

## CSI (1849)



*The professor reached up to readjust his owlish tortoise shell glasses, only realizing midgesture that they were no longer there. How many years had he been wearing his lightweight Dior frames? Certainly as far back as when he'd shaved off his beard. A different look for a different medium, he thought, squinting in the glare of the lights that illuminated the usually dim library setting. He had worked on the book in this room back in his Harvard days—back when his look was more effete—before he had broken into television. Sensing the first pang of a migraine, no doubt brought on by the bright lights, Schama shifted his gaze from the camera lens and, only vaguely aware of his rising annoyance, tried to scan the cue card held at an awkward angle by a sincere but hopelessly inept intern.*

In a similar manner and voice—albeit with access to a more dependable archival source—Simon Schama in his study *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations)* (New York, 1991) turned to literary techniques that, in his words, “deliberately dislocated the conventions by which histories establish coherence and persuasiveness.” Schama bored into the heads of his protagonists to extrapolate thoughts not necessarily conveyed in the historical record, broke up the chronology of events, invented patches of dialogue, and abruptly shifted perspectives in an effort to escape from what he characterized as the historians’ curse: to be “left forever chasing shadows, painfully aware of their inability ever to reconstruct a dead world in its completeness, however thorough or revealing their documentation.”

The focus of Schama’s experiment (after a brief foray into the 1759 Battle of Quebec and the death of General James Wolfe) was a notorious nineteenth-century case involving the murder and dismemberment of a prominent Boston resident on the grounds of the Harvard Medical College by a member of the faculty. In November 1849, John Webster, an ambitious chemistry professor living far beyond his means, killed his creditor George Parkman, a humanitarian turned landlord and real estate speculator, during a confrontation over long unpaid loans. Webster’s efforts to hide his crime were thwarted by Ephraim Littlefield, the college’s janitor and part-time “resurrectionist” (essentially, the middleman between the college doctors and the grave robbers who supplied them with

cadavers). Littlefield proved to be more diligent than the obsequious police investigators and uncovered Parkman's butchered remains underneath Webster's laboratory privy. After a sensational trial, during which a perpetual line of spectators moved in and out of the courtroom in ten-minute shifts, Webster was found guilty in one of the first instances where forensic evidence was used to identify a victim. Webster confessed to the crime before being executed in August 1850. The case stirred long simmering popular resentments and fears in Boston toward the Harvard Medical College as a symbol of the abuse of elite power, both in its inability to stave off cholera and in its nefarious traffic in the bodies of the poor.

But it was neither the book's findings, such as they were (Schama did not come up with a new solution to the case), nor the "mystery" plot that Schama skillfully recounted (although there was no surprise at the end of the tale), but instead his much-hyped approach that at least momentarily brought *Dead Certainties* to the attention of the historical profession and the reading public. Published at the height of the postmodern critique of historical certainty and skepticism toward the efficacy of narrative, *Dead Certainties* was not so much a salvo in that conflict as an intellectual romp by a noted and best-selling scholar with a nose for the promotional. Nonetheless, crossing back and forth between conventions of history and fiction, Schama's lubriciously written if not particularly revealing "historical novella" raised hackles with its seeming endorsement (couched in circumlocutions in the book's afterword) to "dissolve the certainties of events into the multiple possibilities of alternative narrations."

A decade or so after the flurry around *Dead Certainties*, Eric Stange and Melissa Banta had the inspired idea of making a film on Schama's approach to historical inquiry. While following the book's account of the Webster-Parkman murder case, the film would foreground Schama's transgression of method to create a sort of documentary meditation on metanarrative. Their film, *Murder at Harvard*, to be broadcast on July 14, 2003, as part of PBS's *American Experience*, is a welcome break from that series' dogged reliance on disembodied narrators, droning-head scholars, postcard landscapes, repetitive photographs, and impressionistic reenactments (running feet, swinging lanterns, silhouetted figures, etc.). Exuding *gravitas*, Schama serves as a sort of confessor-host to a story within a story, intertwining the whodunnit of the Webster-Parkman case with the how-it-was-done of his book. The self-disclosure is perhaps overly steeped in melodrama (in tones reminiscent of Colin Clive's Dr. Frankenstein, Schama describes when he realized that he couldn't follow a straightforward narrative to adequately delineate the murder case: "I crossed a line I wasn't supposed to cross. I'd be tempted to go beyond conventional history and write in a way I'd never *dared* before!"). But the film's structure succeeds in pulling the viewer into a dual investigation of the ways historians know and don't know what happened in the past.

Several parallel tracks provide a range of perspectives on both the plot of the gruesome mid-nineteenth-century murder and the late-twentieth-century

reconstruction of the case. Schama's self-described struggle to wrest historical truth from the incomplete record of the archives, filmed in Boston and Cambridge locations, alternates with reenactments of significant moments in the investigation, trial, and in real and imagined testimony of protagonists (for the most part shot in a harsh black and white). The story of the teller and of his tale is, in turn, accompanied by a chorus of Harvard doctors, a descendant of the murder victim, and noted historians (including Natalie Zemon Davis, James Goodman, Karen Halttunen, Pauline Maier, and Ronald Story) who provide supplementary opinions and information about the main characters and Boston society as well as endorsements and admonitions about Schama's approach and the role of imagination in historical inquiry.

