collective memory of the public domain. Using a reception analysis approach, this research considers both producer-encoded and audience-decoded content within the four categories of (I) Setting, Details, and Design; (II) History; (III) Behavior; and (IV) Agenda, Values, and Effects outlined by Paul B. Weinstein (2001) to form conclusions concerning the relationship between the encoding and decoding of *Downton Abbey*, in particular, as well as the larger implications these findings have for televised historical drama and society’s collective memory, in general. Ultimately, this essay argues that through its precision of post-Edwardian detail, *Downton Abbey* attempts to construct a veil of accuracy behind which the series’ narrative is theoretically able to operate freely and without rigid constraint by history’s “hard and fast rules” (Fellowes, 2012a, p. 60). The findings also reveal an incongruity between this philosophy of encoding and the subsequent decoding process of *Downton Abbey*’s audience members. Finally, this study offers two potential functions historical drama may serve in contemporary society: as either a catalyst for historical inquiry or as a purveyor of distinctly modern, as opposed to historical, lessons.

Keywords: historiophoty; historical drama; historical fiction; historical accuracy; *Downton Abbey*; television; reception analysis; collective memory

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my very great appreciation to Professor William Stanwood of the Boston College Communication Department not only for his role as faculty advisor on this project, but also, and perhaps more importantly, for his unfaltering support, constant encouragement, and unwavering confidence in my abilities. I am indebted to you, Professor Stanwood, for you have played an indispensable role in my education. Your guidance and instruction over the past year has led me to produce a final product that I am extraordinarily proud of – and that I can only hope inspires pride in you as well. Therefore, it is with all sincerity that I say: Thank you.

Next, I wish to acknowledge the woman who has been indispensable to not only my academic career, but also my personal journey as an undergraduate at Boston College: Dr. Ashley Duggan. Dr. Duggan, encouraging me to pursue a Scholar of the College Project is only one of the many gifts with which you have provided me since our meeting three years ago. I cannot express my gratitude for your support as a teacher, a mentor, and a great friend. This project, and much of what I have achieved while at Boston College, is in large part because of you – thank you.

Finally, I wish to offer my special thanks to Professor Lindsay Hogan of the Boston College Communication Department for her willingness to act as the second, independent reviewer on this project. It is an honor to have such an accomplished scholar and fellow *Downton Abbey* fan lend her expertise to this work, and, for that, Professor Hogan, I offer my sincerest gratitude.



Dedication

for my Mother

I am eternally thankful for your endless love and limitless support that have accompanied me along my constantly evolving journey from the beginning to the present and into the future. Everything I am and everything I hope to become I owe to the incredible woman next to whom I watched my first episode of *Downton Abbey*.



Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	I
DEDICATION	II
LIST OF TABLES	V
INTRODUCTION	1
<hr/>	
BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM	6
ORAL, WRITTEN, AND VISUAL HISTORICAL TRADITIONS.	6
HISTORICAL FICTION AS GENRE.	8
VISUAL MEDIA'S INFLUENCE ON HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING.	9
RESEARCH QUESTION	15
RATIONALE	15
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	16
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	18
<hr/>	
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	18
ENCODING MESSAGES WITHIN HISTORICAL FICTION	19
DECODING MESSAGES WITHIN HISTORICAL FICTION	22
EVALUATING FILM AS A CONDUCTOR OF HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING	24
WEINSTEIN'S APPROACH TO HISTORICAL FICTION.	26
METHODOLOGY	29
<hr/>	
SECONDARY RESEARCH	29
<i>DOWNTON ABBEY AS A CASE STUDY</i>	30
PRIMARY RESEARCH	31
EPISODE SELECTION.	31
SYSTEM OF CATEGORIES: WEINSTEIN'S APPROACH.	34
FINDINGS / RESULTS	37
<hr/>	
PRODUCER-ENCODED CONTENT	37
SETTING, DETAILS, AND DESIGN.	37
HISTORY.	40
BEHAVIOR.	44
AGENDA, VALUES, AND EFFECTS.	52
AUDIENCE-DECODED CONTENT	56
SETTING, DETAILS, AND DESIGN.	57
HISTORY.	60
BEHAVIOR.	61
AGENDA, VALUES, AND EFFECTS.	66

DISCUSSION	70
<i>DOWNTON ABBEY'S VEIL OF ACCURACY</i>	71
<i>DOWNTON ABBEY'S INCONGRUITY OF ENCODING AND DECODING</i>	74
<i>AUDIENCES' SELECTIVE DECODING OF HISTORICAL FICTION</i>	78
<i>HISTORICAL FICTION AS A STEPPING STONE TO HISTORY</i>	81
<i>HISTORICAL FICTION AS A CONTEMPORARY TEACHER</i>	83
CONCLUSION	86
REFERENCES	91
LIST OF APPENDICES	99
APPENDIX A	100
APPENDIX B	101
APPENDIX C	102

List of Tables

TABLE 1

DOWNTON ABBEY EPISODE SELECTIONS BY SEASON FROM TOTAL EVENT-DRIVEN AND
DOMESTIC EPISODES..... 33

Introduction

The works of William Shakespeare are known throughout the world. In his lifetime, Shakespeare composed a substantial collection of poems and plays ranging from the tragic to the comedic to the historical. In his histories, as *The Guardian* journalist James Forrester points out, Shakespeare “knowingly conflated historical characters, [...] deliberately misnamed others, [and] sometimes gave them attributes that were the very opposite of their real characters” (2010, para. 8); therefore, Forrester concludes, “no one is likely to ever accuse Shakespeare of historical accuracy,” yet the English playwright was and is widely renowned as one of the all-time greatest writers of historical fiction (2010, para. 8).

Although today’s flat-screen television has replaced the Elizabethan stage, the historical fiction genre is still very much alive; in fact, “reality-based stories [...] are the most popular drama genre on U.S. and British television today” (Rosenthal, 1999, p. xiii). The standards by which a culture’s historical fiction is based, however, have changed drastically since Shakespeare’s days, during which altering historical fact to produce meaningful drama was a practice readily accepted by audiences. Geoff Nunberg, broadcaster for National Public Radio, puts it bluntly: “Shakespeare wasn’t writing in the age of the Internet” (2013, para. 1).

Today, we live in a world in which every dramatized historical fact – no matter how detailed and obscure – can be “scrutinized for correctness” on any number of portable digital devices, and, furthermore, “no ‘Gotcha!’ remains unposted for long” (Nunberg, 2013, para. 1). The twenty-first century’s digitalized way of life, in which

“more and more online commentary and viewer critiques claim they seek ‘historical accuracy,’” has resulted in what journalist Tiffany Vogt has characterized as a cultural “obsession with historical accuracy” (2011, para. 1).

This “modern obsession with authenticity” has resulted in a polarizing debate concerning the responsibility of visual media to provide audiences with truthful historical information (Nunberg, 2013, para. 5). On the one hand are those viewers, critics, and scholars who argue the same position that was proposed by a *New York Times*’ critic back in 1922: that the absolute truth is “wholly irrelevant” to drama (*New York Times* as quoted in Hudson, n.d., para. 14). This group views entertainment to be the primary purpose of television and history to be “but a colorful backdrop to tell a story,” merely providing a setting in which characters are able to engage with one another (Vogt, 2011, para. 4). From this point of view, televised historical fiction does not need to be concerned with accuracy first, because television shows “are not supposed to be documentaries” (Vogt, 2011, para. 4) and, second, because these shows “would be ‘pretty boring’ if [they] kept entirely to history” (Hudson, n.d., para. 10).

On the other hand, however, are those who fervently disagree that history is “not the substance of the story” of historical fiction series (Vogt, 2011, para. 4). Historians in particular “will assure you that the facts *are* the story” (emphasis added, Forrester, 2010, para. 2). Additionally, many viewers have noted that when the historical elements of a televised drama are found to be inaccurate, “the apparent errors have had an impact on their enjoyment of the show,” leaving them frustrated at the series and its creators (*The Telegraph*, 2011, para. 1).

While each side of this cultural debate makes a convincing argument, there is the distinct possibility that neither group has completely grasped the complexities and nuances that serve to embody this unique genre of drama. There are those who believe that historical fiction cannot be neatly broken down and prioritized according to the relative importance of historical fact and fictional storyline – to do such a thing is to “miss the whole point of historical films” as writer Bill Ward (2011, para. 10) and historical fiction author Nicola Cornick (2011a, 2011b) point out. Instead, these cultural critics suggest that one must view history and fiction as two intrinsically linked parts of a greater whole. Ward passionately illuminates the televised historical drama’s dual adherence to history and entertainment when he writes, “it’s the *history* that’s entertaining!” (2011, para. 10). Cornick takes a more systematic approach and describes historical television series as “work[s] of fiction existing within a historical framework” (2011b, para. 3).

This different understanding of historical fiction as both history *and* fiction, both historical *and* entertaining, inevitably raises the very question that seems to be at the heart of Western society’s recent debate over historical authenticity: the question is not, as many viewers, critics, and scholars believe it to be, whether or not historical fiction *should* be historically accurate, but rather “just *how* ‘*accurate*’ the [historical] framework has to be” (emphasis added, Cornick, 2011b, para. 3).

This question becomes especially significant when one considers that we are living in an age in which “most people get all of their historical information from the movies,” and, as an extension of that, from television (Solomon, 2011, para. 4). A 2012

study conducted by researchers at Duke University found that viewers “aren’t very good at catching major historical accuracies in popular films,” and, furthermore, states Andrew Butler, a postdoctoral psychology researcher at Duke, audiences will “often remember whatever information is [presented through film], regardless of whether it is true or false” (Andrew Duke as quoted in Strauss, 2012, para. 4). While it would be ideal if audience members would “cross-check facts after watching a historical [film],” cultural critics such as Jack Solomon recognize that this is a task the average viewer is unlikely to undertake simply because, for most people, “watching a film is not a scholarly act” (2011, para. 5). This subsequently puts an enormous amount of responsibility, warranted or not, upon filmmakers, for, in light of the presented evidence, it can be argued that movies and television series “do a disservice to the audience if they don’t get the essential facts right” (Solomon, 2011, para. 5).

Filmmakers, therefore, are put in the difficult position of balancing the educational significance of their programs against the entertainment value, a task that even the most critically acclaimed televised period programs have had a difficult time undertaking. One particularly relevant and recent example is PBS *Masterpiece Theatre’s Downton Abbey*, a post-Edwardian period drama that follows the lives of the fictionalized aristocratic Crawley family and their servants, all of whom live in the Yorkshire country estate of Downton Abbey. The series was originally aired on September 10, 2010 on ITV in the United Kingdom and made its way overseas to the United States where it began

airing on PBS's *Masterpiece Theatre* on January 9, 2011. In its American inaugural season, *Downton Abbey* was not only nominated for 11 Emmy Awards,¹ winning six, but also secured nominations for four Golden Globe Awards,² taking home the Golden Globe for Best Miniseries of 2011 (Muther, 2012, N1). *Downton Abbey* has sustained this remarkably high-level of success throughout its four seasons, and on November 10, 2013, Season Four averaged 11.8 million viewers in the United Kingdom, making the series "the country's highest rated TV drama of 2013." As a result, ITV renewed the show for a fifth season, which is scheduled to premiere in the United Kingdom in the fall of 2014 and on PBS in the United States in January 2015 (Fienberg, 2013, para. 3).

Despite its winning BAFTAs, Golden Globes, Emmys, and appearing in the Guinness Book of World Records as the most critically acclaimed English television series of 2011, *Downton Abbey* has "set off a volley of debates [...] about how much drama, even a well-researched one, can contribute to historical understanding" (Musson, 2012, para. 1). *Downton Abbey* is, for this reason, an appropriate series to use in an

Notes:

¹*Downton Abbey* Emmy 2011 Nominations (* denote winner): Outstanding Casting for a Miniseries, Movie, Or A Special; Outstanding Cinematography for a Miniseries Or Movie*; Outstanding Art Direction for a Miniseries or Movie; Outstanding Single-Camera Picture Editing for a Miniseries or Movie; Outstanding Costumes for a Miniseries, Movie, Or A Special*; Outstanding Sound Editing for a Miniseries, Movie, Or A Special; Outstanding Miniseries or Movie*; Outstanding Lead Actress in a Miniseries Or Movie (Elizabeth McGovern); Outstanding Supporting Actress in a Miniseries or Movie (Maggie Smith)*; Outstanding Directing for a Miniseries, Movie, Or A Dramatic Special*; Outstanding Writing for a Miniseries, Movie, Or A Dramatic Special*

²*Downton Abbey* Golden Globe 2012 Nominations (* denote winner): Best Mini-Series Or Motion Picture Made for Television*; Best Performance by an Actress in a Mini-Series Or Motion Picture Made for Television (Elizabeth McGovern); Best Performance by an Actor in a Mini-Series Or Motion Picture Made for Television (Hugh Bonneville); Best Performance by an Actress in a Supporting Role in a Mini-Series Or Motion Picture Made for Television (Maggie Smith)

investigation of the key questions currently plaguing twenty-first century television viewers and critics alike about the televised historical fiction genre – namely, “how much does accuracy matter in historical dramas?” and “where do you draw the line between fact, rumour and fiction in such dramatizations?” (Hudson, n.d., para. 4). Using *Downton Abbey* as a case study, this research sets out to offer answers to these questions in an effort to understand the impact historical accuracy has on audiences’ perceptions of the past.

Background of the Problem

Oral, written, and visual historical traditions. Much of the cultural confusion that envelops the historical fiction genre on film is grounded within a larger context of historical representation. Western society’s traditional methods of historical recording began with oral history and, in the past few centuries, have transitioned to written history. These methods of chronicling the past, especially the written word, have long emphasized and privileged “an increasingly linear, scientific world on the page” (Rosenstone, 1995c, p. 15). Robert Rosenstone, professor of History at the California Institute of Technology, argues that film’s appearance, centuries after that of oral and written history, “change[d] the rules of the historical game, [...] represent[ing] a major shift in consciousness about how we think about the past” (1995c, p. 15).

Vastly different from the written word’s technical and methodical mode of historical representation, television and movies present the past in a “visual and aural realm that is difficult to capture in words” (Rosenstone, 1995c, p. 15), resulting in a situation in which the visual media “struggle for a place within a cultural tradition that

has long privileged the written word” (Rosenstone, 1995c, p. 43). Today, most of Western culture, so accustomed to scholarly historical texts as the sole source of historical information, attempts to assess the accuracy of visual media’s presentation of historical content using the same framework that has long been applied to historical writing; however, as *The Chronicle of Higher Education*’s Susan Bordo points out, this inevitably results in “screen depictions [as] more likely than novels to be criticized for historical inaccuracy,” for the majority of society has not yet recognized that the established methods of judging the written word are no longer adequate when applied to the visual media’s new and unique modes of historical representation (2012, para. 17).

Scholars at the forefront of this discussion have acknowledged, therefore, the call for a new system of judgment specific to the visual media that can sufficiently capture the breadth and depth of historical fiction on film – as Rosenstone writes, “Historical film must be seen not in terms of how it compares to written history but as a new way of recounting the past with its own rules of representation” (1995b, p. 3). The emergence of such a system is largely dependent upon Western culture’s reconsideration of what media constitute as *historical* in the twenty-first century. Cultural critics, from citizen bloggers to history and film scholars, acknowledge that society can no longer privilege the written word as absolute truth or superior to all other modes of historical recording; instead, they have recently begun to argue that “all historical writing is interpretation, [...] [in which] everyone has an angle and an opinion” (Cornick, 2011b, para. 4). Instead of delivering “the ‘real’ of the historical past,” historical writing delivers “a mental conception of it,” one that is profoundly influenced by “speculation, hypothesis, and dramatic ordering and

shaping” (Burgoyne, 1997, p. 5). When viewed in this way, it becomes clear that no method of historical representation, whether oral or written or visual, can be wholly accurate, and history itself becomes less about the transmission and memorization of facts and more about the “transmission of attitudes and abilities” (Hunter, 2013, para. 5) – as *The Guardian* journalist Jonathan Jones puts it, “[History] is about trying to get into other people’s skins, [and] about seeing the world from remote perspectives,” something that historical film, in Jones’ opinion, “can do brilliantly” (2010, para. 5).

Historical fiction as genre. By redefining history for the postmodern world, cultural critics make oral, written, and visual representations of the past all equal and legitimate ways of doing history – each with their own “rules of representation” (Rosenstone, 1995b, p. 3). When it comes to television shows, for example, the inevitable fact that “characters are condensed, events are simplified, and scenes are dramatized” should, in light of this new definition of history, be accepted as inherent to the medium’s mode of historical representation and not considered grounds for dismissal from the historical record – for, as Robert Burgoyne, film studies professor at the University of Saint Andrews, recognizes, “dramatic license and a strong point of view are essential for [historical] films to work as art” (1997, p. 5). In fact, *The Guardian*’s James Forrester suggests that “judging historical fiction is not as simple as ‘accurate = good’ and ‘inaccurate = bad,’” especially when it comes to the visual media – to put it bluntly, “in creating good historical fiction, it is essential to tell lies” (2010, para. 6).

Therefore, instead of dedicating itself to the accumulation of facts, film when engaged in historical fiction, suggests Susan Deeks head of BBC program acquisition,

“has a primary duty to engage the audience with a compelling narrative whilst not distorting the historical truth” (Susan Deeks as quoted in Hudson, n.d., para. 12). As long as the setting is historically accurate, effectively establishing “a framework in which a historical drama can work” (Cornick, 2011b, para. 4), televised representations of history can use fictional storytelling elements to successfully engage subject matter that is “based on or inspired by reality, by the lives of real people, or by events that have happened in the recent or not too distant past” (Rosenthal, 1999, p. xv). In this way, televised historical dramas focus neither on cataloging historical data, at one end of the spectrum, nor on entertaining and producing a profit, at the other, but rather, the “intent, content, and form” of this genre are instead interested in “understanding the legacy of the past” through *both* historical and fictional means (Rosenstone, 1995b, p. 4).

This dual nature of the historical fiction genre, understood in the context of a more liberal definition of *history*, inevitably calls for an investigation of whether or not the genre has a “serious function to perform in society” (Rosenthal, 1999, p. xv) – or, as *The Guardian*’s Jonathan Jones puts it, “which [historical] liberties are acceptable to take, and which are not” considering the power of the media, both past and present, to shape audiences’ views of history (2010, para. 3)?

Visual media’s influence on historical understanding. From theatrical performances to film to television, the visual media, what Hayden White (1988) refers to as historiophoty: “the representation of history and our thought about it in visual images and filmic discourse” (Hayden White as quoted in Rosenstone, 1995c, p.48), have a long history of contributing to what scholars call the collective memory of the public domain

(Bell & Gray, 2007; Edgerton, 2000; Hanke, 2000; Rosenthal, 1999), defined as “both the product and process in which members of the public at large obtain definitions of the symbolic universe from watching and talking about the media” (Rosenthal, 1999, p. 28).

