

**The British Historical Film, 1930-1990**

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## **The British Historical Film, 1930-1990: An Abstract**

This thesis aims to understand the ways in which the historical film has vexed its many critics, and in doing so will look beyond its perceived inadequacies, to provide a new appreciation of its character, appeal, function and development. I have attempted to achieve these goals through a substantial generic study of the British historical film, utilizing notions of myth and ideas derived from reception studies.

In terms of overall approach, this project is an example of what David Bordwell has called 'middle-level research', applying theory to a problem-driven, in-depth, empirical investigation. In following the precepts of middle-level research, it is an additional aim of my thesis to contribute to theoretical and methodological debates surrounding the writing of film history and the study of film genre.

In chapter one, I review the literature which addresses questions of historical film and film history, and in chapter two I discuss the various ways in which a generic consideration can be conducted, with particular reference to the work of Rick Altman and the idea of genre as mythic-ritual. Beginning in 1930, after which date a coherent genre begins to emerge, I apply the approach expounded in chapters one and two to a wide range of primary sources for British cinema, including *Kine Weekly*, *Sight and Sound*, the memoir, the pressbook, and a number of audience surveys. The result, in chapters three and four, is an original overview of the British historical film genre in the period until 1980. Chapter five then situates the British historical film in relation to the genres (both British and American) which lie adjacent to it, and chapter six examines the genre and its history in the 1980s, through detailed case-studies of *Lady Jane*, *Chariots of Fire* and *Henry V*. Finally, my conclusions are worked out by setting the genre as I have defined it in the context of two pertinent concepts – British national cinema and British national identity – and the discourses associated with them, in order to elicit key themes and issues.

The main thrust of my argument is that recent work on 'the costume film', by Pam Cook, Sue Harper and others, has tended to distort the nature of the British historical film, ignoring generic distinctions made by those who produced and consumed the films in question. I hope that my analysis, and my archival research in particular, will lay a foundation for a clearer and fuller future understanding of films which represent the past.

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## INTRODUCTION

Though they have been both numerous and prestigious, historical films have suffered from comparative neglect at the hands of scholars. Furthermore, they have as often been the subject of critical censure as constructive debate. In the 1930s and '40s for example, *Sight and Sound* carried a series of articles which denigrated a range of films including *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933) and *Lady Hamilton* (1941) as 'mere travesties of history', and which charted at length the historical distortions allegedly entailed in such films as *Fire Over England* (1937).<sup>1</sup> However, from as early as 1898, occasional dissident voices have championed the importance of historical films as historical sources, and as a means by which historical understanding could be propagated amongst the public.<sup>2</sup> In this tradition, Gore Vidal has written: '[t]hanks to *A Tale Of Two Cities*, *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, and *Marie Antoinette*, my generation of pre-pubescents understood at the deepest level the roots - the flowers, too - of the French Revolution. Unlike Dickens' readers, we *knew* what the principals looked and sounded like. We had been there with them.'<sup>3</sup> Striking historical images and the compelling star-turn, he suggests, have tremendous influence on the way we view the past. It is my aim to examine the nature of this influence. I will attempt to identify some of the ways in which the historical film has vexed its critics, and in doing so will look beyond its perceived inadequacies, to

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<sup>1</sup> See respectively Rachel Reid, 'What Historians Want', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 11, no. 41 (Summer 1942), pp23-4; and F. J. C. Hearnshaw and J. E. Neale, 'Fire Over England', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 6, no. 22 (Summer 1937), pp98-9.

<sup>2</sup> Thus Boleslas Mutuszewski's book *Une nouvelle source de l'histoire* (Paris, 1898) argues that films of historical intent or content should be preserved in archives, and that they could help to improve society's sense of its past. I am grateful to Dr Patrick Kincaid of the University of Birmingham for pointing out this text.

examine its character, function and development. I hope to achieve these goals through a substantial generic study of the British historical film.

As Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery have suggested, 'most film history books treat questions of historical evidence and explanation as if they were unproblematic . . .'.<sup>4</sup> Historians are in fact often hostile towards theory, regarding it as too abstract, too generalizing and too impersonal to do justice to the complex diversity of the past. G. R. Elton, who has been outspoken amongst sceptics, has even argued that history must be deployed *against* theory, to protect the world from dangerously simple answers to difficult questions.<sup>5</sup> But in truth, the past is unknowable without theory, and the historicist injunction to 'study the past on its own terms' is impossible to follow. All historians form hypotheses, make assumptions and select material, and so are implicitly acting in accordance with theory of some sort. The structure of my work and this introduction are designed to make clear exactly what assumptions and choices are being made.