The eclectic mix of elements in the film may sound a bit cluttered, but it works—at least in so far as *Murder at Harvard* is a film attempting to recount, however self-importantly, the story behind *Dead Certainties*. Indeed, the film makes explicit what is only implicit in the book by clearly declaring what Schama found in the archives versus what he imagined. For example, in an early reenactment, the action is “rewound” so that Schama can momentarily reflect on screen about what he could and couldn't know about that incident. In this way, *Murder at Harvard* avoids repeating the frustration that many readers of *Dead Certainties* experienced, unable to differentiate between fact and fiction and thus ultimately unable to trust the reliability of the author and his book.

But while the creators of *Murder at Harvard* display unusual sensitivity to issues of narrative, evidence, representation, and interpretation in historical scholarship, they are surprisingly oblivious to the fact that by making a film the nature of their inquiry drastically changed. Once they translated Schama's book into film a whole new set of problems arose that are peculiar to a visual and audio medium with its own conventions of storytelling and narrative techniques. *Murder at Harvard* contends with *Dead Certainties* but fails to consider that its own performances, dialogue, production design, costumes, lighting, and camera angles constitute another type of historical intervention affecting the perception of the past and requiring an equally self-conscious reflection.

The reenactments that run through and, in the end, dominate the film portray the Webster-Parkman principals and events through a gothic lens that does not so much resurrect the past as relinquish it to ways of seeing and telling adopted from Hollywood movies and stylish television. Embracing this vision without in turn signaling their representational choices, the filmmakers allow their reenactments—the illusory certainty of performance—to hijack *Murder at Harvard's* critical stance. This is most evident in the climactic re-creation of the murder in Webster's college laboratory. In *Dead Certainties*, the circumstances of the crime were finally revealed in Webster's “death row” confession, from which Schama quoted at some length. An emotionally evocative description of the confrontation that escalated into an unpremeditated murder (if we are to believe Webster), it is nonetheless short on the details of what

transpired. Of necessity, the filmmakers had to fill in the performative blanks to portray, in Schama's formulation, "the most probable way" that the crime occurred. But the crime we witness on-screen—its scripting, blocking, lighting, camerawork, editing, and pacing—is all too familiar; it is less an attempt to imagine what happened than a chance to mimic the ubiquitous style of crime-drama television: a nineteenth-century *CSI*.

Whatever the verdict on Schama's slipping back and forth between fact and fantasy, *Dead Certainties* is an elegantly written book in which the author's ventriloquist act is hard to discern from the authentic voices. In contrast, the words that *Murder at Harvard* puts in its characters' mouths (Stange, Banta, and Schama share writing credit) are so burdened by exposition that they ring false. Moreover, they make risible Schama's repeated claim in the film, when faced with the elliptical record, to have done enough research and uncovered enough evidence "to put words in these characters' mouths." "Now," he proclaims at one point, "their conversation came to me loud and clear."

Failing to measure up to Natalie Zemon Davis's admonition to filmmakers to respect the pastness of the past in representing history, *Murder at Harvard's* performances are never unfamiliar. Mannered, exaggerated, their repertoire limited—Tim Sawyer's John Webster telegraphs guilt in his furtive looks, his skulking walk, his hunched posture; Sean McGuirk's George Parkman is simply an ill-tempered prig—they are types, not individuals, refugees from a misplaced Dickens tale. They also bear only a superficial physical resemblance to their nineteenth-century counterparts (fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Separated at birth? John Webster as portrayed by Tim Sawyer in *Murder at Harvard* versus a contemporary portrait published in *Trial of Professor John W. Webster for the Murder of Doctor George Parkman*. Reported Exclusively for the *N.Y. Daily Globe* (New York, 1850).

Some of these representational issues are most likely matters of directorial and authorial choice and I expect many viewers will evaluate the reenactments differently than I. But *Murder at Harvard* made a wrong turn once it chose to be only a documentary about metanarrative and not a metadocumentary. The analytical distance it succeeded in achieving in its contemplation of written history could have used a Brechtian equivalent in its visual imagining of the past

### Further Reading:

Gordon S. Wood, "Novel History," *New York Review of Books* (June 27, 1991) provides a critical view of Schama's book in the context of the latter's larger scholarship and the debate over the efficacy of historical narrative. Eric Stange, the director of *Murder at Harvard*, published a [meditation on historical documentaries](#) in *Common-place* in 2001.

This article originally appeared in issue 3.4 (July, 2003).

---

Joshua Brown is executive director of the American Social History Project at The Graduate Center, City University of New York. He is the author of *Beyond the Lines: Pictorial Reporting, Everyday Life, and the Crisis of Gilded Age America* (Berkeley, 2002).