When visual media intersect with historical content, explains Gary Edgerton (2000), the public’s collective memory becomes a “site of mediation” between “professional history” and “popular history,” which are to be thought of as “two ends of the same continuum” working together to “enrich the historical enterprise of a culture” (p. 9-10). This inextricable link between factual history and historical fiction, what Edgerton (2000) refers to as *professional history* and *popular history*, is key to understanding historical fiction’s impact on an audience’s historical knowledge. In a study conducted by Deborah Prentice, Richard Gerrig, and Daniel Bailis (1997) at Yale University, the researchers found that “the impact of a fictional story on real-world beliefs depends critically on the relation of the reader to the text,” specifically, “when readers were unfamiliar with the setting of a fictional story, they were vulnerable to its assertions” (p. 419). In other words, in the absence of sufficient knowledge about *professional history*, the *popular history* presented by visual media is more convincing to audience members, thus, sometimes, allowing fiction and not fact to prevail in the public’s collective memory.

As an added caveat, Sian Nicholas (2007) argues that historical fiction presented through visual media must “engage with the audience’s existing understanding of the past” even if the viewer’s preconceptions “exist as little more than stereotypes or popular myths” (Sian Nicholas as quoted in McElory & Williams, 2011, p. 89). Rosenstone

(1995a) expands on this idea by suggesting that if the “visual ‘look,’ [...] tone and atmosphere” of the production are consistent with “the overall data and meanings of what [audiences] already know of the past,” the historical fiction serves to “add to [audiences’] understanding” of that period (p. 10-11).

This phenomenon is in no way solely characteristic of contemporary audiences and media; in fact, as Robert B. Musburger (1985) points out, “the concept of re-creating historical events for an audience is as old as the theatre itself” (p. 93). Before literacy was as widespread as it is today, bards presented history orally by recounting “classic epics” (Rosenstone, 1995a, p. 11). In the fifth century, the golden age of Greek tragedy, all of which “are based on history or myth,” theatrical performance began to supplement the oral historical tradition (Musburger, 1985, p. 93). Over a century later in the 1500s, Western culture began to receive its history lessons from playwrights such as William Shakespeare, who penned eleven historical plays based on the lives of English kings,³ two tragedies connected to English history,⁴ and three tragedies based on Roman history.⁵ Literacy in Europe still being a luxury granted only to society’s elite meant that these live performances served to influence the majority of audience members’ understanding of the historical past.

³ Shakespeare’s histories, as listed in the *First Folio*: *King John*; *Edward III*; *Richard II*; *Henry IV, Part I*; *Henry IV, Part II*; *Henry V*; *Henry VI, Part I*; *Henry VI, Part II*; *Henry VI, Part III*; *Richard III*; *Henry VIII*

⁴ Shakespeare’s English-history inspired tragedies, as listed in the *First Folio*: *King Lear*; *Macbeth*

⁵ Shakespeare’s Roman-history inspired tragedies, as listed in the *First Folio*: *Coriolanus*; *Julius Caesar*; *Antony and Cleopatra*

The invention of film in 1895 served to perpetuate this ancient trend of historical education through visual media. Movie pioneers Auguste and Louis Lumière honed this new technology to “record actualities,” making these French brothers the official founders of documentary filmmaking with shorts such as *Exiting the Factory* (1895), *Baby’s Lunch* (1895), and *Arrival of a Train* (1896) (Musburger, 1985, p. 94). Musburger explains that audiences were “so impressed with the [filmic] medium itself that little more than filming life as it occurred sustained their interest” (1985, p. 94). In subsequent years and with increased understanding of the new medium, directors began to incorporate narrative storytelling into their representations of the past, thus bringing historical fiction to the silver screen. The beginnings of feature length motion pictures, such as D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915), which “restaged pageants from the Civil War” (Rosenthal, 1999, p. 1), Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Ten Commandments* (1923) and *The Sign of the Cross* (1932), which served to restage biblical history as epics, and Fred Niblo’s *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1925), adapted from a novel and preserved in 1997 in the United States’ National Film Registry for being “culturally, historically, and aesthetically significant” (National Film Preservation Board, 1997), lend support to Rosenstone’s assertion that “the historical film has been making its impact on [audiences] for many years now,” especially on audiences’ sense of the past (1995a, p. 1).

The power of motion pictures today is no different than their silent predecessors of the late 1800s and early 1900s, save for that, in the late twentieth century, filmmakers are “interpreting the past for ever larger audiences” (Toplin, 1988, p. 1226), not to mention the fact that “film has invaded the classroom” as an educational tool

(Rosenstone, 1995a, p. 1). Gary Gutting of *The New York Times* puts it plainly when he writes, “movies are the source of what we know – or what we think we know – about history,” listing Steven Spielberg’s recent film *Lincoln* (2012) as an example of a motion picture that has been “recommended as a source of knowledge [...] with ‘instructional value,’” a phenomenon that resonates with multiple other historical fictions produced in the recent past, including *The King’s Speech* (2010), *Argo* (2012), *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), and, most recently, *12 Years a Slave* (2013) (2012, para. 1).

Television is no different than the visual media that precede it, especially when one considers that early television programming “drew from the legacies of theatre [and] motion pictures” (Musburger, 1985, p. 100). In fact, since the 1960s, television has set a precedent for the being the primary outlet of “social and cultural” information, for “some of the most important events of the past century took place before television cameras” (O’Connor, 1988, p. 1201). From the funeral of John F. Kennedy to the Neil Armstrong’s first steps on the moon, television has allowed viewers from around the world to bear witness to historic events within the comfort of their own living rooms (O’Connor, 1988, p. 1203). When it comes to historical fiction, television, the first visual electronic media to bring history directly into the domestic sphere, has, once again, reformatted the principal means by which audiences receive historical information – John E. O’Connor, pioneer of research regarding film and history, makes reference to early historical fiction programs such as *Roots* (1976) and *Holocaust* (1978) that, despite inaccuracies, “raised major historical issues for discussion in living rooms and over lunch tables as never before” (1988, p. 1203).

Today, the medium is even more pervasive, as “history on television is now big business” for both commercial and public networks as well as corporate and independent producers (Edgerton, 2000, p. 7), effectively “populariz[ing] knowledge for mass audiences” (Bell & Gray, 2007, p. 128). Since the rise of “longer format programs,” such as the made-for-television movie and the mini-series (Musburger, 1985, p. 96), there has been significant increase in historical programming on television throughout the United States as cable and premium cable channels attempt to differentiate themselves from broadcast networks within the twenty-first century’s multi-channel landscape. Drawing upon substantial budgets, complex serial narratives, and historical settings, these networks have received “strong Nielsen ratings for historical dramas” such as *Deadwood* (2004), *The Tudors* (2007), *Mad Men* (2007), and *Downton Abbey* (2010) (Toplin, 1988, p. 1210).

These televised historical dramas typically fall into one of two broad categories identified by Rosenstone (1995a); the series is either “based on documentable persons or events or movements” or it is a program in which “the central plot and characters are fictional, but whose historical setting is intrinsic to the story and meaning of the work” (p. 2). The ease of accessibility of these popular programs contributes to television’s surpassing the motion picture as the “primary way children and adults form their understanding of the past, [...] transform[ing] the way millions of viewers think about historical figures and events” (Edgerton, 2000, p. 7). In this way, as Robert Hanke of the University of Toronto describes, television becomes the principle “audiovisual vehicle for popular [or collective] memory” (2000, p. 47), making it the ideal visual medium to

consider when looking to uncover historiophoty's current influence on audience's understanding of the past.

Research Question

In an effort to begin the next stage of research into the realm of historical fiction on film, this research studies the accuracy of depictions of historical events in popular television programs to discover the way in which historical periods and fictional television storylines interact with each other in order to understand what role televised period programs may or may not play in audiences' perceptions of the past. Therefore, the overarching question driving this project is: What historical understanding do audiences take away from televised historical fiction programs?

Rationale

Kathy Kemper of *The Huffington Post* is one of many recent journalists who have recently called attention to "Americans' lack of interest in both history and current events" (2013, para. 5), an unfortunate symptom of our "increasingly postliterate world (in which people can read but won't)" (Rosenstone, 1995a, p. 1). Today, when most people watch historical fiction, either in the form of a movie or a television show, they watch to be entertained and do not necessarily expect or desire a history lesson (Philips, 2013, para. 8). What many audience members fail to realize, however, is that historical films "are the source of much of what we know – or what we think we know – about history" (Gutting, 2012, para. 1), for in "our media-dominated, digitally enhanced era" (Bordo, 2012, para. 17), films represent one of the main sources of knowledge in society and, for many, serve as a "history lesson they've never had" (Duncan, 2013, para. 1).

Having already defined *history*, in all of its recorded forms, as more of an “act of the imagination” than a catalogue of absolute truths (Jones, 2012, para. 6), it becomes imperative to question to what extent society can rely on historical records –especially those of filmed historical fiction for which “historical accuracy is not of primary concern” (Solomon, 2011, para. 3) – as a source of historical fact and understanding.

This is a question that becomes increasingly important in light of a recent study conducted at Duke University (2012) that found that audiences have “great difficulty distinguishing fact from fiction” (Bordo, 2012, para. 17), a reality that has the potential to invoke serious consequences on “the public’s view of the past” (1983, p. xxxiii). Presently, scholars like O’Connor worry that audiences, after viewing historical fiction, believe that “they have actually absorbed and understood the history” (O’Connor, 1983, p. xxxvii), thus contributing to Western culture’s loss of a “collective sense of what really happened” (historian Margaret George as quoted in Bordo, 2012, para. 20). Therefore, scholars have begun to recognize and emphasize the “importance [of] study[ing] television’s portrayal of history [...] because of the impact it threatens to have on the nation’s historical consciousness” (O’Connor, 1983, p. xxxvi).

Theoretical Framework

This research focused primarily within the context of the media influence paradigm through its examination of media messages in relation to viewers’ experiences. More specifically, the study utilized Stuart Hall’s reception analysis approach, “an audience-centered theory that focuses on how various types of audience members make sense of specific forms of content” (Baran & Davis, 2012, p. 257). Hall’s method of

analysis allows the messages brought forth through television programming to be considered in the broader cultural, political, social, and economic context in which they are consumed.

Through reception analysis, the study first examined how television producers encode meaning, both factual and fictional, into their historical dramas and then sought to find how audiences use their broader cultural surroundings and personal experiences to decode those messages and inform their perceptions of the past. This approach strived to create what Clifford Geertz (1973) refers to as a “thick description,” or an analysis that not only “seeks to explain behavior, but also uses context to explain the meaning behind the behavior” (Miller, 2000, p. *xvi*).

Review of the Literature

Theoretical Framework

In its most basic sense, this study attempted to understand how audiences interpret and internalize specific media content. Stuart Hall's reception analysis approach is the theoretical framework that best allows for this type of research, for the goal of reception analysis is to "capture the way people actually consume and decode media in their everyday lives" (Mittell, 2010, p. 366).

To attain this understanding of "how various types of audience members make sense of specific forms of content," Hall, in his essay "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse" (1973), suggested researchers utilize a two-step method (Baran & Davis, 2012, p. 257). He wrote that, when conducting reception research, researchers should focus on: (1) "the social and political context in which the content is produced," what he termed *encoding*, and (2) "the consumption of media content," called *decoding* (Baran & Davis, 2012, p. 257). It is this dual focus of Hall's reception analysis that has resulted in his approach also being referred to as the encoding/decoding model (Baran & Davis, 2012).

The first part of Hall's model considers *encoding*, which is commonly considered to be the process through which the producers of media content embed their intended or preferred message within the text (Baran & Davis, 2012). Since reception analysis is based heavily on semiotic theory, which argues that texts are made up of structured signs, researchers often utilize textual analysis as the best way to study a text's encoded, or

producer-intended, meaning, for textual analysis allows scholars to interpret the text's signs and its structure (Mittell, 2010).

In order to analyze the second part of Hall's model, the *decoding* process, researchers will often consider "open-ended surveys, interviews, focus groups, observations, analyses of published reviews or comments, [...] or other related methods" (Mittell, 2010, p. 366) – a qualitative approach that allows scholars to consider the wider discourse surrounding a text. It is this combination of investigating both a text's encoded and decoded messages that serves to classify Hall's reception analysis approach.

Encoding Messages within Historical Fiction

Hall's theory, when applied to historical fiction, suggests that producers of televised historical dramas intentionally encode their programs with a deliberate historical message. In order to better understand the ways in which producers enact this process of encoding, it is first helpful to review the standing literature on both the strengths and weaknesses of film and television to convey historical messages. Robert Brent Toplin (1988) of the University of North Carolina Wilmington, author of several books and academic articles concerning the relationship between history, politics, and film, identifies film's ability to "excite feelings and emotions" as one of the most powerful assets of the medium (p. 1213). Toplin's assertion gains support through a case study conducted by Desmond Bell and Fearghal McGarry (2007) that found "film has been rather better at exploring the emotional life of its characters than conventional scholarly historiography" (p. 14). In this same vein, Toplin (1988) admits that the visual media do not work well in "presenting a complete chronology of events" as does the

written word, arguing instead that film's purpose is to "function as poetry, not as an encyclopedia" (p. 1213).

Rosenstone (1988) identifies a collection of the poetic techniques a filmmaker might utilize to construct and encode historical fiction programs; he describes the medium's ability to "evoke the past through powerful images, colorful characters, and moving words" (p. 1174), allowing audience members to "see landscapes, hear sounds, witness strong emotions that are expressed with body or face, or view physical conflict between individuals and groups" (p. 1179). Toplin (1988) argues that these characteristic attributes of film allow for the medium's unique capacity to "arouse interest or sensitize viewers to a problem," despite being a "poor mechanism for presenting detailed, balanced, and comprehensive coverage of a subject" (p. 1215). As has been previously stated, however, Toplin (1988) argues that historical television programs should be considered as "constituting an interpretation, not a detached, encyclopedic rendering of history" (p. 1216), for historical fiction's process of invention is "not the weakness of historical film, but in fact a major part of its strength" (Rosenstone, 1988, p. 30), providing "symbolic and metaphorical truths" that "the lecture room, seminar discussion, or research monograph are scarcely equipped to match" (McElroy & Williams, 2011, p. 83).

At the same time, however, Geoffrey Cowen, author of "The Legal and Ethical Limitations of Factual Misrepresentation" (1998), recognizes that historical television producers, when using film's strengths to encode messages into their texts, have "an ethical duty of care to their audiences" (p. 157). Cowen describes an "unwritten contract

between the writer (as well as the editor, publisher, producer, and distributor) and the audience” that, in the United States, has been underlined by the Supreme Court (1998, p. 155). Cowen makes specific reference to *Gertz v. Robert Welch, Inc.*, a 1973 Supreme Court case in which Elmer Gertz sued *American Opinion* magazine for defamation, leading to the Court’s ruling that “there is no constitutional value in false statements of fact” (1998, p. 157) – although, the First Amendment implies that much of the regulation of the truthfulness of historical fiction relies upon “the ethical sensibilities” of its producers to assure that the “essence of the characters, the dialogue, and the story remain faithful to the truth” (Cowen, 1998, p. 162).

Producers of televised historical dramas, then, have a social responsibility to uphold this essence of truthfulness in their fictional representations and can do so by utilizing a range of cinematic techniques, allowing them to effectively – and ethically – encode messages into televised content. In his many works, Rosenstone has identified four such “fictive techniques” used by film-makers (Bell & McGarry, 2007, p. 11); these are: (1) the *compression* of several characters into one; (2) the *condensation* of multiple events; (3) the *displacement* of an incident in time or place – in other words, moving an incident from one time or location to another; and (4) the *alteration* of one character’s sentiments to reflect those of another (Rosenstone as cited in Bell & McGarry, 2007). In his other writings, Rosenstone also mentions the necessity of film to “summarize, synthesize, generalize, and symbolize” (1995a, p. 8) as well as “invent” when constructing historical fiction (1995a, p. 10).

A study conducted by Louise Pouliot and Paul S. Cowen (2007) at the University of Quebec at Montreal reveals that when producers are successful in their use of these methods, audiences will more readily “identify with the protagonists and become emotionally involved in the story,” leading to the researchers’ conclusion that fiction films “produce stronger emotional reactions than documentaries” (p. 253). Furthermore, Toplin suggests, that this type of emotional involvement in the historical narrative of film serves to “bring a subject to the attention of people who did not know much about it before, and encourage them to ask questions and seek further information” (1988, p. 1213), thus beginning the second, audience-oriented phase of Hall’s reception theory.

Decoding Messages within Historical Fiction

Reception analysis assumes “the relationship between the viewer and the image is shaped by what both bring to the encounter” (Werner, 2002, p. 404) – having already reviewed the literature regarding what *the image* brings to the encounter, namely the producers’ encoded historical message, it is now equally important to review the current literature on what *the viewer* brings to the encounter, namely the way in which he or she decodes the image and forms ideas and beliefs about the historical past.

As has been mentioned, “we live in a world deluged with images” and, as a result, the visual media – motion pictures, television, feature films, docudramas, mini-series – have become, once school is over, “the chief source” of knowledge of the past for a “majority of the population” (Rosenstone, 1988, p. 1174). In accord with Hall’s theory, the current literature recognizes that audience members “consume and process” these “filmed and televised histories within a web of individual and cultural forces” (Anderson,

2000, p. 15). In other words, a viewer's decoding of historical fiction is intrinsically tied to his or her personal and cultural experiences, not least of which is that individual's "background experiences, knowledge, and interests brought to the image" (Werner, 2004, p. 2) – a phenomenon that, as previously mentioned, was demonstrated by Prentice et al. (1997) and in research that found the "impact of fictional stories on [audiences'] real-world beliefs" to be contingent upon "the relation of the reader to the text," such that viewers without any prior knowledge about the fictional narrative were more susceptible to its message (p. 419).

What Prentice et al.'s findings suggest about the decoding process is that "the acceptance of information is the default" for audience members, and, as a result, individuals are likely to only reject information if they are "able to process it carefully" and find that it conflicts with what they already know, or think they know, to be historically true (Prentice et al., 1997, p. 417). This becomes a problem however, in a society in which audiences often do not cross-check their facts by either reading books or conducting primary source research after viewing a historical film. Scholars, therefore, argue that the decoding of historical fiction is a process in which individuals "learn what they know about the past from engaging with media" and not from any other historical sources (Stoddard & Marcus, 2010, p. 84). Support for this position is grounded in studies such as those conducted by Andrew Butler, Franklin Zaromb, Keith Lyle, and Henry Roediger (2009), who found that their participants were "more likely to cite examples from film over examples from other text-based historical sources when asked to remember particular historical events" (Butler et al. as quoted in Stoddard & Marcus,

2010, p. 84), and Alan Marcus (2005), who discovered that “students tend to refer to examples from Hollywood films as fact even when they recognize the inaccuracies that are commonplace in these films” (Alan Marcus as quoted in Stoddard & Marcus, 2010, p. 84).