In terms of overall approach, my thesis is an example of what David Bordwell has called 'middle-level research'.<sup>6</sup> That is, research which proceeds in the belief that 'you do not need a Big Theory of Everything to do enlightening work in a field of study' (p29, italics removed), and which 'asks questions that have

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<sup>3</sup> Gore Vidal, *Screening History* (London: Abacus, 1992), p20.

<sup>4</sup> Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985), p13.

<sup>5</sup> G. R. Elton, *The Practice Of History* (London: Fontana, 1969), pp55-56.

<sup>6</sup> David Bordwell, 'Contemporary Film Studies and the Vicissitudes of Grand Theory', in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* ed. by David Bordwell and Noel Carroll (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996). Bordwell introduces the term on p3.

both empirical and theoretical import' on the understanding that 'being empirical does not rule out being theoretical' (p27). Avoiding the dangers of reductionism and determinism inherent in overarching theoretical commitments, middle-level research is a flexible, creative *application* of theory to film-based, problem-driven, in-depth, concrete historical research, which 'can combine traditionally distinct spheres of enquiry' such as industry, audience and style (pp28-9). In following these precepts, it is an additional (though indirect) aim of my research to contribute to theoretical and methodological debates surrounding the writing of film history and the study of film genre.

In the first two chapters of my thesis, I discuss the limitations of existing work on history and film, and suggest that an approach which combines reception studies with genre theory may be rewarding. In the following two chapters I apply my theoretical model to various sources for British cinema between 1930 and 1980, arriving in chapter three at a preliminary understanding of the British historical film genre, which I then analyze in general terms in chapter four. In the same chapter, I will locate the historical perspectives it develops within a general context of historiographic discourse, to help isolate the features and tendencies that have often provoked and dismayed professional historians. Chapter five situates the British historical film in relation to the genres adjacent to it, and chapter six examines the 1980s through case-studies, in which the analysis of chapter four is worked out in greater detail, and with far more attention to the problem of genre history. Finally, my conclusion sets the genre as I have defined it in the context of two pertinent concepts - British national

cinema and British national identity – and the discourses associated with them, in order to elicit key themes and issues.

Many of the finer points of my approach are explained as I progress. In chapter two for example, I address some of the complexities associated with the notion of ‘British’ cinema, and will outline how I came to impose limits on the plethora of films that might possibly have concerned me. Some theory of approach is also required to deal with the assortment of relevant secondary materials. The evidence for public and industrial notions of the British historical film genre includes audience surveys, pressbooks, posters, cinema and television advertizing, trade magazines, journalistic articles and reviews, fan-magazines and star profiles, and filmmakers’ memoirs. Following the principles of reception studies, I argue that all these sources have significance for the consumption and understanding of genre, and have tried to take as many of them as possible into account in my analysis. At times I have been able to be quite comprehensive because of the very limited number of available sources in some areas. Where selection has been unavoidable, I have tried to be logical and candid in the choices made.

Setting this evidence for the generic appreciation of the historical film in context, amid rival frames of reading and comprehension, has necessarily entailed an interdisciplinary approach. This is particularly so in chapter six, where I explore the various frames applied and applicable to *Lady Jane* (1986), *Chariots of Fire* (1981) and *Henry V* (1989), touching upon areas of social, political and cultural history as well as matters of genre. I trust that I have



managed to treat these non-filmic areas with sufficient sensitivity and understanding, and without losing sight of the historical film and its generic identity.

I have endeavoured to extend the principle of wide-ranging interest beyond source selection, to also include temporal scope. Whilst the most valuable advancements in our understanding of the past are usually made through close specialization, it is also true that too much focus may lead to serious distortions. Leger Grindon, for example, conducts a series of extended, scholarly and extremely rewarding analyses, and generalizes from them about the historical film genre. But it is a striking fact that all his case-studies are connected in some way to revolution and social change, and (as we shall see) are therefore not representative.<sup>7</sup> In aiming at a more-than-usually comprehensive account of the British historical film, I hope to demonstrate that those who have studied particular periods of the genre in isolation have often overlooked features and distinctions that are clearer in the bigger picture.

The bigger picture has its own problems of course. For example, Brian Taves' book on the 'historical romance' roves across national borders and weaves through differing generic regimes, restlessly alluding to a large number of films and seldom developing anything more than the most superficial analysis of any of them.<sup>8</sup> Grindon's book and Marcia Landy's recent work on historical film go

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<sup>7</sup> *Shadows on the Past: Studies in the Historical Fiction Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994). Grindon says that his book is not intended to be comprehensive (see for example p223), but he does claim that his examples afford a sound basis for generalisation (p26).

