Janina Ramirez and the triumph of ‘slow’ media

The medievalist’s ubiquity on the BBC and her popular podcast reflect a thirst for in-depth knowledge. By Ben Luke

You might have been forgiven for thinking that this autumn on BBC Four was Janina Ramirez season. First, in September, she presented Raiders of the Lost Pat, a brilliant series about three archaeologically finds made in 1939: the Sutton Hoo burial, the Olmec civilisation of Mexico. Then, three weeks after the last episode of that series, she was back on screen as a co-star in another new programme: Wheatfield — A Shed in New York (until 22 March 2020).

Ramirez was among a number of academics and PhD supervisors, and she was in Australia, so she didn’t have a clue what was going on. But Ramirez was among a number of academics and curators who began to present much of BBC Four’s Medieval Studies in York (she now runs the History of Art course at the department for continuing education at the University of Oxford). She was a “peculiarly medieval” academic, working for peanuts, when a BBC researcher called her about a potential programme about the Anglo-Saxon — she was the second Anglo-Saxon expert to come up on Google. “The first person was actually my PhD supervisor, and she was in Australia, so she couldn’t take the call,” Ramirez says. “But she’s left an image on the phone telling me that I love about Anglo-Saxon Art.” Months later, another call. “They wanted me to put me in front of the camera.” She had only had a brief come-on screen before and adds that she “didn’t have a clue what to do,” though she seems immediately accomplished as a presenter when you watch 2010’s ‘Voyages of the Anglo-Saxon today.’

Ramirez is a perfect example. “Here’s a little something for your Instagram and Facebook stories,” reads the museums’ website. “Wanderlust: It is the deliberate misquelling of baroque that makes one film or another. The podcasts feature guests you might expect – Janina Ramirez, well-known art historians like Martin Kemp — as well as less obvious art lovers like Philip Schofield, the drummer from the band Radiohead. “I do them because I learn in the process,” Ramirez says. “I make friends in the process.”

It’s no surprise that people want to meet new people and share exciting conversations (“Handmade in Bolton and Ramseys”). The museums are here to create the hashtag and people need to find it. “If people want to find my work, they will. Some hashtags, on the other hand, do capture the imagination and become part of a movement. In 2016, the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, DC asked the public online whether they could name five female artists, and when many couldn’t they created the hashtag #WomenArtists to spread the word on social media. Now it’s an annual campaign during Women’s History Month each March and other museums have taken up the baton too. This March, the Tate in London used #WomenArtists to announce five major solo exhibitions of women artists for 2020-21. The National Gallery of Australia in Canberra has piggy-backed on the campaign with its own, using #WomenArtists to announce five shows of women artists in its galleries. Where does this go, then? It’s not easy to work out where this hashtag movement is going. What is clear, though, is that the hashtag has become a part of the cultural zeitgeist. And the more that happens, the more it seems to me that the word ‘tag’ doesn’t do it justice. It’s a hashtag at heart.”

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