In 1992, David Perry, Tammie Howard, and Dolf Zillmann attempted to discover a possible reason for why audience members tend to automatically decode historical fiction as factual. Using social learning theory, which predicts that audiences will be more attentive to messages that reflect real-life, this team of researchers hypothesized that “as the perceived realism of television increases, so does the audience’s motivation to learn its content” (Rubin, 1979 as quoted in Perry et al., 1992, p. 197). The findings of this study demonstrate audiences’ tendency to “regard historically-based drama as more likely than fiction to teach them useful historical details or meaningful lessons about life, resulting in greater levels of attention,” implying that is it the classification of these television programs as *historical* that prompts audience members to absorb and learn their content (Perry et al., 1992, p. 184).

Evaluating Film as a Conductor of Historical Understanding

Toplin writes that, despite isolated studies such as that of Perry et al., there is a “dearth of literature” on the connection between historical film and its ability to influence audiences’ historical understanding (1988, p. 1212) – something that scholars such as Toplin (1988), O’Connor (1988), and Rosenstone (1995a) attribute to the “absence of any accepted, coherent, and comprehensive methodology for analyzing [television programs] as historical artifacts” (O’Connor, 1988, p. 1201), which results in the lack of a

“consensus on how to evaluate the contribution of the historical film to historical understanding” (Rosenstone, 1995a, p. 1).

Researchers have not yet found a way to systematically think about “what constitutes good filmed history,” specifically “what methods of visual interpretation deserve acclaim or a disapproving state, or which liberties taken by producers are in the bounds of professional acceptance” (Toplin, 1988, p. 1211). Subsequently, as Rosenstone (2003) describes, “judgments are made about historical value based on widely divergent grounds,” everything from “accuracy of detail, [to] the use of original document, [to the] appropriateness of music, [to] the looks or apparent auditability of an actor to play someone” (p. 12).

Although not agreed upon across the academic community, C. Vann Woodward (1967) presents a model for assessing *good historical fiction* that appears to successfully encompass much of today’s research and understanding of historical film; Woodward writes that historical fiction “is informed by a respect for history, a sure feeling of the period, and a deep and precise sense of place and time” (C. Vann Woodward as quoted in Toplin, 1998, p. 1225). The fact that Woodward’s definition is merely one among many contested descriptions of *good historical fiction*, however, points to the necessity of a method “to judge the ways in which, through invention, film summarizes vast amounts of data or symbolizes complexities” (Rosenstone, 1995a, p. 9). The emergence of such a method would provide an answer to one of the field’s prevailing questions: “How should appropriate questions about accuracy and responsible representation apply to the loose treatment of fact evident in historical dramas?” (Toplin, 1998, p. 1224).

Weinstein's Approach to Historical Fiction. Paul B. Weinstein, professor of history and popular culture at the University of Akron's Wayne College, recognizes "the power of the mass media to shape perception and to affect interpretation of the past" and has, therefore, developed a set of "tools to examine film from a critical perspective," the goal of which is to "train the eye and mind to translate the entertaining images [of film] into data for comparative and critical analysis" (2001, p. 42).

Weinstein divides his approach into four sections: (I) Setting, Details, and Design (II) History; (III) Behavior; and (IV) Agenda, Values, and Effects, each of which enables the researcher to view "what is being communicated, to whom, in what fashion, and why the subject was selected" (Weinstein, 2001, p. 42). Each section includes a series of questions the answers to which allow the researcher to conduct a methodical analysis of the text and "arrive at an enhanced version of historical truth" (Weinstein, 2001, p. 42).

In the sections that follow is Weinstein's rubric divided according to his four categories for analysis, each complete with a list of "specific elements to be examined for accuracy" (2001, p. 29). The following sections "outline a model for the analysis of film texts," providing "questions [researchers] should ask and points [they] should observe as [they] examine a film text" (2001, p. 42).

Setting, details, and design. Weinstein's questions for researchers to consider regarding the Setting, Details, and Design category are:

1. Are locations, costumes, and sets accurate?
2. Do buildings look realistic?
3. Does the overall look of the film reflect the period?

4. Has the filmmaker included details that enhance the historical atmosphere and viewing experience? (Weinstein, 2001, p. 43)

History. Weinstein's questions for researchers to consider regarding the History category are:

1. Is the history accurate?
2. Are events presented realistically?
3. Is the chronology correct? (Weinstein, 2001, p. 42)

Behavior. Weinstein's questions for researchers to consider regarding the Behavior category are:

1. Do the character speak and act as people in their time, situation and class did?
2. Are gender relationships accurately rendered? (Weinstein, 2001, p. 43)

Agenda, values, and effects. Weinstein's questions for researchers to consider regarding the Agenda, Values, and Effects category are:

1. What values underlie the film?
2. What does the filmmaker do to influence feelings and emotions?
3. What sort of heroic and villainous icons are presented and supported in the film?
4. What messages did the filmmaker wish to convey?

5. Does the film succeed in producing the desired effect? (Weinstein, 2001, p. 43)

Although not a formal or widely acknowledged methodology, Weinstein's approach and comprehensive rubric provides a systematic way to think about and analyze the many facets of historical fiction and, therefore, have the potential to serve as a first-step toward the construction and establishment of an organized procedure with which historical fiction can be universally examined and evaluated.

Methodology

Secondary Research

This study began with the acquisition of secondary research pertaining to the research question. Using the Biltmore College University Libraries' Holmes One Search, credible books on relevant topics – such as professional and popular history, historiography and historiophoty, historical fiction, historical authenticity, television audience comprehension and retention of historical content, and reception research – were found. These resources were made available through Library webpage searches that utilized keywords and phrases that were, once again, of relevance to the research topic. These search-terms included combinations and variations of: *history; popular history; visual history; historical fiction; historical accuracy; authenticity; fact; fiction; film; TV; television; programs; programming; historical drama; period drama; effects; influence; impact; audience; viewers; education; pedagogy; understanding; comprehension; retention; knowledge.*

The same combinations and variations of these keywords were used to search within Biltmore College University Libraries' collection of Databases and E-Journals, specifically those of *Communication Abstract, Communication and Mass Media Complete, Academic OneFile, ProQuest, and JSTOR*. The secondary research yielded by this investigation of databases and e-journals was a series of studies and articles published in credible peer-reviewed journals. Once this dual process of secondary research was completed, the information gathered was subsequently used to aid in the

selection of a contemporary televised historical drama that would serve as a case study for the completion of the intended primary research.

***Downton Abbey* as a Case Study**

Based on the secondary research collected, PBS *Masterpiece Theatre's Downton Abbey* was found to be the quintessential example of a highly successful, currently televised historical drama that strives to engage the past through its possession of a “definite historical goal” (Musson, 2012, para. 1). The series accurately reflects one of the key traits of the historical fiction genre: the characteristic tension between the competing goals of historical truth and fictional storytelling. For example, the show’s creator, Julian Fellowes, believes the program to be “pretty accurate” (Julian Fellowes as quoted in *The Telegraph*, 2011, para. 2), and, at the same time, those who work on the series acknowledge that *Downton Abbey* is “a fictional world” (Hugh Bonneville as quoted in Langmuir, 2012, para. 4). In this way, *Downton Abbey* does not claim to be “a social history” (Hugh Bonneville as quoted in Langmuir, 2012, para. 4), for, as Amy Duncan, journalist blogger for *Metro*, remarks, if Fellowes wanted his series “to mirror that of Victorian Britain right down to the tiniest detail, he would have created a show for the History Channel rather than for the ITV drama slot” (2012, para. 4). Instead, *Downton Abbey* utilizes the medium of television, with its “open-endedness” and “unlimited time to develop any character,” to temper historical truth with emotional storytelling (Fellowes, 2012b, p. 7).

This careful balancing act has served to make *Downton Abbey* “the most successful new drama on any channel since February 2009” (Richards, 2010, para. 2).

Despite the series' apparent success, however, in navigating the boundary between the factual and the fictional, *Downton Abbey* is "being picked apart, studied and lambasted – not for its content or weak plot, but for its minute and often overlooked historical accuracies," such as the medical ailments depicted by the series and the linguistic anachronisms scattered throughout *Downton Abbey*'s dialogue (Richards, 2010, para. 4). This cultural backlash against a television program that appears to embody a successful execution of televised historical drama, as previously defined by Woodward (1967), demonstrates the series' qualifications for detailed consideration as a case study in this research.

Using *Downton Abbey* as a case study, this research proceeded to investigate whether or not the historical fiction genre on television has a "serious function to perform in society" (Rosenthal, 1999, p. xv), and, furthermore, as *The Guardian*'s Jonathan Jones puts it, "which [historical] liberties are acceptable [for televised historical fiction] to take, and which are not?" (2010, para. 3). Important to note however, is the fact that in its investigation of *Downton Abbey*, this study did not concern itself with assessing the historical accuracy of the series due to the subjective nature of *accuracy*; rather, content was analyzed in an effort to understand the ways in which *Downton Abbey* and, more generally, televised historical drama, convey historical information and how viewers subsequently assess and understand that information.

Primary Research

Episode selection. Rosenstone (1995a) argues that historical drama can be divided into two broad categories: films "based on documentable persons, events, or

movements” and those “whose central plot and characters are fictional, but whose historical setting is intrinsic to the story and meaning of the work” (p. 2). While *Downton Abbey* as a series may fall into Rosenstone’s latter classification of historical drama, individual episodes align themselves with both categories – the plots of some being driven by a documentable element while the plots of others focus on the lives and relationships of the fictional characters against the series’ historical backdrop. To assure that both categories of episode were considered by this study, brief synopses of individual episodes within each season were consulted in order to categorize episodes into two broad categories: (1) event-driven episodes: those episodes in which main plotlines revolve around or are influenced by a definitive historical event or occurrence; and (2) domestic episodes: those episodes that do not include a major historical milestone, but rather provide a look into history through everyday, domestic storylines. To facilitate the selection of specific *Downton Abbey* episodes for analysis, each season of the series that has been aired in the United States as of December 2013 (Season One, seven episodes; Season Two, eight episodes; Season Three, eight episodes) was considered separately. Season One was found to have three event-driven episodes and four domestic episodes; Season Two was found to have five event-driven episodes and three domestic episodes; and Season Three was found to have one event-driven episode and seven domestic episodes.

TABLE 1

Downton Abbey Episode Selections by Season from Total Event-Driven and Domestic Episodes

<i>Season</i>	<i>Episode Category</i>			
	<i>Event-Driven</i>		<i>Domestic</i>	
	<i>Total</i>	<i>Selected</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Selected</i>
One	1.1, 1.4, 1.6	1.1	1.2, 1.3, 1.5, 1.7	1.7
Two	2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.5, 2.8	2.8	2.4, 2.6, 2.7	2.7
Three	3.3	3.3	3.1, 3.2, 3.4, 3.5, 3.6, 3.7, 3.8	3.4

Every episode within each group, separated according to both season number and content category, was then assigned a number. Using an online random number generator, one episode per grouping was selected for analysis. As can be seen in Table 1, from Season One's three event-driven episodes, Episode One (referred to as episode 1.1 – Season One, Episode One) was selected and, from the four domestic episodes, Episode 7 (episode 1.7) was selected; from Season Two's five event-driven episodes, Episode Eight (episode 2.8) was selected, and from the three domestic episodes, Episode Seven (episode 2.7) was selected; finally, from Season Three's one event-driven episodes, Episode Three (episode 3.3) was automatically selected, and from the seven domestic episodes, Episode Four (episode 3.4) was selected. Each of these six selected episodes were viewed and analyzed according to the system of categories constructed from the information attained through this study's phase of secondary research.

System of categories: Weinstein’s approach. As was previously described in the Review of the Literature section of this study, Paul B. Weinstein, in his “Movies as the Gateway to History: The History and Film Project” (2001) provides a comprehensive approach to assessing the historical accuracy of filmed historical fiction. These guidelines and their associated questions, divided into the broad categories of: (I) Setting, Details, and Design; (II) History; (III) Behavior; and (IV) Agenda, Values, and Effects, were applied to the content of *Downton Abbey* in order to evaluate the historical authenticity of the series and uncover the producers’ intended and encoded historical message.

This preliminary stage of the research that considered producer-encoded content was supplemented with behind-the-scenes material provided by the producers of *Downton Abbey*. This additional content consisted of (1) the Special Feature video segments – “Downton Abbey: The Making of” (2011b) and “Downton Abbey: A House in History” (2011c) – made available through the series’ Season One set of DVDs, (2) the Special Feature video segments – “Fashion and Uniforms” (2012b), “House to Hospital” (2012c), and “Romance in a Time of War” (2012d)– made available through the series’ Season Two set of DVDs, (3) the Special Feature video segments – “*Downton Abbey* Behind the Drama” (2013b), “Downton in 1920” (2013c), and “The Men of Downton” (2013d) – made available through the series’ Season Three set of DVDs, (4) *Downton Abbey: The Complete Scripts, Season One* (2012a), the first season’s full shooting scripts with additional material and commentary from Julian Fellowes, (5) *Downton Abbey: The Complete Scripts, Season Two* (2013), the second season’s full shooting scripts with

additional material and commentary from Julian Fellowes, and (6) *Return to Downton Abbey* (2013), a PBS special hosted by Susan Sarandon that includes a mix of behind-the-scenes footage, interviews with creators and cast members, and video clips from Seasons One through Three. All of these specialty additions were published by PBS *Masterpiece Theatre*, which, while serving the beneficial purpose of providing this research with a more explicit view of *Downton Abbey*'s producer-intended, or encoded, meanings, also requires the researcher to recognize their potential for presenting a biased view.

The next stage in the research process served to represent the decoding piece of Hall's reception research – for, as stated by Jason Mittell, “to understand the decoding process, cultural studies scholars use qualitative reception research to investigate how actual viewers make sense of texts. Such research can use [...] analyses of published reviews or comments (in a magazine or online forum)” (2012, p. 366). Weinstein's system of categories and questions were used to analyze the audience-created content of two published articles from peer-reviewed journal articles, 15 published articles from contemporary news sources, and two messages posted to online discussion boards. This content was acquired through searches conducted using (1) the Biltmore College University Libraries' collection of Databases and E-Journals, specifically those of *Communication Abstract*, *Communication and Mass Media Complete*, *Academic OneFile*, *ProQuest*, and *JSTOR*, (2) the search engines provided on the websites of popular news publishers, and (3) general internet search engines; each of these searches was guided by keywords that combined the term “*Downton Abbey*” with variations of the previously utilized terms: *history*; *popular history*; *visual history*; *historical fiction*;

historical accuracy; authenticity; fact; fiction; historical drama; period drama; effects; influence; impact; audience; viewers; education; pedagogy; understanding; comprehension; retention; knowledge.

A textual analysis of these materials once again considered Weinstein's categories of: (I) Setting, Details, and Design; (II) History; (III) Behavior; and (IV) Agenda, Values, and Effects, and sought to uncover the ways in which audience members interpret, internalize, and react to each of these factors. This combination of textual analyses of both *Downton Abbey* and the cultural discourse that surrounds the program serves to fulfill Hall's suggestion that reception research focus on both the encoding and decoding processes of media.

Finally, it is important to mention that, although a prescribed method of analysis was in place for the duration of this study, the research also adhered to an emergent design, practicing flexibility, open-mindedness, and acceptance were unexpected findings to develop while the study was conducted.

Findings

Producer-Encoded Content

Setting, details, and design. Each of the six selected *Downton Abbey* episodes as well as the supplementary, producer-generated materials were considered in the context of Weinstein's Setting, Details, and Design category and the four questions it dictates: (1) Are the locations, costumes, and sets accurate? (2) Do buildings look realistic? (3) Does the overall look of the film reflect the period? and (4) Has the filmmaker included details that enhance the historical atmosphere and viewing experience? (Weinstein, 2001, p. 43). This lens concerned itself with the small historical details and distinctions included in both *Downton Abbey*'s narrative and *mise-en-scène* (everything, outside of editing and sound, that appears within the camera's frame – this includes the “setting, lighting, costumes and makeup, and staging and performance” [Bordwell & Thompson, 1979, p. 113]).

Each of the six selected episodes are set inside or on the grounds of *Downton Abbey*, the Yorkshire country estate of the Crawley family. The setting of *Downton Abbey*, according to series' producer Nigel Marchant, “was another character for the script and to get the house right was very important to [the producers]” (Nigel Marchant as quoted in Neame, Eaton, & Fellowes, 2011c). Julian Fellowes, *Downton Abbey* creator, chose Highclere Castle, built in the 1830s in Berkshire, to play such a significant role in the series because, in his opinion, “it is an extraordinary expression of aristocratic confidence, [and] a loud statement of the value of aristocracy” (Fellowes, 2012a, p. 3); additionally, it is believed that each episode's incorporation of slow, lengthy establishing

and tracking shots of both Highclere Castle's interior and exterior, for example the shot in episode 1.1 that introduces the estate – written as: “The sun is rising behind Downton Abbey, a great and splendid house in a great and splendid park” (Fellowes, 2012a, p. 2) – serve to “add an air of authenticity” to the action taking place in and around the building (Neame et al., 2011c).

Downton Abbey even employs a historical advisor, Alistair Bruce, to build upon the authenticity of this historic backdrop. Bruce serves to “guide the directors” and oversee the incorporation of visual details, such as costumes, hair, make-up, and props, in order to create “a look, a feel, and a style” for the series that accurately reflects the historical atmosphere of post-Edwardian England (Neame et al., 2011c). Bruce explains his position as one in which, “you don't always get every tiny detail right, but my goodness you try. And you look and you keep watching to try to make sure the detail is properly attended,” for, he has stated, “if the [audience's] subconscious is satisfied that everything is right [accurate], then I think people will enjoy [the show] more and get the story better” (Alistair Bruce as quoted in Neame et al., 2011b). Fellowes appears to put an equal emphasis on the importance of accurate details, for many of his notes that accompany the shooting scripts express his frustration at the “perennial errors of many, many period shows,” such as costuming a butler in gloves when “butlers never wore gloves and footmen only wore gloves to serve at the table,” and his frequent dedication to and enjoyment from countering these misconceptions in *Downton Abbey* (Fellowes, 2012a, p. 197).

Instances where Fellowes's, Bruce's and, subsequently, *Downton Abbey's* attention to historical detail shines through in the six selected episodes include: (1) In episode 1.1: the installation of electricity in the main rooms of the house, the servants ironing the Crawleys' newspapers – something Fellowes admits is “cliché in a way because everyone knows it was done” but uses dialogue to “correct the common misconception” that ironing was done to flatten the newspapers, when it was in fact used to dry the ink (Fellowes, 2012a, p. 10) – Mr. Charles Carson's (the butler) straining wine into a decanter through gauze; (2) in episode 1.7: the installation of a telephone in both the main hall and servants' hall, the reference to *The Lady* as a magazine to advertise for a new lady's maid – a characteristic move by Fellowes in that it “makes reference to things that people would have known about at the time” (Fellowes, 2013, p. 4); (3) in episode 2.7: dialogue concerning the food shortages and rationing that followed the First World War, the incorporation of new fashions, such as the man's dinner jacket and women's clothing that featured “shorter skirts, [and] looser cuts” (Neame et al., 2012a); (4) in episode 2.8: the traditional display of presents during a wedding, the arrival of the gramophone at Downton Abbey – what Fellowes believes to be “a symbol of the period” (2013, p. 432); (5) in episode 3.3: the post-war servant shortages reported in the newspapers, the strict social hierarchy not only between classes but also within the servants' hall – as denoted by Carson's line, “Daisy [the kitchen maid] will not sit down [to eat with the rest of the servants]. She eats with Mrs. Patmore [the cook] in the kitchen” (Fellowes et al., 2013a); (6) in episode 3.4: the introduction of an electric toaster, the designation between married women eating breakfast in bed and unmarried

women eating with the men in the breakfast room, and, finally, the distinction between types of utensils as seen in this exchange between Alfred Nugent (the footman) and Carson:

CARSON: Go on then.