<sup>8</sup> Brian Taves, *The Romance of Adventure: The Genre of Historical Adventure Movies* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993).

into far fewer films in much greater detail, but they are similarly weakened by drawing examples from a plurality of national cinemas.<sup>9</sup> I hope that my case-studies will balance the necessary lack of extended film analysis in chapters three to five, and that by confining myself largely to British cinema, my research will be more coherent and precise.

In excluding the silent era from my analysis, I considered the possibility that it might have helped to establish some of the genre's specific conventions and modes of address. My investigation of the historiographic character of the British historical film suggests that it owes much to the norms of professional history-writing which obtained throughout the nineteenth century and up until the end of the First World War. But in fact, relative to later decades, few historical films were produced in Britain in the 1910s and '20s, whilst the low survival rate of film stock before the coming of sound, and the difficulties and costs entailed in accessing extant films, makes it very difficult to make reliable generic conclusions.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, I have taken the *terminus post quem* of 1930, after which a coherent genre begins to emerge,<sup>11</sup> and have borrowed the

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<sup>9</sup> Marcia Landy, *Cinematic Uses of the Past* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996). Landy draws her conclusions from Italy, America, Britain and Africa; Grindon from the US, France and Italy. Grindon also includes a text (*The Rise to Power of Louis XIV*) that was produced for and shown on television. The problem lies in such assertions as the one made by Landy, that after World War Two, 'monumental' historical films ceased to be produced, a claim which is supported with exclusive reference to Italy (p11). This is not true of American film, and we shall see that it does not apply to British cinema either.

<sup>10</sup> For my assessment of the rates of production of the silent historical film, I have relied upon Denis Gifford's *The British Film Catalogue, 1895-1985: A Reference Guide* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1986). On the conditions which inhibit historical study of silent cinema, consult Allen and Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice*, pp29-36.

<sup>11</sup> As Sarah Street suggests, in the 1930s '[t]he industry's growing concentration and the impact of quota legislation provided a more stable economic backdrop for the increasing visibility of popular British genres,' with then dominant categories being 'historical/costume; empire; comedy; musicals (musical comedies); melodramas.' See *British National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1997), p39.



findings of Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, Sarah Street and others on the general development of film up to that date.<sup>12</sup> My choice of this date is also supported by Nicholas Hiley's suggestion that after the introduction of sound, a new audience supplanted an older type, which had been in decline for over a decade, and which was more working class, more local and communal, and more accustomed to 'participate' in screenings than that which replaced it.<sup>13</sup>

I have tried to avoid the jargon (and the rather turgid prose) that at times has blighted film criticism. This is because a further aim of my thesis is to allay the understandable trepidation that historians feel on first encountering film studies, in order that their work on film might in future become rather more sympathetic and closely argued than is currently the case.<sup>14</sup> Chapters one and two engage closely with this work on film and history, and also with seminal studies of film genre, in order to establish the 'need' for my thesis and further details of my methodology. Unavoidably, these chapters are rather dry. However, in this section and elsewhere, I have tried to write in a readable way, and have enlivened my discussion with stimulating examples wherever it has been possible. Finally, I have made extensive use of sub-headings to augment the

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<sup>12</sup> Specifically, I have relied upon David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985); Sarah Street, *British National Cinema*, especially pp33-8; and David A. Cook, *A History of Narrative Film*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (New York: Norton, 1990).

<sup>13</sup> See Nicholas Hiley, "'Let's go to the pictures': The British cinema audience in the 1920s and 1930s", in *Journal of Popular British Cinema 2: Audiences and Reception in Britain* ed. by Annette Kuhn and Sarah Street (Wiltshire: Flicks Books, 1999), especially pp45-6.

clarity of my argument, though I am aware that this comes at the cost of occasional interruptions to the flow of my thoughts.

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<sup>14</sup> Examples of work which embody these failings are discussed below, in chapter one.

# **APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY**

## **CHAPTER ONE: History on Film and Historical Film**

### **1. Discourses Addressing Historical Film as History: Some Problems**

The prominence of the past in British and world cinema prompts a range of important questions. What has the past been made to mean, how and to whom? How has that meaning changed, and why? What attitudes towards the past are involved? What proportion of these films may be considered historical, and in what sense? How do historical films relate to other types of history?

Work on film and the past, especially in recent years, has focussed unimaginatively and overridingly on the last of these questions. And it has done so in a way that is seriously flawed in two respects. Firstly, there has been a tendency to approach film with little sense of its peculiarities as a medium, and with preconceived ideas about historical method and epistemology.

In a recent book edited by Mark C. Carnes, historical film is compared to an utterly unproblematized understanding of 'historical truth', derived from empirical academic history. Amongst almost all the contributors to the volume, there is an assumption that film is subject to the same standards of argument and verifiability as are applied to scholarly publishing, and that only these standards are adequate in the judgement of history. The title of the book - *Past Imperfect:*

*History According To The Movies* - signals the limited scope of its project from the first. And in Carnes' introduction, the assumptions that are elsewhere tacit are made explicit when he asserts that Hollywood history 'fills irritating gaps in the historical record and polishes dulling ambiguities and complexities'.<sup>1</sup> Hollywood historicals 'do not provide a substitute for history that has been painstakingly assembled from the best available evidence and analysis. But sometimes filmmakers, wholly smitten by their creations, proclaim them to be historically "accurate" or "truthful", and many viewers presume them to be so. We should neither accept such claims nor dismiss them out of hand, but regard them as an invitation for further exploration' (pp9-10) - as an *entrée*, in other words, to the world of 'real' history.<sup>2</sup>

Carnes' perspective is common among those (historians) who have written on historical film. It is a 'common sense' position, baldly and angrily stated. Ian Jarvie, for example, contends that film has a 'poor information load', is characterized by 'discursive weakness', and is therefore not conducive to history. It is descriptive rather than interpretative, unsystematic, uncritical, and impatient of reflection. Film may embody a historian's view, he argues, but 'how could it defend it, footnote it, refute objections and criticize the opposition?' Ultimately, history on film is 'a travesty'.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies* ed. by Mark C. Carnes (London: Cassell, 1996), p9.

<sup>2</sup> Subsequent chapters assess the relative acceptability of specific films in light of these tenets. For example, Carolly Erickson finds that 'the historical Catherine was nothing like the kittenish, pouting, vamping heroine played by Marlene Dietrich' in *The Scarlet Empress* (p86). Overall, this film 'is a gross distortion of the times in which Catherine lived' (p88), an example of 'Hollywood mythmaking' which amounts to 'little more than a fairy-tale' (p89).

Similarly, Michael Parenti complains that Hollywood history is reduced to personal drama, eschewing 'real' issues,<sup>4</sup> while Daniel Leab concludes that 'truth, accuracy, and a proper respect for history [...] have been routinely subordinated to the need for dramatic effect and even the whim of the filmmaker'.<sup>5</sup> Martin A. Jackson urges historians to engage with film, a medium too popular and influential to ignore.<sup>6</sup> But he also asserts that such a film as *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1936) obviously has no useful information to give, that one would need a book for insight into the Crimean war (p232), and that one should study film as one would a book (p234). His sense of the particular problems of film analysis is limited to the difficulty of operating a projector (p234), and he ends by prescribing that the historian should make films 'which may stand unashamedly with any book or article on the subject' (p236); these films would not be exciting, he concedes, but they would be accurate (p237).

In a similar vein to the authors of *Past Imperfect*, George MacDonald Fraser also compares historical film to 'history proper', but (with reservations) does so more approvingly:

There is a popular belief that where history is concerned, Hollywood always gets it wrong - and sometimes it does. What is overlooked is the astonishing amount of history Hollywood has got right, and the immense unacknowledged debt which we owe to the commercial cinema as an illuminator of the story of mankind. This although films have sometimes blundered and distorted and

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<sup>3</sup> Ian Jarvie, 'Seeing Through Movies', *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 8 (1978), p378.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Parenti, *Make-Believe Media: The Politics of Entertainment* (Berkshire: St Martin's Press, 1992), p58.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Leab, 'The Moving Image As Interpreter of History - Telling the Dancer From The Dance', in *Image As Artifact: The Historical Analysis of Film and Television* ed. by John E. O'Connor (Malabar, Fla.: R. E. Krieger, 1990), p83.

<sup>6</sup> Martin A. Jackson, 'The Film and the Historian', in *Cultures* 2, no. 1 (1974), issue entitled 'Flashback: Films and History', pp223-7.



falsified, have botched great themes and belittled great men and women, have trivialized and caricatured and cheapened, have piled anachronism on solecism on downright lie - still, at their best, they have given a picture of the ages more vivid and memorable than anything in Tacitus or Gibbon or Macauley, and to an infinitely wider audience. Nor have they necessarily been less scrupulous. At least they have shown history, more faithfully than they are usually given credit for, as it was never seen before.<sup>7</sup>

Thus Fraser opposes himself to the musty scholarship enshrined in Carnes, allowing greater latitude to historical film. It is in keeping with this approach that he goes on to argue for tolerance of filmmaking imperatives; the moviemakers must edit and adapt in order to entertain, he says.<sup>8</sup>