[Alfred points to the row of spoons laid out before him]

ALFRED: Teaspoon, egg spoon...melon spoon, grapefruit spoon, jam spoon...

[Alfred points his finger over the last spoon, thinking hard. Carson waits.]

CARSON: Shall I tell you?

ALFRED: All right.

[Carson picks up the spoon.]

CARSON: A bullion spoon.

ALFRED: But I thought soupspoons were the same as tablespoons.

CARSON: Ah, so they are, but not for bullion, which is drunk from a smaller dish. (Fellowes et al., 2013a)

The previously listed examples provide merely a sample of instances in which *Downton Abbey*'s producers reveal their close adherence to the historical details that characterize the series' narrative and *mise-en-scène*.

History. Each of the six selected *Downton Abbey* episodes as well as the supplementary, producer-generated materials were considered in the context of Weinstein's History category and the three questions it dictates: (1) Is the history accurate? (2) Are events presented realistically? and (3) Is the chronology correct? (Weinstein, 2001, p. 42). More general in nature, this lens concerned itself with

assessing the extent to which the producer-encoded content makes reference to a specific historical time or place or incorporates and accurately explains major historical events or milestones.

Grounding themselves in a solid historical context, four out of the six episodes under consideration open with overlay text that serves to denote a specific historical time. One of the introductory scenes of episode 1.1 reveals to the audience that the date is “April 1912”; episode 1.7 situates itself in “July 1914”; and both episodes 2.7 and 2.8 contain overlay text at their openings that reads “1919”.

The specificity of these dates is not only meant to notify *Downton Abbey*'s audience as to each episode's historical period, but the presence of a designated time period simultaneously allows for the incorporation of notable historical events into the episodes' narrative and dialogue, which, as Julian Fellowes writes, helps to “give the audience enough information so they can follow the show” (2012a, p. 12). For example, episode 1.1 opens in April 1912 with the sinking of the *Titanic* – something the audience, the Crawley family, and the servants discover simultaneously when Robert Crawley (Earl of Grantham) opens his morning newspaper to reveal “a picture of the familiar four-funneled liner, *Titanic*” (Fellowes, 2012a, p. 12). Fellowes explains his reasoning behind choosing this “iconic disaster” to open the series as:

There are very few people who've never heard of the *Titanic* and most of us have a fairly accurate idea of when it took place, which is before the First World War. [...] It is a shorthand way of saying we are in England and it is just before the First World War. [...] The audience knows all this

because the script contains one word, *Titanic*, or indeed from the moment Robert opens the newspaper and they see those familiar four funnels. You don't have to spend lots of time explaining. This one incident tells them what they need to know. (Fellowes, 2012a, p. 12)

Episode 1.7 follows in this vein, what Fellowes refers to as “part of the style of *Downton Abbey*” in that it “makes references to world-shaking events without usually having anyone of historical significance come to the house [Downton Abbey]” (2012a, p. 346). Set in July 1914, episode 1.7 uses dialogue to make periodic references to historical events – for example, early on in the episode there exists this exchange between Robert and Mrs. Hughes (the housekeeper):

ROBERT: Any local news?

MRS HUGHES: The main topic here is the murder of the Austrian Archduke. (Neame et al., 2011a)

And later on, the episode features this exchange between Robert and Carson:

ROBERT: [...] Besides, none of us know what the next few months will bring.

CARSON: Because of the Archduke's death?

ROBERT: The Austrians won't get what they want from Serbia. And now Russia's starting to rumble... (Neame et al. 2011a)

Finally, this series of references throughout episode 1.7 concludes with an announcement by Robert at Downton Abbey's garden party; Robert asks for silence before declaring, “I very much regret to announce... that we are at war with Germany” (Neame et al., 2011a).

While episodes 1.1 (through *Titanic*'s sinking) and 1.7 (through the murder of the Austrian Archduke and the declaration of the First World War) incorporate historical events about which *Downton Abbey*'s producers assume their audience is more or less well-versed, episodes 2.7 and 2.8, both set in 1919, deal with the Spanish 'flu epidemic of 1918-1919, a piece of history that Fellowes believes "has almost been forgotten today" (2013, p. 435). Between episodes 2.7 and 2.8, Carson, Lavinia Swire (Matthew Crawley's fiancée), and Cora Crawley (Countess of Grantham) all contract the Spanish 'flu, allowing the producers of the series to demonstrate the nature of the disease to unaware audience members, something about which Fellowes comments, "I always like when I feel we're telling them [the audience] something they didn't know" (2013, p. 435).

In regard to the episodes selected from Season Three, episode 3.3 does not provide a specific historical date or any major historical references; episode 3.4, however, despite not indicating a specific date during which the episode takes place (as do episodes 1.1, 1.7, 2.7, and 2.8), does make historical references, namely to the American and English women's suffrage movements and to the Irish Revolution. The references of episode 3.4 are structured in a way similar to those regarding the Spanish 'flu in episode 2.7 and serve to situate the episode in a general historical time period. In keeping with Fellowes's narrative "style of *Downton Abbey*" (2012a, p. 346) events such as Tennessee's ratification of the nineteenth amendment (which extended the right of suffrage to American women) and the destruction of the Anglo-Irish Big Houses (the Irish republicans' burning of the British aristocracy's country mansions during the Irish

War of Independence) are briefly referenced through dialogue and position the episode between 1919 and 1920.

Behavior. Each of the six selected *Downton Abbey* episodes as well as the supplementary, producer-generated materials were considered in the context of Weinstein's Behavior category and the two questions it dictates: (1) Do the characters speak and act as people in their time, situation, and class did? and (2) Are gender relationships accurately rendered? (Weinstein, 2001, p. 43). The emergent design of this study, however, resulted in the recognition for the need to expand upon Weinstein's two guiding questions in the Behavior category in order to provide a more inclusive and robust framework within which to evaluate the behavior of *Downton Abbey*'s characters, both individually and within their relationships with other characters. Therefore, this lens ultimately concerned itself with the period appropriateness and accuracy of characters' behavior (how the characters speak and act) as individuals depending on their gender, class, age/generation, sexuality, nationality, and situation as well as the period appropriateness and accuracy of characters' behavior in relationship with other characters depending on the gender, class, age/generational, sexual, national, and situational dynamics between the characters.

Overall, the behavior projected by *Downton Abbey*'s cast of characters across the six considered episodes is aptly summarized by *Downton Abbey*'s historical advisor, Alistair Bruce, when he says in "Downton Abbey: A House in History," "The family did not regard the staff as alien and vice-versa the other way around. [...] That link that happens between human beings is there; despite the divide of lifestyle, there was a great

bond within the house” (Alistair Bruce as quoted in Neame et al., 2011c). Out of the two facets of this “bond” within Downton Abbey (one facet being the compassion felt by the Crawley family for their staff and the other being the compassion felt by the staff for the Crawley family), the narrative of each analyzed episode involves instances of the Crawley family’s demonstration of care and concern for their staff. Episode 1.1 is marked by a storyline that features Robert and Mr. John Bates (Robert’s valet). Bates is described as “walk[ing] with a stick and [having] a noticeable limp” (Fellowes, 2012a, p. 17) – making it important to note that, as mentioned in “*Downton Abbey: Behind the Drama*” (2013b), “someone with such an injury would rarely have been employed in service in a house; so it’s of huge importance that Bates is given this chance [to be Robert’s valet and to work at Downton Abbey].” The narrative explains the unusualness of Bates’ employment through the fact that “Bates was Robert’s servant when they were serving in the South African [Boer] War,” and there are, as a result, strong emotional ties between the two men (Fellowes, 2012a, p. 17) – something that manifests itself in this exchange when Bates, about to leave Downton Abbey as a result of his assumed inability to physically handle the work of a valet, is stopped by Robert:

[The chauffeur shuts the door and gets in, as does Bates. The car is moving off, when –]

ROBERT: Wait!

[The car stops. Robert runs forward, opening Bates’ door and pulling the case off the valet’s lap.]

ROBERT (CONT’D): Get out, Bates.

[Robert holds the door. A shocked Carson runs forward to close the door after Bates. The chauffeur drives off.]

ROBERT: Get back inside [Bates]. And we'll say no more about it.

[Bates takes his case and goes. Robert looks at the butler.]

ROBERT (CONT'D): It wasn't right, Carson. I just didn't think it was right. (Neame et al., 2011a)

Episode 1.7 includes two similar instances in which the Crawley family employs tremendous kindness when interacting with the Downton Abbey staff. The first instance is between Robert and Mrs. Patmore (the cook), who has been having difficulty with her eyesight; Robert declares, "On Doctor Clarkson's recommendation, I'm sending you up to London to see an eye specialist at Moorfields, Anna Smith [the head housemaid] will go with you and you'll stay with my sister Lady Rosamund Painswick, in Eaton Square" (Neame et al., 2011a). Episode 1.7's second instance involves Lady Sybil aiding Gwen Dawson (a housemaid) to secure a secretarial position with a telephone company; the surprising nature of such an act is expressed by Robert in this exchange with Lady Sybil:

SYBIL: Sorry, Papa, you can't go in there [the library].

ROBERT: Why on earth not?

SYBIL: Gwen's in there with Mr. Bromidge [the telephone company owner]. She's being interviewed.

ROBERT: I cannot use my library because one of the housemaids is in there applying for another job?

SYBIL: That's about the size of it. (Neame et al., 2011a)

Episode 2.7 also includes equally unusual acts by the Crawley family toward their staff. Despite the fact that Fellowes notes that the history of the period was such that "one of the central truths of this way of life [was] that the servants always knew more

about the family than the family knew about the servants” to the point that “most employers would hardly know the names [of their servants],” the relationships between the Crawley family and their staff often stray from this description (Fellowes, 2012a, p. 35) – for example the relationship that exists between Robert and Jane Moorsum (a relatively new housemaid at Downton Abbey):

ROBERT: How’s your boy doing? Uh, Freddie?

[She is flattered he has remembered the name.]

JANE: Yes, Freddie. He’s doing very well.

ROBERT: I wrote to the headmaster of Ripon Grammar. I said to look out for him [Freddie].

JANE: That’s – that’s so kind, m’lord. (Neame et al., 2012a)

And later in the episode, after Jane has submitted her resignation to leave Downton Abbey:

[Robert takes an envelope out of his pocket.]

ROBERT: This is the name and address of my man of business –

JANE: Why? You don’t owe me anything.

ROBERT: It’s not for you. It’s for Freddie. Let me give him a start in life.

JANE: I’m not sure...

ROBERT: It would make me very happy. (Neame et al., 2012a)

Episode 2.7 includes another storyline that is marked by similar familiarity and kindness: Lady Mary arranges for a romantic honeymoon room for head housemaid Anna Bates (previously Anna Smith) to share with Bates after their marriage that day – the

stage directions state: “A four-poster bed has been turned down. The lamps are on. A fire is burning” (Fellowes, 2013, p. 476).

Instances of this nature continue throughout the other three selected episodes (episodes 2.8, 3.3, and 3.4): in episode 2.8, Thomas Barrow (first footman / underbutler) is offered a position back at Downton Abbey after his time spent in the army medical corps during the war, despite the fact that in episode 1.7, he was caught in an attempt to steal Carson’s wallet, an offense that Fellowes notes multiple times would have been “the worst thing for a servant” (2012a, p. 19), for “once you were perceived as a thief you would not work again” (2012a, p. 260); in episode 3.3, after discovering that Mrs. Hughes might be ill, Cora informs Mrs. Hughes: “I don’t want you to have any concerns about where you’ll go or who’ll look after you, because the answer is here, and we will” (Fellowes et al., 2013a); and in episode 3.4, a storyline from episode 3.3 is further developed to feature Isobel Crawley taking it upon herself to aid Ethyl Parks (a former Downton Abbey housemaid) in rebuilding her life after Ethyl has fallen into prostitution.

Next, consideration must be paid to the second facet of the “bond” between the two groups that inhabit Downton Abbey (the compassion felt by the staff for the Crawley family); episodes 1.1 and 3.3 offer two examples. In episode 1.1, Carson and Mrs. Hughes discuss the episode’s driving question of who will be the next male heir to inherit the Downton Abbey estate:

CARSON: I do take it personally, Mrs. Hughes. I can't stand by and watch our family threatened with the loss of all they hold dear.

MRS HUGHES: They're not 'our' family.

CARSON: They're all the family I've got! (Neame et al., 2011a)

In episode 3.3, members of the staff again express sympathy for the Crawley family after Lady Edith has been left at the altar on her wedding day by fiancée Sir Anthony Strallan. Downstairs occur this series of exchanges: first, between Daisy Robinson (the kitchen maid) and Anna:

DAISY: I never thought I'd feel sorry for an earl's daughter.

ANNA: All God's creatures have their troubles. (Fellowes et al., 2013a)

And later, in the servants' hall over dinner:

MRS PATMORE: Never mind me. What about the pain of that poor girl upstairs [Lady Edith]?

O'BRIEN: Jilted at the altar. I don't think I could stand the shame.

THOMAS: Then it's lucky no one's ever asked you, isn't it?

ANNA: Poor thing. How will she find the strength to hold up her head?

DAISY: I swear, I'd have to run away and hide in a place where no one knew me.

ALFRED: I think she's well out of it.

MOLESLEY: How can you say that?

ALFRED: I mean it, She's young, not bad looking. She could do much better than that broken down crock [Sir Anthony Strallan].

CARSON: Sir Anthony may have betrayed a daughter of this house, but he still does not deserve to be addressed in that manner by a footman.

MRS HUGHES: Oh, I think he does Mr. Carson. Every bit of that. And worse.

CARSON: Well, maybe just this once. (Fellowes et al., 2013a)

Despite the plethora of moments during which the Crawley family and their staff express feelings of compassion and sympathy toward one another, Fellowes believes that he still maintains his dedication to the period by showing that “there was nevertheless great inequality in this world” (2012a, p. 35). For example, episode 1.1 demonstrates that although Robert and Carson may have a pleasant working relationship, Carson cannot and does not react when he walks into the library as Robert indignantly declares, “I don’t care what Carson thinks” (Neame et al., 2011a). Similarly, in episode 2.8, Robert fights adamantly against his daughter Lady Sybil’s cross-class engagement to Tom Branson (the chauffeur and an Irish republican), declaring, “I won’t allow it! I will not allow my daughter to throw away her life!” (Neame et al., 2012a) – remaining true to the period’s strict societal rules under which “it would have been very difficult for Sybil to marry into an Irish republican family as the daughter of an English earl, and there is no doubt that some of them would have found such a marriage impossible to accept” (Fellowes, 2013, p. 233), not to mention the fact that “if she did marry the chauffeur, that would put her out of society because there is no way Branson would be allowed or accepted in the great houses [such as Downton Abbey]” (Alistair Bruce as quoted in Neame et al, 2012d). It should be noted, however, that by the end of the episode, Robert relinquishes his resistance and allows Lady Sybil to “take [his] blessing with [her]” to Ireland (Neame et al., 2012a), and, by episode 3.3, Branson (now called Tom by the Crawley family) has been welcomed to live upstairs at Downton Abbey with the Crawleys and is

affectionately referred to by Robert as “our tame revolutionary” (Fellowes et al., 2013a). In episode 3.4, Fellowes does provide, however, an example of the period’s tensions and inequality within class lines when Mrs. Bird (the cook for Isobel and Matthew Crawley at Crawley House) refuses to help Ethyl Parks (a former Downton Abbey housemaid who has fallen into prostitution) into her coat, stating “I do not believe it is part of my duties to wait on the likes of her. I’m sorry, but that’s what I feel” (Fellowes et al., 2013a).

The final aspect of the Behavior category that became apparent through analysis of the six selected episodes was the manner in which characters spoke with one another, especially across class lines. Episodes 3.3 and 3.4, specifically, feature moments in which conversation between the Crawley family and the Downton Abbey staff is depicted as open and casual. Episode 3.3 features Carson catching Cora with “Might I have a word, my lady?” as she is stepping into a car on her way to a family picnic in the village of Eryholme (Fellowes et al., 2013a); Carson proceeds to use this time to openly inform Cora about Mrs. Hughes’ illness. In episode 3.4, Cora interrupts dinner one evening to introduce the new footman (Jimmy Kent) to her mother-in-law Violet (the Dowager Countess of Grantham):

CORA: This is our new footman, Mamma. What should we call you?

JIMMY: Jimmy.

CARSON: James, Your Ladyship.

[Carson steps forward and clears his throat.]

CARSON (CONT’D): This is James.

ROBERT: Welcome to Downton, James. (Fellowes et al., 2013a)

Episode 3.4 also features a moment when, after Lady Edith has successfully had a Letter to the Editor published in the newspaper, Robert, unsure what to make of it, looks for Carson's opinion when he asks, "What do you think, Carson?" (Fellowes et al., 2013a).

Agenda, values, and effects. Each of the six selected *Downton Abbey* episodes as well as the supplementary, producer-generated materials were considered in the context of Weinstein's Agenda, Values, and Effects category and the five questions it dictates: (1) What values underlie the film? (2) What does the filmmaker do to influence feelings and emotions? (3) What sort of heroic and villainous characters are presented and supported in the film? (4) What messages did the filmmaker wish to convey? and (5) Does the film succeed in producing the desired effect? (Weinstein, 2001, p. 43). More holistic in nature, this lens concerned itself with assessing the six selected episodes as a whole in terms of the producers' intended style and tropes, means of narrative and character inspiration, and intended themes and goals for *Downton Abbey* as a series.

In general, one of *Downton Abbey*'s primary values, according to Fellowes, is "treat[ing] everyone equally" (Fellowes et al., 2013c); Fellowes explains that when devising *Downton Abbey*, it was very important "to give equal weight, in terms of narrative or moral probity or even likeability to both parts of the community of a great house, the family and their servants" (Fellowes, 2012b, p. 7). As a result of this balanced treatment of characters, *Downton Abbey*'s principle characters are not presented in terms of heroes versus villains, but rather each character is, what Fellowes describes as, a

“shifting character” (2013, p. 149); he provides more detail in his commentary, where he writes:

I suppose the fundamental philosophy of *Downton* is essentially that pretty well all of the men and women in the house, whatever their role there, are decent people. We have one or two who fall below the marker but mainly they are trying to do their best. Of course, we need conflict, but to me it’s not enough to have nasty people versus nice people [...]. (Fellowes, 2012a, p. 76)

The most apparent examples of Fellowes’s “shifting characters” are Mrs. Sarah O’Brien (Lady Grantham’s Lady’s Maid) and Thomas Barrow (first footman / underbutler). Both O’Brien and Thomas are viewed as troublemakers by the rest of the Downton Abbey staff and even by a few members of the Crawley family – Robert remarks that “[O’Brien] is always making trouble” (Neame et al., 2011a), a fact the audience is made aware of through devious acts, such as in episode 1.1 when O’Brien purposely “hooks Bates’s [walking] stick with her foot and he, taken unawares, falls” (Fellowes, 2012a, p. 51); as for Thomas, even Fellowes admits that he “is a villain in the first series” (2012a, p. 66), as demonstrated by Thomas’s plotting to get rid of and replace Bates as Lord Grantham’s valet. Fellowes also notes, however, that “just when you think [these characters] are all bad, they’re not quite, so you have to adjust your opinion” (2013, p. 149). For example, episode 1.7 features O’Brien, after leaving wet soap on the floor for pregnant Cora to slip on once she exits the bathtub, is “suddenly gripped by the horror of what she has done and she tries to stop it, but she is too late” (Fellowes, 2012a,

p. 385), an attempt that Fellowes writes, “hopefully makes the audience feel slightly reluctant to condemn [O’Brien] absolutely” (Fellowes, 2012a, p. 385). In addition, Thomas’s homosexual narrative, which emerges in episode 1.1, is what Fellowes believes is “the key element which makes Thomas slightly sympathetic” (Fellowes, 2012a, p. 156), for “being gay in 1912 was very, very difficult. [...] it was actually illegal at that time, and a man could risk prison by expressing his attraction to someone else” (Fellowes, 2012a, p. 66), presumably making Thomas’s defensiveness and hostility more understandable and forgivable to audience members.

The duality of *Downton Abbey*’s characters also manifests itself in the interactions and situations in which the characters engage throughout the series – situations that Fellowes refers to as “*Downton* dilemmas” or “*Downton* moments” (2013, p. 459), which he describes as being “dependent on both points of view [in a disagreement] being reasonable” (Fellowes, 2012a, p. 76), thus encouraging the audience to “hopefully have their sympathies and take the side of one character or the other, but also sometimes change their minds” (Fellowes, 2012a, p. 76). By way of an example, episode 2.7 features a disagreement between Robert and Cora over the extent of Matthew’s (who has returned to Downton Abbey after the war injured – presumably a paraplegic – and engaged to Lavinia Swire) stay at Downton Abbey. Cora’s point of view is such that “she does not want [Lady Mary] to be desperately in love with a man who is incapable of fathering any children or living a normal life” (Fellowes, 2013, p. 364); on the other hand, Robert believes “there is something dishonorable in dumping Matthew” by sending him home (Fellowes, 2013, p. 364). Fellowes comments that “In the *Downton* way,

Robert and Cora both have a point in their disagreement about sending Matthew home” (2013, p. 364).

The manner by which Fellowes creates the narrative storylines and characters for *Downton Abbey* was another consideration under the Agenda, Values, and Effects category. In general, Fellowes ascribes to the belief that “as with so many aspects of this way of [post-Edwardian] life, there were not the hard and fast rules that people now like to talk about” (Fellowes, 2012a, p. 60) and even notes that “it’s always rather interesting that what seems the most fictional [in *Downton Abbey*] is in fact based entirely in truth” (Fellowes et al., 2013b); therefore, Fellowes’s inspiration for the series includes a wide range of sources. Among these points of inspiration are: (1) historical facts – for example, the social history recorded in Gail MacColl and Carol McD. Wallace’s nonfiction book *To Marry an English Lord*, which served as “part of the inspiration for the show” (Fellowes, 2012a, p. 14); (2) memoirs – such as Margaret Powell’s *Below Stairs* (Fellowes, 2012a, p. 191); (3) personal stories – for example, Fellowes will often note that a scene, situation, character, or line of dialogue “comes from a story told by my mother” (Fellowes, 2013, p. 58) or originated “from a story in our own family” (Fellowes, 2012a, p. 396); (4) secondhand stories – other times, Fellowes will comment that a scene, situation, character, or line of dialogue “came from a real story I heard at a dinner party in Derbyshire,” for example, as he did when referencing Lady Sybil and Branson’s elopement in episode 2.7 (Fellowes, 2013, p. 410); and (5) the Internet – in the instance of Mrs. Patmore’s eye surgery in episode 1.7, Fellowes “went onto the Internet to learn about the first cataract operations” (Fellowes, 2012a, p. 370).

Although equipped with a variety of methods by which to gather historical information and narrative inspiration, Fellowes does note occasions during which he “cheats” historical accuracy (Fellowes, 2013, p. 154); however, he attests that, “if I cheat, then someone [a *Downton Abbey* character] must make a point of it” through dialogue (Fellowes, 2013, p. 154). Episode 2.7 provides an example of this when Matthew is in his room at Downton Abbey dressing for dinner and Violet knocks on the door asking “Oh, Cousin Matthew? Are you dressed? May I come in?” (Neame et al., 2012a) – a situation that would have been regarded as “strange” and “an almost daring, and extreme measure” (Fellowes, 2013, p. 406), making it necessary, in Fellowes’s mind, to include Violet’s line: “No doubt you will regard this as rather unorthodox. My pushing into a man’s bedroom, uninvited” (Neame et al., 2012a).

Audience-Decoded Content

Before providing a report of the findings that resulted from this study’s analysis of audience-generated resources, it is important to note that the emergent design of this research influenced the materials that were ultimately evaluated as *audience-decoded content*. Although this research intended to consider average *Downton Abbey* viewers and their interpretations of the series in terms of Weinstein’s four categories of: (I) Setting, Details, and Design; (II) History; (III) Behavior; and (IV) Agenda, Values, and Effects, it was discovered over the course of the study that this material was unavailable. Although there exist a variety of *Downton Abbey* fan forums and discussion boards, the audience commentary that characterizes these media outlets was found to consist of viewer postings that are unrelated to Weinstein’s categories, and, instead, were comprised

of content that, for example, makes predictions about future episodes or seasons, poses or responds to *Downton Abbey* trivia questions, or provides background information about the series' actors and actresses. In light of the fact that relevant commentary written by average *Downton Abbey* viewers was unavailable, this study chose to recognize the perspectives of academics, writers, journalists, and critics as a representative critical voice for *Downton Abbey*'s audience, for their work more readily aligned with Weinstein's four categories and therefore the focus of this research. Thus, the audience-decoded content that was ultimately evaluated by this study consists of two published articles from peer-reviewed journal articles, 15 published articles from contemporary news sources, and two messages posted to online discussion boards.

Setting, details, and design. Each element of audience-created content was considered in the context of Weinstein's Setting, Details, and Design category and the four questions it dictates: (1) Are the locations, costumes, and sets accurate? (2) Do buildings look realistic? (3) Does the overall look of the film reflect the period? and (4) Has the filmmaker included details that enhance the historical atmosphere and viewing experience? (Weinstein, 2001, p. 43). Evaluated from a decoding perspective, this lens concerned itself with instances in which *Downton Abbey*'s audience commented upon the small historical details and distinctions included in both the series' narrative and *mise-en-scène* in terms of whether or not these elements are perceived to evoke an accurate historical atmosphere.

On the one hand, audience members appear to appreciate the “documentary aspect to the drama” of *Downton Abbey*, citing the series’ immersive “verisimilitude” (Fenton, 2012, para. 13):

We want the food to look like period food, and the kitchen and servants’ quarters to be accurate portrayals of servants’ quarters. We are delighted to note that, say, the butler strains the vintage port through a napkin, or that the most fantastic points of servants’ etiquette (no maids, only footmen, serving dinner) have been resurrected for our amusement. (Fenton, 2012, para. 13)

Amongst the historical details that *Downton Abbey* has succeeded in portraying, viewers mention elements that range from the series’ “fastidious attention to the fashions and rituals of the time” (Dina Copelman as quoted in WETA, 2010, para. 5) to the truthfulness of “the footman Alfred’s great height,” the sneakiness of lady’s maids, the freedom marriage offered women in service, the butler’s authoritative position, and the initial “resistance to new-fangled technology,” such as electric toasters (Lethbridge, 2013). It was subsequently mentioned that this attention to detail serves to “capture the feeling of the great country house in action, the high standards and ritualistic lifestyle that were supported by a large and (usually) dedicated residential staff, no matter what crisis was going on” (Musson, 2012, para. 21).

At the same time, however, audiences members acknowledge that “on blogs and fan forums, *Downton Abbey* is being picked apart, studied, and lambasted [...] for its minute and often overlooked historical inaccuracies” (Richards, 2010, para. 4) – an

example of which is neurologist Orly Avitzur's *Neurology Today* article (2013), which grades *Downton Abbey*'s "neurological injuries and ailments" on a scale ranging from A to F depending on how accurately the series depicts each medical condition. While some viewers believe that the "medical information imparted by the plot seems to be correct" (Byrne, 2013, p. 4), Avitzur's grades range drastically from the series' A+ depiction of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Season Two, Episode Three, to its failed (F) attempt to portray Matthew's spinal cord injury in Season Two, Episodes Five and Seven.

Another detail that seems to bother viewers is the series' setting – James Fenton (2012) of *The New York Review of Books* writes, "the story is set in North Yorkshire, but filmed in the south of England, and nothing we see on screen reminds one at all of the north" (para. 14). Furthermore, other fans have noted the "historical inaccuracies and errors that have cropped up in the series, [...] the majority [of which] have appeared in the outdoor scenes" (*The Telegraph*, 2011, para. 4):

[These errors] have included a television aerial fixed to a home, a modern-style conservatory appearing in shot, as well as double yellow lines on a road. Viewers even claim to have spotted a modern street sign in the background and a piece of music which was featured in one episode had not yet been written at the time the series is set. (*The Telegraph*, 2011, para. 4)

The number of servants that make up the staff of *Downton Abbey* marks an additional point of debate amongst audience members. Some members seem to understand that the series' "number of servants was deliberately reduced to simplify the

narrative, and jobs that would have been filled by several people were condensed” (Musson, 2012, para 3), while others have commented: “My only quibble would be that surely a house of the size that this one [Downton Abbey] is made to look onscreen would have many more staff than it appears to have?” (as quoted in Richards, 2010, para. 14), or, more forcibly: “[...] of course there are far too FEW servants: where are all the housemaids – there should be at least eight of them?” (Lethbridge, 2013, para. 1).

History. Each element of audience-created content was considered in the context of Weinstein’s History category and the three questions it dictates: (1) Is the history accurate? (2) Are events presented realistically? and (3) Is the chronology correct? (Weinstein, 2001, p. 42). Evaluated from a decoding perspective, this lens concerned itself with instances in which Downton Abbey’s audience commented upon the historical accuracy or realism of the series’ references to specific historical times and places or to major historical events or milestones.

There is disagreement amongst *Downton Abbey*’s audience members over whether or not, through viewing *Downton Abbey*, they are, as editor of *British Heritage* magazine Dana Huntley (2012) calls it, “getting the real picture” of post-Edwardian life in aristocratic homes (para. 4). On the one hand, there are those like Huntley who believe that “in most respects, [viewers] are” (2012, para. 5) – for example, Dina Copelman, British history professor at George Mason University, ascribes that “the show gets significant historical events right” (Dina Copelman as quoted in WETA, 2010, para. 6); for example, she writes that episode 2.7’s and 2.8’s “depiction of the 1918 ‘Spanish’ ‘flu epidemic is accurate” (Dina Copelman as quoted in WETA, 2010, para. 6). On the other

hand, however, are those viewers, such as historian Jennifer Newby, who believes the series “is completely wrong and infuriating to watch” (Jennifer Newby as quoted in *The Huffington Post*, 2011, para. 1).

This frustration, in part, has been attributed to both “the absence of particular historical contexts” and the fact that “Downton, and the Crawleys especially, seem very isolated” from the political and social world that is changing around them (Dina Copelman as quoted in WETA, 2013, para. 9). Although viewers recognize that *Downton Abbey* does provide “a few references to specific events” (Dina Copelman as quoted in WETA, 2010, para. 9), those historical events are often “presented as a personal story [for members of the Crawley family or staff] rather than a social and political crisis” (Dina Copelman as quoted in WETA, 2013, para. 4) – for example, in Season Two, Robert’s “foolish investment strategy” that leaves the financial fate of Downton Abbey in question is presented as “individual bad judgment” as opposed to a “problem intrinsic to economic practices” that spanned across England’s aristocracy after the First World War (Dina Copelman as quoted in WETA, 2013, para. 5).

Behavior. Each element of audience-created content was considered in the context of Weinstein’s Behavior category and the two questions it dictates: (1) Do the characters speak and act as people in their time, situation, and class did? and (2) Are gender relationships accurately rendered? (Weinstein, 2001, p. 43). Once again, however, the emergent design of this study resulted in the recognition for the need to expand upon Weinstein’s two guiding questions in the Behavior category in order to provide a more inclusive and robust framework within which to evaluate audiences’

interpretation of the behavior of *Downton Abbey*'s characters, both individually and within their relationships with other characters. Therefore, this lens, when considered from a decoding perspective, ultimately concerned itself with instances in which *Downton Abbey*'s audience commented upon the period appropriateness and accuracy of characters' behavior (how the characters speak and act) as individuals depending on their gender, class, age/generation, sexuality, nationality, and situation as well as the period appropriateness and accuracy of characters' behavior in relationship with other characters depending on the gender, class, age/generational, sexual, national, and situational dynamics between the characters.

In terms of the ways in which *Downton Abbey*'s characters speak, both as individuals and while in conversation with one another, *The Telegraph* (2011) identifies that "fierce debates have raged online over whether particular words and phrases have been used [by *Downton Abbey*] in the correct historical context" (para. 5). American linguist, Geoff Nunberg, in his article "Historical Vocab: When We Get It Wrong, Does It Matter?" writes:

Spotting linguistic anachronisms in Julian Fellowes' *Downton Abbey* is as easy as shooting grouse in a barrel. 'I couldn't care less,' Lord Grantham says. Thomas complains that 'our lot always gets shafted.' Cousin Matthew announces he has been on a steep learning curve, a phrase that would have gotten a blank reception even in the [1960s]. [...] The clangers are just too weirdly modern to ignore. (Nunberg, 2013, para. 4)

Yet others “have insisted that such expressions would have been used at the time” (*The Telegraph*, 2011, para. 7).

It is the way in which *Downton Abbey*’s characters act, however, especially in relation to one another, that has garnered the greatest public response. Specifically, viewers have noted that “the marriage of Branson and Sybil would have been highly unusual for the time” (Musson, 2012, para. 5) and “should stretch to the breaking point the credulity of even the most ardent *Downton* fan” (Lethbridge, 2013, para. 7); however, it appears to be the overall relationship between the Crawley family and the *Downton Abbey* servants that has received the most attention.

Jeremy Musson (2012) identifies that the “presses’ main criticism of the accuracy of *Downton Abbey* is that the show presents the two classes of people – the servants and the served – as too interconnected and friendly,” admitting that “*Fellowes* does portray them as close; the servants are workers, but they are also trusted and loyal friends, and sometimes lovers” (para. 4). Others have described *Downton Abbey*’s depiction of the relationship between the house’s upstairs and downstairs as “unrealistic” (metro.co.uk, 2012, para. 2), claiming that the “idealized romance at the heart of *Downton Abbey* is the symbiotic, interdependent bond between master and servant” (Chocano, 2012, para. 11). The Crawley family has been identified by viewers as “never lapsing into the most offensive kind of upper-class drawl one would expect of them,” in fact “great care has been taken to keep them pleasant and approachable, even when the things they say are sometimes shown to be class-bound and unfeeling” (Fenton, 2012, para. 12); as Huntley explains,

The one element that does not ring true [in *Downton Abbey*] is the easy interaction and conversation between the upstairs world of the family and their peers and the downstairs world of the hired help. That just didn't happen (or at least not on such a scale). Most of the family wouldn't have even known a housemaid's name. These great country houses had back stairways for a reason. There's not going to have been much interaction between these social sets, let alone much of an emotional connection.

(Huntley, 2012, para. 5)

Audience members seem to identify Robert (the Earl of Grantham) as the member of the Crawley family that most embodies this heightened level of compassion for the members of *Downton Abbey*'s staff. Carina Chocano's *New York Times* article gives perhaps the most robust description of Robert's audience-perceived characterization; Chocano writes,

Has a fictional aristocrat as upright and honorable, as tender of heart and noble of spirit, as humble, forbearing, magnanimous, solicitous and totally ludicrous as the Earl of Grantham ever graced the screen? Supermodels playing rocket scientists in Nicolas Cage movies put less strain on my credulity. It's not just that the earl takes his role as steward of the British class system seriously; it's that he's positively messianic in his flock-tending. His noblesse is all about oblige. In fact, save for an uncharacteristic, but not all that inconsistent, indiscretion toward the end of the second season [a brief romantic interlude with housemaid Jane

Moorsum], the earl's behavior is a model of self-effacing forbearance. He simple cannot do enough. You can't help wondering what gives.

(Chocano, 2013, para. 4)

When it comes to *Downton Abbey*'s servant class, audience members' criticism focuses not only on the staff's intimate interactions with the Crawley family, what historian Jennifer Newby has called "totally wrong" (Jennifer Newby as quoted in *The Huffington Post*, 2011, para. 4), but also on the nature of their physical labor, describing the conditions at Downton Abbey as "idealized" (Dina Copelman as quoted in WETA, 2010, para. 13), "too clean" (Jennifer Newby as quoted in *The Huffington Post*, 2011, para. 2), and "failing to convey the texture of domestic service, the chapped hands and rough knees...that real servants suffered" (Lucy Dulap as quoted in oxford-royale.co.uk, 2011, para. 3); Copelman elaborates on this viewpoint:

Being a servant was dirty work (at Downton the only servant who actually looks like she sweats is the cook); servants' living quarters were most likely drafty, cold. Servants were not likely to be confidants and the servants' welfare would not have been such a major preoccupation of real-life Crawleys. At best *Downton* provides a highly selective view of what relationships between servants and their employers might be; in fact, the presentation of servants' living conditions and class relations generally is highly romanticized and largely implausible. (Dina Copelman as quoted in WETA, 2010, para. 13)

Despite the criticism regarding the way in which *Downton Abbey*'s class relationships are rendered, some viewers stand by evidence and accounts that reveal instances of real-life benevolent employers combined with pleasant serving conditions, much like those featured on *Downton Abbey*. Jeremy Musson, in his article for *Foreign Affairs*, cites William Lanceley's memoir *From Hall-Boy to House-Steward* when he notes that "some former servants recall their time in service before the First World War as the most carefree of their lives" (Musson, 2012, para. 8). Musson also argues that, based on his exploration of memoirs, letters, and wills from the period, "there is no question that, as in *Downton Abbey*, many of the highly trained resident domestic staff in country houses became friendly with their employers – and, sometimes, even lovers," adding that his research "revealed a sense of shared goals and common purpose among the co-occupants" of English country houses (Musson, 2012, para. 10).

Agenda, values, and effects. Each element of audience-created content was considered in the context of Weinstein's Agenda, Values, and Effects category and the five questions it dictates: (1) What values underlie the film? (2) What does the filmmaker do to influence feelings and emotions? (3) What sort of heroic and villainous characters are presented and supported in the film? (4) What messages did the filmmaker wish to convey? and (5) Does the film succeed in producing the desired effect? (Weinstein, 2001, p. 43). Evaluated from a decoding perspective, this lens concerned itself with instances in which *Downton Abbey*'s audience commented holistically on the series, revealing their perception of the series' structure, inspiration, themes, goals, or messages and the effect *Downton Abbey* has on themselves as audience members.

Interpreted as a whole, *Downton Abbey* has been understood in various ways by viewers – there are those that believe “Julian Fellowes [...] had a definite historical goal” when he conceived of the series (Musson, 2012, para. 1), others do not expect “one hundred per cent accuracy” from *Downton Abbey*’s form of television drama, claiming that “if Julian [Fellowes] wanted his series to mirror that of Victorian Britain right down to the tiniest detail, he would have created a show for the History channel rather than for the ITV drama slot” (metro.co.uk, 2012, para. 4), and then there are those audience members who have called *Downton Abbey* “sheer fantasy and a sanitized version of the past” (historian and broadcaster Andrew Norman Wilson as quoted in Singh, 2011, para. 5), describing the series as “preposterous” (A.N. Wilson as quoted in Singh, 2011, para. 10). One viewer attributes this range of opinions to the series’ competing genres, and therefore competing goals, when she writes, “It’s a period drama. It’s a family drama. It’s a history lesson. But most of all it’s a soap opera” (Marley, 2012, para. 5).

Downton Abbey’s audience has also pointed out that the series is “very much of the present moment” (A.N. Wilson as quoted in Singh, 2011, para. 9), describing what *Downton Abbey* offers as “a utopian version of the past that’s custom made for the present sociopolitical morass, [...] presenting a system so perfect that it can weather any upheaval, smooth out any wrinkle, [and] absorb any shock” (Chocano, 2012, para. 9). Some have called *Downton Abbey*’s contemporary vibe a “virtue” because of the “life lessons it teaches viewers,” providing the examples of “good manners and mutual respect shown in the relationships between the staff downstairs and the Lord and Ladies upstairs” and arguing that these are “dying virtues in today’s society but *Downton* reminds viewers

how it all works” (metro.co.uk, 2012, para. 6). Others, however, have described *Downton Abbey* and its modernity in terms closer to those expressed here by Chocano:

[*Downton Abbey*] is a Hegelian fable in which master and servant recognize their mutual dependence and give into it, realizing that in the grand scheme they are equal. It’s not so much a portrait of an era as it is an advertisement for an imagined ideal of an enlightened aristocracy whose conservatism included a sense of responsibility, not disdain, toward those dependent on it. (Chocano, 2012, para. 12)

Katherine Byrne, associate lecturer at the University of Ulster, Coleraine, North Ireland and author of one of the few published, scholarly analyses of *Downton Abbey*, provides an evaluation of the series that serves to affirm Chocano’s point of view. Byrne (2013) argues that “*Downton* has made the appearance of period accuracy a priority” (p. 3), and therefore,

Downton can engage with uncensored modernity with those themes – sexuality, feminism, and war – that appeal most to a contemporary audience. It can deliberately play with [viewers’] interests and preoccupations without having to trouble itself with fidelity to a source text; so as long as it looks ‘authentic,’ the viewer accepts it as such. (Byrne, 2013, p. 6)

Byrne’s analysis subsequently offers a perspective on the values and messages that result from *Downton Abbey*’s having “so much in common with our own present” (Byrne, 2013, p. 1). To begin, Byrne’s interpretation, much like that of Chocano, states

that “Fellowes sees his work as a fable for social responsibility and order: the individual exists to serve others and is an indispensable part of the turning of the whole machine” (Byrne, 2013, p. 5), this, she argues, serves to “imply that despite this world’s obsession with breeding and performance there is nothing natural or intrinsic about the ordering of society and its roles” (Byrne, 2013, p. 8). This, combined with the fact that throughout *Downton Abbey* “there is no tragedy that cannot be overcome with togetherness, loyalty, and love,” Byrne suggests, results in a “metaphor for contemporary Britain beset with economic and social difficulties” (Byrne, 2013, p. 14). Byrne concludes by asserting that *Downton Abbey*’s primary function is to “act as an idealized vehicle of reassurance for its audience” (Byrne, 2013, p. 14).

Discussion

This research sought to understand, first, the ways in which televised historical dramas convey historical information and, second, the extent to which audiences then interpret and internalize that historical content as either factual or fictional. It is important to note that this study did not set out to investigate the historical accuracy of *Downton Abbey*, in particular, or televised historical drama, in general – for, as has been discussed, assessing the *accuracy* of any historical account is made nearly impossible by the subjective nature of accuracy as a result of its dependence on various factors, such as the strengths of the medium through which the history is conveyed, the producers’ representation of the historical facts, and the audience’s previous knowledge and subsequent interpretation of the projected history.

In accordance with C. Vann Woodward’s (1976) description of *historical fiction*, this study defined a successful rendition of the genre as being “informed by a respect for history, a sure feeling of the period, and a deep and precise sense of place and time” (C. Vann Woodward as quoted in Toplin, 1998, p. 1225). Furthermore, this research grounded itself in the notion that it is oftentimes essential for successful televised historical fiction to “tell lies” (Forrester, 2010, para. 6) by embracing its strengths as a “potentially more imaginative medium than printed history” (Bell & Gray, 2007, p. 118) that is “rather better at exploring the emotional life of its characters than conventional scholarly historiography” (Bell & McGarry, 2007, p. 14).

Largely, the results of this research reveal that *Downton Abbey*, as a contemporary, popular, and representative example of televised historical drama, is a

powerfully contradictory text. The series' inherent contradictions present themselves through inconsistencies and tensions that characterize not only the producers' historical intentions for the program, but also the audience's interpretations of the program's projected history – interpretations that range from dominant (full acceptance of the producers' message) to negotiated (partial acceptance of the producers' message) to oppositional (full rejection of the producers' message).

Downton Abbey's Veil of Accuracy

The results of this study reveal the area in which *Downton Abbey* was found to be most successful in fulfilling Woodward's definition of *historical fiction* – both in its commitment to accurately encoding historical content that conveys a “sure feeling of the period” and in its audience's decoding of the series as a program possessing “a deep and precise sense of time and place” (C. Vann Woodward as quoted in Toplin, 1998, p. 1225) – was the Settings, Details, and Design category. The results reveal a marked intention and dedication on the part of *Downton Abbey* producers to “get every tiny detail right” when it comes to the series' *mise-en-scène* (Alistair Bruce as quoted in Neame et al., 2012b), which, in turn, resulted in viewers' dominant to negotiated decoding of the series grounded in their expressed appreciation for the “documentary aspect” of the drama (Fenton, 2012, para. 13). However, although the findings suggest *Downton Abbey's* strict adherence to period details serves to exemplify successful historical fiction, as this study has chosen to define it, the question remains, as scholar Katherine Byrne (2013) writes, “does commitment to detail make *Downton Abbey* good *history*?” (emphasis added, p. 4).

Answering Byrne's inquiry requires that this research next identify the areas in which *Downton Abbey* was found to be least successful in relaying historical content and satisfying Woodward's description of historical fiction. In terms of audience-decoding, the findings suggest that the Behavior category, which assessed the period appropriateness of the actions and speech of the series' characters both individually and in relationship with other characters, was considered by viewers as *Downton Abbey*'s weakest area in terms of historical correctness and believability, failing to maintain the "respect for the history" for which historical fiction calls (C. Vann Woodward as quoted in Toplin, 1998, p. 1225). The analysis of audience-created content revealed audience-decoding of Weinstein's Behavior component to be mainly oppositional, meaning viewers most often rejected the producers' portrayal of the compassionate and familiar relationships between the Crawley family and their servants on the grounds that the familial bonds, casual cross-class conversations, and pleasant working conditions depicted on *Downton Abbey* are incongruent with their understanding of the realities of the post-Edwardian period; audience members interpreted the Behavior aspect of *Downton Abbey*'s projected history as being "unrealistic" (metro.co.uk, 2012, para. 2), "idealized" (Chocano, 2012, para. 11), and "totally wrong" (Jennifer Newby as quoted in *The Huffington Post*, 2011, para. 4). Even instances in which the series attempts to exhibit the "great inequality" (Fellowes, 2012a, p. 35) of the post-Edwardian period were interpreted by audience members as "highly romanticized and largely implausible" (WETA, 2010, para, 3).

Additionally, viewers expressed disappointment at the manner in which *Downton Abbey* executes the History category; an analysis of these findings established that audiences identify the Crawley family as more or less “isolated” from the major historical events that are occurring in the world around them, and, when major events are mentioned in the script, viewers feel the narrative lacks in adequate “historical context” (WETA, 2013, para. 9).

Taken together, these findings – which demonstrate that *Downton Abbey* favors the accuracy of small period details (the Settings, Details, and Design aspect of the series) over that of broader historical patterns (as denoted through the Behavior and History categories) – point to one of the main contradictions at the heart of both *Downton Abbey* and, more generally, historical drama. This dichotomy, which is central to an investigation of the ways in which historical fiction is both encoded and decoded, raises questions, such as: “Is [*Downton Abbey*] useful as history, being factually accurate [in terms of Setting, Details, and Design], or damaging for being ideologically problematic [in terms of Behavior and History]?” (Byrne, 2013, p. 16), and, more generally, when encoding historical drama, “which [historical] liberties are acceptable to take [ones pertaining to small details or larger themes], and which are not?” (Jones, 2010, para. 3).

The results of this study offer a potential answer to these questions. The findings indicate that *Downton Abbey* producers may rely upon the Setting, Details, and Design category’s extremely factual details to ensure the audience’s “subconscious is satisfied that everything is right” (Alistair Bruce as quoted in Neame et al., 2011b), thereby masking the fictions inherent within both the Behavior category– for example, Fellowes’

historical “cheats” (Fellowes, 2013, p. 154) – and the History category– namely, *Downton Abbey*’s admitted narrative tendency to simply reference historical events “without usually having anyone of historical significance come to the house [Downton Abbey]” (Fellowes, 2012a, p. 346). In this way, *Downton Abbey*, through its precision of post-Edwardian detail, attempts to construct a veil of accuracy behind which the series’ narrative is theoretically able to operate freely and without rigid constraint by history’s “hard and fast rules” (Fellowes, 2012a, p. 60).

This study’s analysis of audience-decoded content, however, demonstrates that audience members, while appreciative of the series’ attention to detail, are, for the most part, unconvinced by *Downton Abbey*’s projected image of truth, for they show themselves as capable of distinguishing between the series’ strength at depicting period details and weaknesses at constructing representative characters and relationships or explaining the wider political, economic, and social backdrop against which the series is played, thus demonstrating more critical agency than past studies have attributed to viewers of historical drama (Strauss, 2012; Prentice, et al., 1997).

***Downton Abbey*’s Incongruity of Encoding and Decoding**

Underlying the discussion above is a second contradiction brought forth by the results of this study: the disparity between *Downton Abbey*’s encoding, which producers’ maintain is “pretty accurate” (Juliann Fellowes as quoted in *The Telegraph*, 2011, para. 2), and audiences’ oppositional decoding that serves to question and sometimes even negate the accuracy of the program. A potential explanation for this incongruity is grounded in the results of the Agenda, Values, and Effects category, which reveal

conflicting perspectives between the intentionality and type of history that is encoded into *Downton Abbey* versus the audience's perceptions and expectations for the historical content of the series.

To review, this study's analysis of producer-encoded content found that the types of historical sources *Downton Abbey* uses for narrative inspiration are not a reflection of the "hard and fast rules" of history (Fellowes, 2012a, p. 60), but rather, the content of the series is influenced mainly by memoirs, personal stories, and secondhand stories – many accounts about which Julian Fellowes has written, "what seems the most fictional is in fact based entirely in truth" (Fellowes et al., 2013b). The encoding of *Downton Abbey*, therefore, can be said to rely upon "the specific and the particular" to convey historical accuracy (Cornick, 2011b, para. 4); in other words, through its use of individualized stories and accounts, the series projects an ideology that argues, for example,

Surely there must have been pleasant, even generous, members of the nobility just as there must have been mean and vindictive ones, given that even aristocrats are people and people come in all shades of character. [...] If there is even *one* example of [...] *one* happy Edwardian servant who is well-trained by their employer, then that establishes an [accurate] framework in which historical drama can work. (emphasis added, Cornick, 2011b, para. 4)

The historical messages presented by *Downton Abbey* are further complicated by the fact that the series appears to be encoded with competing intentions concerning whether or not the content of the program is designed to factually educate its audience or

if its primary goal is simply to emotionally entertain viewers. A continuation of the analysis of producer-encoded content reveals Julian Fellowes' desire to, on the one hand, write *Downton Abbey* out of "an emotional, rather than historical curiosity" (Fellowes & Sturgis, 2012, p. 6), focusing primarily on the "community of a great house" (Fellowes, 2012b, p. 7) and simply "referencing world-shaking [historical] events" (Fellowes, 2012a, p. 346) with which viewers are already familiar so that the narrative "doesn't have to spend a lot of time explaining" the history, such that the need to construct a compelling narrative and human interest drama complete with character development outweighs attempts at historical accuracy regarding character behavior and relationships (Fellowes, 2012a, p. 12). Yet, on the other hand, the results also illustrate Fellowes' competing, dual desire to promote *Downton Abbey* as being expert on all things post-Edwardian with the mission, by way of the series' historical advisor, "correct the common [historical] misconceptions" held by the audience and promoted by other period shows (Fellowes, 2012a, p. 10).

While *Downton Abbey*'s indecisive duality of encoding – under which it is inconclusive whether historical content is a primary or secondary concern – as well as the series' reliance on "specific and particular" historical stories as fodder for its historical content may not impede the program's ability to conform to Woodward's loose definition of *historical fiction*, these methods do appear to come in direct opposition with what this study has identified as the audience's historical expectations for the program, which are identified as holding *Downton Abbey* to decidedly stricter historical guidelines than those

outlined by Woodward (Cornick, 2011b, para. 4) – hence viewers’ oppositional decoding of the series.

It is important to note that the expectations that inform the audience’s decoding process are formed not only by *Downton Abbey*’s weekly episodes, but also by *Downton Abbey*’s placement within the greater context of PBS *Masterpiece Theatre*. It becomes key then to point out that this context in which American audience members decode *Downton Abbey* is one that considers PBS as founded with the express goal of “educating, enlightening, and entertaining” the American people (Miller, 2000, p. 86). For many viewers, PBS has long been considered a “purveyor of ‘quality’ within [...] a television ‘wasteland’” (West & Laird, 2011, p. 307-308), and *Masterpiece Theatre*, in particular, has tended to attract an audience with a “high degree of cultural [and] educational capital” (Miller, 2000, p. 178).

PBS’s and, more specifically, *Masterpiece Theatre*’s reputation for educational and engaging content, within which *Downton Abbey* is situated, offers then a potential rationale for audiences’ oppositional decoding of *Downton Abbey*. Anticipating an educational television program, audience members engage with *Downton Abbey* expecting the series will allow “sweeping historical themes to remain sacred” whilst still maintaining precision of detail (Barton, 2001, p. 9), in addition they assume that the series, in order to fulfill PBS’s educational mission, will focus not on what may have been truthful for “*one* happy Edwardian servant” (emphasis added, Cornick, 2011b, para. 4), but rather on accurately “reflect[ing] the experience of the *majority* of servants in Edwardian England” (emphasis added, Cornick, 2011b, para. 4). In other words, the fact

that *Downton Abbey* is, in some regards, “informed by a respect for history, a sure feeling of the period, and a deep and precise sense of place and time” may not be enough for audience members who engage with the series expecting explicitly factual and educational content, thus rendering the encoding and decoding of *Downton Abbey* relatively at odds with each other in regard to the way in which each process expects and defines *historical accuracy* (C. Vann Woodward as quoted in Toplin, 1998, p. 1225).

Audiences’ Selective Decoding of Historical Fiction

Ironically, it may be that viewers’ expectation for a history lesson, as previously described, is the very thing that prevents them from receiving one. As has been discussed, the results of this study indicate that *Downton Abbey*’s audience members are more likely to accept and internalize the series’ historical content if it complies with what they understand to be the “real” post-Edwardian period and, if it does not, the series’ producer-encoded history is rejected, regardless of its actual factuality. Therefore, viewers’ expectations for a wholly accurate rendition of “sweeping historical themes” (Barton, 2001, p. 9) that correlate with how they believe post-Edwardian England was structured might be inhibiting them from learning from some of the truthful, “specific and particular” historical instances that are encoded into the series (Cornick, 2011b, para. 4). These findings are consistent with those of Sian Nicholas (2007) in her analysis of the ITV historical drama *Foyle’s War*; Nicholas argues “to be convincing, the screen image needs to look like the [audiences’] *imaged* past” (emphasis added, McElroy & Williams, 2011, p. 89).

In terms of PBS *Masterpiece Theatre*, these results may not have been considered problematic in light of the fact that, upon its founding, the *Masterpiece* series was considered to be “Grand Television” for an “older, cultural elite” (West & Laird, 2011, p. 306) in possession of “several advanced degrees” (Finkle, 1999, p. 74). This educated audience of the 1970s with its “high degree of cultural [and] educational capital” would appear to have had the breadth and depth of historical knowledge necessary to adeptly decode a televised historical fiction program, drawing upon their established understanding of the period to distinguish between the factual and the fictional (Miller, 2000, p. 178). PBS in the 1980s and 1990s, however, saw a large drop in ratings, especially in regard to *Masterpiece Theatre*’s viewership (Knox, 2012, p. 32-33), so, in an effort to improve its standing, the series attempted to redefine itself in order to “attract a variety of taste groups” and “satisfy viewers across all age groups whose expectations for drama render the show’s previous model antediluvian” (West & Laird, 2011, p. 322).

It is with this goal of a new public image that *Masterpiece Theatre* began airing *Downton Abbey* in 2011, boosting their ratings by more than fifty percent (West & Laird, 2011) and “hook[ing] in a new generation of viewer” (metro.co.uk, 2012, para. 7). Last year, *Downton Abbey* broke records when it became “the highest-rated PBS drama of all time with 24 million views” (Muther, 2014, p. 60), indicating that *Downton Abbey* has made historical drama “familiar and accessible to wide sections of the population, not only the culturally literate middle class” for which *Masterpiece Theatre* was initially intended (Byrne, 2013, p. 16).

This democratization of PBS *Masterpiece Theatre*'s, and in particular *Downton Abbey*'s, viewership presents issues concerning audiences' internalization of media content in light of the fact that, as both this study and that of Nicholas (2007) have shown, in order to be decoded as accurate, historical drama must "engage with audience's existing understandings of the past" even if "these understandings, or preconceptions, exist as little more than stereotypes or popular myths [...] [that form] the prevailing popular or collective memory of that past" (Sian Nicholas as quoted in McElroy & Williams, 2011, p. 89). In a situation, such as that of *Downton Abbey*, in which it is not surprising, as history and film scholar John E. O'Connor (1983) remarks, "to find the unemployed auto worker watching the same *Masterpiece Theatre* episode as a Park Avenue lady of leisure or a prep school coed," it can no longer be assumed that historical fiction viewers are equipped with the background information necessary to engage with and correctly decode the content of historical dramas (p. xvii).

Today, *Downton Abbey* viewers encounter the series with a range of perspectives as to what characterized "real-life" in post-Edwardian England, thus making it entirely possible that certain viewers' understanding of accurate and inaccurate history is arbitrary and uninformed. Consequently, the history lesson that *Downton Abbey*'s audience receives is one that conforms not to a realistic portrayal of the past, but rather to viewers' preconceived ideas of the series' historical period, thereby reaffirming any historical misconceptions audience members may possess, for any information presented by the series that serves to challenge or correct viewers' existing understanding is disregarded. Furthermore, for those viewers encountering *Downton Abbey* with no background

knowledge whatsoever, the findings of Prentice, Gerrig, and Bailis (1997) reveal that “the acceptance of information is the default” (p. 417), implying that *Downton Abbey* – which, even its producers admit, makes “references to world-shaking events” (Fellowes, 2012a, p. 346) without “spend[ing] lots of time explaining” (Fellowes, 2012a, p. 12) and allows for historical “cheats” (Fellowes, 2013, p. 154) – may be constructing and transmitting false historical information to viewers, which they, in turn, are accepting as historical fact.

More generally, the results of this study demonstrate that the selective way in which audiences decode meaning from televised historical fiction based on their previous knowledge of the historical period may suggest that instead of teaching accurate historical content, period dramas may, at best, reinforce their viewers’ predetermined misconceptions and, at worst, impart false information to their less-informed audience members.

Historical Fiction as a Stepping Stone to History

Although the previously discussed findings suggest potentially harmful consequences for society’s collective memory of the past, it is important to note that the social function televised historical drama serves in today’s media-laden society remains a contested one. Ann Rigney of Utrecht University, Netherlands, points out that the problems that have been demonstrated to arise from historical fiction’s encoding and subsequent decoding may be irrelevant to viewer’s ultimate understanding of the past when she suggests the power of televised historical drama to “stimulate public interest in history in a positive way, acting as a ‘stepping stone that motivates’ the viewer to find out

more” (Ann Rigney as quoted in Byrne, 2013, p. 16), thereby highlighting historical fiction’s ability to influence the public’s collective memory in a constructive way not by formally teaching its audience but by, as Robert Brent Toplin (1988) writes, “bring[ing] a subject to the attention of people who did not know much about it before, and encourage[ing] them to ask questions and seek further information” (p. 1213).

In an era in which “visitor numbers have been declining at many history museums nationally” (Jacobson, 2013, para. 5), popular historical fiction programs, such as *Downton Abbey*, have been instrumental in causing, what Dana Thorpe executive director of South Carolina’s Upcountry History Museum, has referred to as a “resurgence in people taking a look back into the past” (Dana Thorpe as quoted in Burns, 2013, para. 37). Indeed, the widespread popularity of *Downton Abbey* has resulted in increased interest in the post-Edwardian period on the part of both American and British viewers.

The series’ premiere in 2011 launched Highclere Castle to its current status as “one of Britain’s best known stately homes” (Eccles, 2012, para. 3) and a “major tourist attraction,” doubling the estates’ visitors numbers (Eccles, 2012, para. 5). American museums too have built on the historical fervor inspired by *Downton Abbey*, drawing visitors with a “huge range of ages” (*The News Journal*, 2014, para. 1). To offer an example, the Winterthur Museum in Delaware, between the months of March and January 2014, is hosting a traveling exhibit entitled *Costumes of Downton Abbey*, which, within its first month, put the museum “nearly 400 percent ahead of its attendance compared to the same time [the previous] year” (*The News Journal*, 2014, para. 1). Similarly, New York’s Southampton Historical Museum hosted *Downton Abbey Style in*

Southampton: 1900 to 1920 in 2013, an exhibition about which Tom Edmonds, executive director of the museum, stated, “The title intrigues people, and hopefully, if they are fans, they will be tricked into visiting us and learning about local history” (Tom Edmonds as quoted in Jacobson, 2013, para. 4).

The idea of “lin[ing] up history with pop culture” is believed by some to represent the future of historical instruction, not to mention the survival of historical institutions (Tom Edmonds as quoted in Jacobson, 2013, para. 4). In this way, televised historical drama, despite its tendency to bend the “hard and fast rules” of history (Fellowes, 2012a, p. 60), represents a means by which history is “made appealing to modern audiences” (Burns, 2013, para. 36). As the results of this study have demonstrated, however, televised historical fiction cannot be relied upon as the lone purveyor of historical content; it rests upon viewers to seek out “history museums to connect what [they] are seeing on TV with what really happened [...] in those particular periods of time” (Dana Thorpe as quoted in Burns, 2013, para. 37) – otherwise, as this study indicates, audiences are likely to come away from historical fiction programs with a contradictory, skewed, and, sometimes, falsified understanding of the past.

Historical Fiction as a Contemporary Teacher

While the majority of this discussion has concerned itself with historical fiction’s construction and transmission of historical content, this final section of the Discussion will focus on considering the portion of this research that present an unexpected and alternative lens through which to consider both the encoding and decoding of historical drama, namely the findings studied under the Agenda, Values, and Effects category.

These results suggest that, in an age in which television audiences have undergone “great democratization” to the point that viewers are no longer necessarily equipped with the adequate background knowledge to distinguish historical drama’s facts from its fictions, perhaps the lessons put forth by televised historical fiction programs such as *Downton Abbey* are no longer meant to be educational in a historical sense, but rather the historical backdrops of these programs are merely settings in which more contemporary lessons are being taught (O’Connor, 1983, p. xvii).

As the results of this study reveal, *Downton Abbey* has been described by both producers and audience members as being “a contemporary piece” (Gareth Neame as quoted in Neame et al., 2011b) that “plays against very modern lines” (Susan Sarandon as quoted in Inky Dinky Worldwide, 2013). The modernity of the series is felt through, as the analysis of audience-decoded content reveals, its projected sentiments of “togetherness, loyalty, and love” (Byrne, 2013, p. 14), but also, as demonstrated by the producer-encoded content, through *Downton Abbey*’s guiding structure that evokes contemporary notions of democracy through its narrative that “treats every character, the members of the [Crawley] family and the members of the staff, equally” (Fellowes & Sturgis, 2012, p. 6) and its use of “shifting characters” (Fellowes, 2013, p. 149) as well as “*Downton* dilemmas” (Fellowes, 2013, p. 459) that “depend on [all] [characters and] points of view being reasonable” (Fellowes, 2012a, p. 76). It is *these* characteristics, and not anything profoundly historical, that are what Julian Fellowes deems “the principle strengths of the show” (Fellowes, 2012b, p. 7). Similarly, Gareth Neame, executive producer of *Downton Abbey*, states that “one key reason for the success [of *Downton*

Abbey] was combing a much-loved, familiar and expressly British genre, that of the English country house, with the pace, energy, and accessibility of the most contemporary show” (Gareth Neame as quoted in Rowley, 2013, p. 11).

Furthermore, the audience interpretations that emerge from the Agenda, Values, and Effects category decode *Downton Abbey* as functioning as a series that, through its devoted attention to accuracy in regard to the Setting, Details, and Design category, projects an “appearance of period accuracy” (Byrne, 2013, p. 3) that serves to create a distant and safe backdrop against which the series is able to engage “issues and topics that reflect [not history, but] what happens today” (Fellowes, Trubridge, & Neame, 2013d).

Considered through this lens, historical drama uses history, specifically accuracy of period details, simply as means to disguise a series’ contemporary influences. Televised historical drama, therefore, becomes characterized as a means of teaching “life lessons” rather than history lessons (metro.co.uk, 2012, para. 6).

Conclusion

Televised historical drama, such as *Downton Abbey*, invokes a long tradition of historiophoty that began in the fifth century with the Greek tragedies, continued on through the works of Shakespeare and other playwrights, and eventually transitioned to the cinematic and, most recently, the television screen. Never before, however, has it been so important to investigate these visual recreations and representations of the past, for, 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” (p. 10). Therefore, this research investigated the accuracy of depictions of historical periods on popular television programs with the intent of discovering the impact of historical fiction on audiences’ perceptions of the past and, subsequently, on the collective memory of the public domain.

Using a reception analysis approach, this research utilized the popular PBS *Masterpiece Theatre* program *Downton Abbey* as a case study to consider both producer-encoded and audience-decoded content within the four categories of (I) Setting, Details, and Design; (II) History; (III) Behavior; and (IV) Agenda, Values, and Effects outlined by Paul B. Weinstein (2001), in his “model for the analysis of film texts” (p. 42). An overall analysis of Weinstein’s categories, as they relate to both the encoded and decoded content of *Downton Abbey*, identified two main contradictions situated at the heart of the program. The first inconsistency reveals *Downton Abbey* to be more concerned with creating an atmosphere of perceived accuracy surrounding the Settings, Details, and

Design category, but far less successful at displaying accuracy in the Behavior category's characters and relationships and the History category's references to historical milestones, indicating a desire on the part of producers to "create [a] reality vivid and convincing enough [to] carry authority" and thereby conceal the inaccuracies inherent in the series' narrative (Bordo, 2012, para. 17). This first contradiction served to illuminate a second incongruity that exists between *Downton Abbey*'s encoding and decoding. The series' producers interpret *historical accuracy* as something that can be fulfilled if it reflects the specific experiences of real-life individuals. Producers also display a duality in their intentions for *Downton Abbey* as a program in that they attempt to be both "faithful to the documentary record" and narratively engaging enough that they "reach as wide an audience as possible" (Kemper, 2013, para. 1). The results demonstrate, however, that audience members are profoundly influenced by the educational mission of the network on which *Downton Abbey* airs and, therefore, engage with the series expecting explicitly factual, educational content that reflects the experience of the majority, not individuals.

These two major findings led this study to conclude that audiences' background knowledge of the historical period being represented on television is essential to their decoding of the series and, hence, to their acceptance or rejection of the historical information being presented; these findings are consistent with past research that suggests: "To be taken seriously, the historical film must not violate the overall data and meanings of what [its audience] already know[s] of the past" (Rosenstone, 1995a, p. 11). Finally, the results of this study offered two options of potential social functions

historical drama may serve. The first possibility is historical drama's potential to act as a catalyst to inspire viewers "to investigate the fact behind the fiction" (Cornick, 2011a, para. 2), thereby highlighting the critical role modern historical institutions play in bridging the gap between historiophoty and historiography, for, as Gary Gutting of *The New York Times* writes,

Merely seeing the movie – even if we know that it is based on a great deal of sound historical research – does not allow us to tell which details are accurate or even which aspects of its interpretation are plausible. To learn this, we need to put the movie in dialogue with the work of historians. [...] we need to make our own connection with the historians' work. It's not nearly enough just to go see the movie. (Gutting, 2012, para. 10-11)

The second potential function of historical drama within society stems from this study's emergent and unexpected finding that suggests that historical fiction's purpose may not be to convey historical content to audience members, but rather to teach contemporary "lessons [they] need to learn [and] raise issues [they] need to contemplate," rendering the accuracy of historical content merely a tool by which series' contemporary influences are meant to be disguised (Barton, 2001, p. 9).

This research, which serves to confirm Rosenstone's (1988) assertions that we "live in a world deluged with images, one in which people increasingly receive their ideas about the past from motion pictures and television" and that "today, the chief source of historical knowledge for the majority of the population [...] must surely be the visual media," has important implications and practical applications (p. 1174). First,

these findings validate the crucial importance of studying televised historical drama as a legitimate source of historical content that profoundly influences society's collective understanding of the past – thereby further increasing the demand for a formal and standardized definition of and methodology for assessing the historical fiction genre on television. Next, this research calls attention to the fact that producers and audiences alike “must stop expecting films to do what (they imagine) books do” (Rosenstone, 2004, p. 29) by acknowledging the strengths of the filmic medium to render “visual metaphors” about the past (Rosenstone, 2003, p. 14); this would help to align producer intentions and audience expectations in the future and reduce the identified disparity between encoding and decoding.

The second major implication of this research is a call for media literacy training. In today's media-saturated world, increasingly democratized television audiences are more susceptible than ever to “the power of the mass media to shape perception and to effect interpretation of the past” (Weinstein, 2001, p. 31); therefore, this study points to the necessity of “preparing students for lifelong learning, training them (and the public at large) to be more thoughtful viewers of historical films and television” (O'Connor, 1988, p. 1207).

Finally, it is important to call attention to the fact that this study is not without its limitations. First, inherent in the nature of reception analysis is that fact that texts are *polysemic*, meaning they are “fundamentally ambiguous and can be interpreted in many ways,” therefore one must take into consideration the fact that the data considered has the potential to yield different and varied results and conclusions than those expressed

through this analysis (Baran & Davis, 2012, p. 257). Second, in terms of the producer-encoded content that was evaluated by this research, it is important to point out that, only one example of a televised historical drama was considered, and, although every effort was taken to assure that the sample of episodes selected for analysis was random and representative, the sample size of this study was relatively small – both of these aspects may inhibit the generalizability of the subsequent results. Third, the emergent design of this research required that the analyzed audience-created content consist of articles and postings from academics, writers, journalists, and critics, all of which may be considered constituting some form of a cultural elite – this may have influenced the nature of the audience-decoded findings and the extent to which they are representative of average viewers' decoding practices. Finally, the results may have benefited and been made more reliable from the use of more than a single coder.

Despite these limitations, however, this study does provide insight into a relatively new field of study that considers the combine role of visual media and the historical fiction genre on influencing viewers' perceptions of the past – a subject that would benefit from further scholarship and investigation.

References

- Anderson, S. (2000). Loafing in the garden of knowledge: History TV and popular memory. *Film & History (03603695)*, 30(1), 14-23.
- Avitzur, O. (2013). Neurology debuts in Masterpiece Classic's 'Downton Abbey:' Does it make the grade? *Neurology Today*, 13(4), 20-21.
doi:10.1097/01.NT.0000427573.64426.fe
- Baran, S. J., & Davis, D. K. (2012). *Mass communication theory: Foundations, ferment, and future*. Boston, MA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Barton, F. (2001). Cultural revelation and historical obfuscation: The potentials and dangers in cinema as a tool of education. *The Cresset*, LXIV(7), 5-13.
- Bell, D., & McGarry, F. (2013). *One cut too many? History and film: A practice-based case study* Intellect Ltd. doi:10.1386/jmpr.14.1.5_1
- Bell, E., & Gray, A. (2007). History on television: Charisma, narrative and knowledge. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10(1), 113-133.
doi:10.1177/1367549407072973
- Bordo, S. (2012). When fictionalized facts matter. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/article/When-Fictionalized-Facts/131759/>
- Bordwell, D., & Thompson, K. (1979). *Film art: An introduction* (10th ed.). Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill.
- Burgoyne, R. (1997). *Film nation: Hollywood looks at U.S. history*. Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press.
- Burns, A. C. (2013). In order to stay timely, museums look to the future. Retrieved 3/24, 2014, from http://www.greenvilleonline.com/article/20130608/DOWNTOWN/306080034/In-order-stay-timely-museums-look-future?nclick_check=1
- Byrne, K. (2013). Adapting heritage: Class and conservatism in Downton Abbey. *Rethinking History*, 1-17. doi:10.1080/13642529.2013.811811
- Chocano, C. (2012, Feb 17). The upside-down appeal of 'Downton Abbey'. *New York Times*. Retrieved 10/05, 2013, from http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/19/magazine/downton-abbey.html?_r=0&pagewanted=all

- Cornick, N. (2011a). Does accuracy matter in historical fiction? Message posted to www.nicolacornick.co.uk
- Cornick, N. (2011b). Does historical accuracy spoil a good story? Message posted to nicolacornick.co.uk
- Cowan, G. (1998). The legal and ethical limitations of factual misrepresentations. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 560 (The Future of Fact), 155-164.
- Dalrymple, T. (2012, Feb 4). The secret appeal of 'Downton Abbey'. *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved 10/05, 2013, from <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052970203889904577199331607181106>
- Downton Abbey and the history of domestic service. (2011). Retrieved 10/05, 2013, from www.oxford-royale.co.uk
- Downton Abbey is 'completely wrong and infuriating to watch' expert Jennifer Newby claims. (2011). *The Huffington Post*. Retrieved 10/05, 2013, from http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2011/12/27/downton-abbey-is-complete_n_1170625.html
- Downton Abbey might not be historically accurate, but who really cares? (2012). Message posted to metro.co.uk
- Downton Abbey: Historical inaccuracies and mistakes plaguing ITV show. (2011). *The Telegraph*. Retrieved 10/05, 2013, from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/downton-abbey/8868732/Downton-Abbey-historical-inaccuracies-and-mistakes-plaguing-ITV-show.html>
- Duncan, A. (2012). Downton Abbey might not be historically accurate, but who really cares? Message posted to metro.co.uk
- Eccles, L. (2012). How TV's hit period drama saved the REAL Downton Abbey: Up to 1,200 paying visitors a day fund repairs at crumbling stately home. Retrieved 3/24, 2014, from <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2253200/How-ITVs-hit-saved-real-Downton-Abbey-Visitors-surge-funds-repairs-crumbling-stately-home.html>
- Edgerton, G. (2000). Television as historian: An introduction. *Film & History* (03603695), 30(1), 7-12.
- Fellowes, J. (2012a). *Downton Abbey: The complete scripts. season one* (1st ed.). New York: William Morrow.

- Fellowes, J. (2012b). *The world of Downton Abbey*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Fellowes, J., & Sturgis, M. (2012). *The chronicles of Downton Abbey: A new era*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Fellowes, J. (2013). *Downton Abbey: The complete scripts. season two* (1st ed.). New York: William Morrow.
- Fellowes, J., Trubridge, L., Neame, G., Marchant, N., Percival, B., Goddard, A., . . . NBC, U. T. (2013a). *Downton Abbey. season 3*. [Video/DVD] London: Alexandria, VA: Carnival Film & Television Limited; PBS Distribution.
- Fellowes, J., Trubridge, L., Neame, G., Marchant, N., Percival, B., Goddard, A., . . . NBC, U. T. (2013b). *Downton Abbey. season 3 special feature. "Downton Abbey behind the drama"*. [Video/DVD] London: Alexandria, VA: Carnival Film & Television Limited; PBS Distribution.
- Fellowes, J., Trubridge, L., Neame, G., Marchant, N., Percival, B., Goddard, A., . . . NBC, U. T. (2013c). *Downton Abbey. season 3 special feature. "Downton in 1920"*. [Video/DVD] London: Alexandria, VA: Carnival Film & Television Limited; PBS Distribution.
- Fellowes, J., Trubridge, L., Neame, G., Marchant, N., Percival, B., Goddard, A., . . . NBC, U. T. (2013d). *Downton Abbey. season 3 special feature. "the men of Downton"*. [Video/DVD] London: Alexandria, VA: Carnival Film & Television Limited; PBS Distribution.
- Fenton, J. (2012, March 8). The Abbey that jumped the shark. *The New York Review of Books*. Retrieved 10/05, 2013, from <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2012/mar/08/abbey-jumped-shark/>
- Fienberg, D. (2013). 'Downton Abbey' renewed for season 5 by PBS, ITV. *HitFix*. Retrieved 10/05, 2013, from <http://www.hitfix.com/the-fien-print/downton-abbey-renewed-for-season-5-by-pbs-itv>
- Finkle, D. (1999, May 9). An oasis of literate TV or snobbish escapism? *New York Times*, pp. 74.
- Forrester, J. (2010). The lying art of historical fiction. *The Guardian*. Retrieved 10/05, 2013, from <http://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2010/aug/06/lying-historical-fiction>
- Gutting, G. (2012). Learning history at the movies. *The New York Times*. Retrieved

- 10/05, 2013, from http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/29/learning-history-at-the-movies/?_r=0
- Hanke, R. (2000). Quantum leap: The postmodern challenge of television as history. *Film & History* (03603695), 30(2), 41-49.
- Hudson, A. Does accuracy matter in historical drama? *BBC News*. Retrieved 10/05, 2013, from http://www.bravenewfilms.org/does_accuracy_matter_in_historical_drama
- Hunter, M. (2013), Truth, lies, and historical fiction. *Financial Review*. Retrieved 10/05, 2013, from http://www.afr.com/p/lifestyle/review/fun_not_facts_hijacks_history_lessons_Kht37DmEKRL3zVrs1OaRYO
- Huntley, D. (2012), Downton Abbey: Why we love it - and where it went. *British Heritage*. Retrieved 10/05, 2013, from <http://www.historynet.com/downton-abbey-why-we-love-it-and-where-it-went.htm/2>
- Inky Dinky Worldwide, CT LLC (Producer), & Marty, B. (Director). (2013, 1 December). *Return to Downton Abbey*. [Television Special] PBS Distribution.
- Jacobson, A. (2013, Dec. 5). 'Downton abbey,' the long island version. *The New York Times*. Retrieved 10/05, 2013, from http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/08/nyregion/downton-abbey-the-long-island-version.html?_r=0
- Jones, J. (2010), Do artists need to be accurate to recreate history? *The Guardian*. Retrieved 10/05, 2013, from <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2011/feb/28/artists-accurate-history-robin-hood>
- Kemper, K. (2013). Entertainment vs. historical accuracy? *The Huffington Post*. Retrieved 10/05, 2013, from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kathy-kemper/entertainment-vs-historic_b_2988928.html
- Knox, S. (2012). *Masterpiece Theatre* and British drama imports on US television: Discourses of tension. *Manchester University Press*, 7(1), 29-48.
- Langmuir, M. (2012), *Downton Abbey's* Hugh Bonneville on butlers, historical accuracy, and watching season two online. *Vulture*. Retrieved 10/05, 2013, from <http://www.vulture.com/2012/01/downton-abbey-hugh-bonneville-on-butlers-historical-accuracy-and-watching-season-two-online.html>

- Lethbridge, L. (2013, November 25). How accurate is 'Downton Abbey'? *The Huffington Post*. Retrieved 10/05, 2013, from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lucy-lethbridge/how-accurate-is-downton-a_b_4337494.html
- Marley. (2012). Downton Abbey: A history lesson cleverly disguised as a soap opera. Message posted to <http://popgurls.com/2012/02/09/downton-abbey-a-history-lesson-cleverly-disguised-as-a-soap-opera/>
- McElroy, R., & Williams, R. (2011). The appeal of the past in historical reality television. *Media History*, 17(1), 79-96. doi:10.1080/13688804.2011.532385
- Miller, J. S. (2000). *Something completely different: British television and American culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Mittell, J. (2010). *Television and American culture*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Musburger, R. B. (1985). Setting the stage for the television docudrama. *Journal of Popular Film & Television*, 13(2), 92-101.
- Musson, J. (2012). Downton Abbey as history: What the show got right about life in a country house. *Foreign Affairs*. Retrieved 10/05, 2013, from <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/138507/jeremy-musson/downton-abbey-as-history>
- Muther, C. (2012, Jan 8). Part soap-opera, part epic drama, 'Downton Abbey' returned for a second season, and Americans can't get enough. *The Boston Globe*, pp. N1.
- Muther, C. (2014, Jan. 3). Loss and renewal, upstairs and down. *The Boston Globe*, pp. 18-20.
- National Film Preservation Board, Library of Congress. (1997). *National Film Registry*. Retrieved 10/05, 2013, from <http://www.loc.gov/film/filmnfr.html>
- Neame, G., Eaton, R., Fellowes, J., Marchant, N., Trubridge, L., Stephenson, S., . . . PBS Distribution. (2011a). *Downton Abbey. season 1*. [Video/DVD] London: Alexandria, VA: Carnival Film & Television Limited; PBS Distribution.
- Neame, G., Eaton, R., Fellowes, J., Marchant, N., Trubridge, L., Stephenson, S., . . . PBS Distribution. (2011b). *Downton Abbey. season 1 special feature. "Downton Abbey: The making of"*. [Video/DVD] London: Alexandria, VA: Carnival Film & Television Limited; PBS Distribution.
- Neame, G., Eaton, R., Fellowes, J., Marchant, N., Trubridge, L., Stephenson, S., . . . PBS Distribution. (2011c). *Downton Abbey. season 1 special feature. "Downton Abbey: A*

- house in history*". [Video/DVD] London: Alexandria, VA: Carnival Film & Television Limited; PBS Distribution.
- Neame, G., Eaton, R., Fellowes, J., Trubridge, L., Pearce, A., Goddard, A., . . . PBS, D. (2012a). *Downton Abbey. season 2*. [Video/DVD] London: Alexandria, VA: Carnival Film & Television Limited; PBS Distribution.
- Neame, G., Eaton, R., Fellowes, J., Trubridge, L., Pearce, A., Goddard, A., . . . PBS Distribution. (2012b). *Downton Abbey. season 2 special feature. "fashion & uniforms"*. [Video/DVD] London: Alexandria, VA: Carnival Film & Television Limited; PBS Distribution.
- Neame, G., Eaton, R., Fellowes, J., Trubridge, L., Pearce, A., Goddard, A., . . . PBS Distribution. (2012c). *Downton Abbey. season 2 special feature. "house to hospital"*. [Video/DVD] London: Alexandria, VA: Carnival Film & Television Limited; PBS Distribution.
- Neame, G., Eaton, R., Fellowes, J., Trubridge, L., Pearce, A., Goddard, A., . . . PBS Distribution. (2012d). *Downton Abbey. season 2 special feature. "romance in a time of war"*. [Video/DVD] London: Alexandria, VA: Carnival Film & Television Limited; PBS Distribution.
- Nunberg, G. (2013). Historical vocab: When we get it wrong, does it matter? Retrieved 10/06, 2013, from www.npr.org
- O'Connor, J. E. (1988). History in Images/Images in history: Reflections on the importance of film and television study for an understanding of the past. *American Historical Review*, 93(5), 1200.
- O'Connor, J.,E. (1983). *American history/American television: Interpreting the video past*. New York: Ungar.
- Paskin, W. (2012). Evaluating *the New York review of books* anti-*Downton Abbey* essay. Retrieved 10/05, 2013, from <http://www.vulture.com/2012/02/evaluating-downton-abbey-essay.html>
- Perry, D. K., Howard, T., & Zillmann, D. (1992). Predicting retention of the contents of film drama based upon a fictional or historical context. *Communication Research Reports*, 9(2), 195-203.
- Philips, D. (2013). How important is historical accuracy in film? Message posted to www.thebigslice.org

- Pouliot, L., & Cowen, P. S. (2007). Does perceived realism really matter in media effects? *Media Psychology*, 9(2), 241-259.
- Prentice, D. A., Gerrig, R. J., & Bailis, D. S. (1997). What readers bring to the processing of fictional texts. *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, 4(3), 416-420.
- Richards, V. (2010). Downton Abbey: 'sorry ma'am, the butler's out snowboarding!'. *The Independent*. Retrieved 10/05, 2013, from <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/media/tv-radio/downton-abbey-sorry-maam-the-butlers-out-snowboarding-2114942.html>
- Rosenstone, R. A. (2003). Historical film / Historical thought. *South African Historical Journal*; 48(1), 10-22.
- Rosenstone, R. A. (1988). History in Images / History in words: Reflections on the possibility of really putting history onto film. *The American Historical Review*, 93(5), 1173. doi:10.2307/1873532
- Rosenstone, R. A. (1995a). The historical film as real history. *Filmhistoria Online*, (1). Retrieved from http://www.publicacions.ub.edu/bibliotecadigital/cinema/filmhistoria/Art._Rosenstone.doc.pdf
- Rosenstone, R. A. (1995b). *Revisioning history: Film and the construction of a new past*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Rosenstone, R. A. (1995c). *Visions of the past: The challenge of film to our idea of history*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Rosenstone, R. A. (2004). Inventing historical truth on the silver screen. *Cineaste*, 29(2), 29-33.
- Rosenthal, A. (1999). *Why docudrama? Fact-fiction on film and TV*. Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Rowley, E. (2013). *Behind the scenes at Downton Abbey: The official backstage pass to the set, the actors and the drama*. New York: St. Martin Press.
- Singh, A. (2011). Downton Abbey is sheer fantasy, says historian. *The Telegraph*. Retrieved 10/05, 2013, from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/8769641/Downton-Abbey-is-sheer-fantasy-says-historian.html>

- Solomon, J. (2011). Why historical accuracy matters in the movies. Message posted to blogs.bedfordstmartins.com
- Strauss, V. (2012). Study: Historical inaccuracies in films can hinder learning. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved 10/05, 2013, from http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/study-historical-inaccuracies-in-films-can-hinder-learning/2012/03/29/gIQAdSzNjS_blog.html
- Stoddard, J. D., & Marcus, A. S. (2010). More than "showing what happened": Exploring the potential of teaching history with film. *High School Journal*, 93(2), 83-90.
- Toplin, R. B. (1988). The filmmaker as historian. *The American Historical Review*, 93(5), 1210. doi:10.2307/1873536
- The News Journal. (2014). What's new now: 'costumes of Downton Abbey' trending. Retrieved 3/24, 2014, from <http://www.delawareonline.com/story/entertainment/arts/2014/03/24/-costumes-of-downton-abbey-trending/6841525/>
- Vogt, T. (2011). What is this sudden obsession with historical accuracy on television? Message posted to www.theTVaddict.com
- Ward, B. (2011). Getting it right - and wrong - on film. Message posted to billwardwriter.com
- Weinstein, P. B. (2001). Movies as the gateway to history: The history and film project. *History Teacher*, 35(1), 27-48.
- Werner, W. (2002). Reading visual texts. *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 30(3), 401-428.
- Werner, W. (2004). "What does this picture say?" reading the intertextuality of visual images. *International Journal of Social Education*, 19(1), 64-77.
- West, N., & Laird, K. E. (2011). Prequels, sequels, and pop stars: Masterpiece and the new culture of classic adaptation. *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 39(4), 306-322.
- WETA. (2010). Real life history of Downton Abbey season 2. Retrieved 10/05, 2013, from www.weta.org
- WETA. (2013). Real life history of Downton Abbey season 3. Retrieved 10/05, 2013, from www.weta.org

List of Appendices

APPENDIX A

DOWNTON ABBEY CHARACTER TREE, THE CRAWLEY FAMILY 100

APPENDIX B

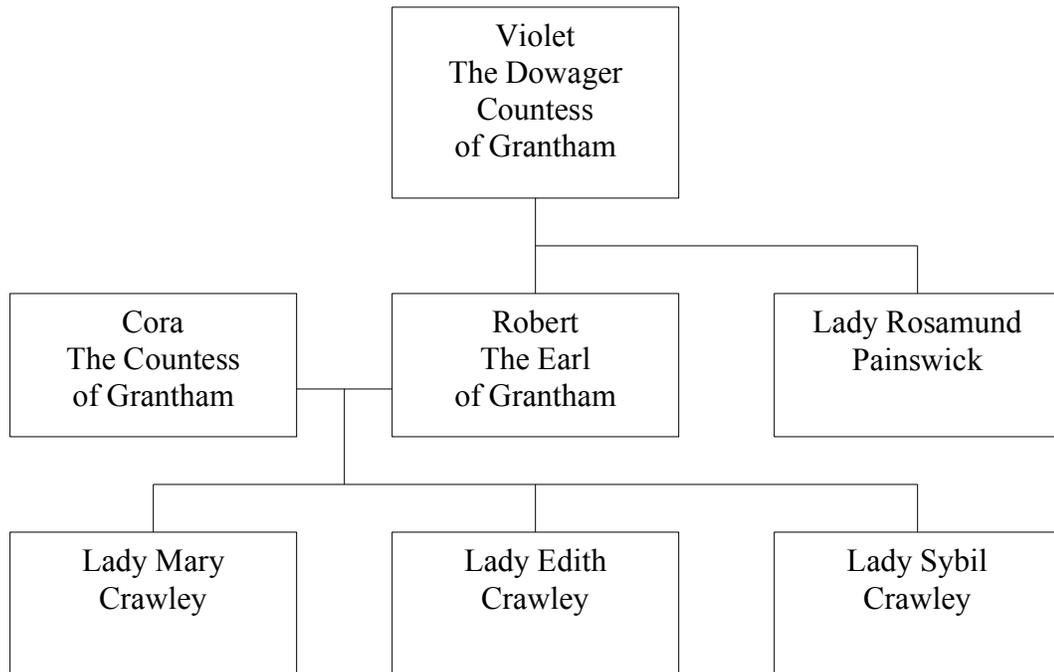
DOWNTON ABBEY CHARACTER TREE, THE DOWNTON STAFF: MEN 101

APPENDIX C

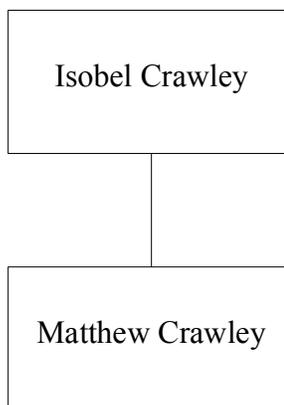
DOWNTON ABBEY CHARACTER TREE, THE DOWNTON STAFF: WOMEN 102

Appendix A

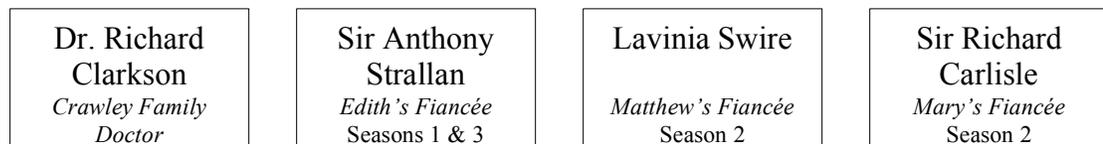
Downton Abbey Character Tree The Crawley Family



Extended Family

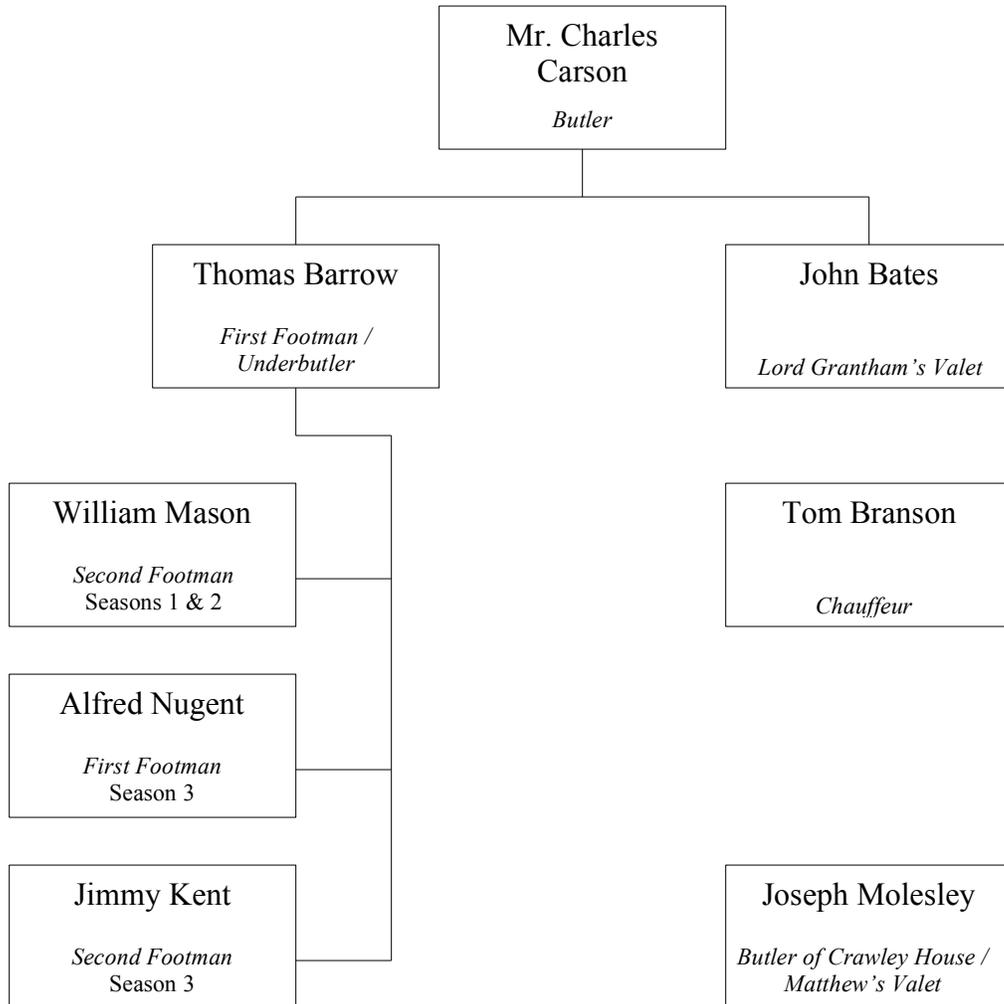


Crawley Family Acquaintances



Appendix B

Downton Abbey Character Tree
The Downton Staff: Men



Appendix C

Downton Abbey Character Tree
The Downton Staff: Women