But lurking behind these sentiments, a prescriptive ideal of history remains, and ultimately, Fraser's project amounts to the same thing as Carnes'. Operating to preconceived notions of good history, he too awards approbation or vituperation, only on a slightly more personal basis, privileging a sacred but nebulous notion of 'historical spirit' over the accepted empirical norms of academe.<sup>9</sup>

In Fraser's case moreover, problems arising from the lack of an explicitly-formulated definition of 'acceptable history' or 'historical truth', are

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<sup>7</sup> George MacDonald Fraser, *The Hollywood History of the World: From One Million Years B.C. to Apocalypse Now* (New York: William Morrow, 1988), pxii.

<sup>8</sup> In adapting history for the purposes of entertainment, filmmakers 'are not necessarily more culpable than many serious historians who, if they seldom deliberately falsify, are often inclined to arrange, shape, select, emphasize and omit in order to prove a case, or to confound a rival, or make propaganda, or simply present what they wish to believe is the truth' (pxv).

<sup>9</sup> 'For me, provided he does not break faith with the spirit of history by wilful misrepresentation or hatchet job, [the director] may take liberties with the letter - but he should take as few as possible' (pxv). Fraser's purpose is to scrutinize the Hollywood historical 'in the light of history as I understand it' (pxviii). He unhappily reports that *Becket* (1964) 'plays fast and loose with history' by falsely portraying the hero as a Saxon upstart in a Norman hierarchy (p46), and



compounded by the fact that the author's personal understanding of good history commingles with his personal understanding of good *cinema*. Thus for example he feels sufficiently compensated by the impressive tableau scenes in *Quo Vadis* (1951) to forgive its numerous inaccuracies (p22), which seem no less egregious than those in *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (1939), recipient of some of Fraser's most impatient criticism (p77).

The problems in history-and-film criticism so far discussed are closely paralleled in other areas of debate, most notably in the discourses surrounding the use of art in film. In *Art and Artists On Screen*, for example, John A. Walker establishes a notion of 'truth' which closely resembles those advanced by Carnes and Fraser.<sup>10</sup> He asserts the importance of 'accuracy' (p1), and states his intention to compare film with 'reality' (p13), ultimately concluding that 'mass media representations of art and artists "contaminate" the originals.' (p194).<sup>11</sup>

Walker's warning that '[t]he progressive "mediasation" of art [. . .] is a process that is [. . .] fraught with danger as far as the fine arts are concerned because it

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laments *The Private Life of Henry VIII* as the worst of all Tudor films 'in terms of accurate historical portrayal', with Laughton's performance 'a deplorable caricature' (p65).

<sup>10</sup> John A. Walker, *Art and Artists on Screen* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> The films which occupy Walker are variously claimed to be naïve, partial, dishonest, sanitized and romanticized, and are situated within a hierarchy of unacceptability. Thus for instance, comparing Korda's biopic to Gary Schwartz's *Rembrandt: His Life, His Paintings* (an 'immensely detailed and scholarly text', p27), Walker lists the film's inaccuracies and liberties in turn, and warns finally that 'Korda's adulatory representation of Rembrandt should be viewed with extreme scepticism' (p28). In discussing *The Agony and The Ecstasy* (1965), he recognizes that 'estimating the accuracy of Reed's film is not a question of comparing the film directly with the past'. But this is not an admission of the fictionalization of all history; rather, it is all a matter of testing the film against 'the most authoritative, recent art-historical accounts' (p56). Walker does note some of the particular conventions of cinematic representation, but only in so far as it gives him ammunition with which to sink a particular film. For example, it is noted that *Moulin Rouge* (1952) makes the typical biopic promise that it will 'enable the artist's time to live again', but this merely justifies a rather gloating enumeration of the film's failures to live up to the academic record (p33).

threatens to obliterate whatever residual uniqueness they possess' (p12), and his anxiety that *Moulin Rouge* (1952), for example, might mislead the uninitiated, recalls similar protectionist sentiments in the introduction to *Past Imperfect*. It appears that film is often regarded by academics and other professionals as a medium which threatens to usurp more traditional and 'legitimate' forms, and which must be properly 'regulated' and 'contained'. A particularly clear example of this perspective is to be found in the conclusion of a recent book entitled *World War II: Film and History*, where the editors express something like outrage that the advice of professional historians can be so readily ignored by filmmakers, advancing 'disasterous' instances of this happening in practice, and demanding future adherence to 'the canons of historical scholarship'.<sup>12</sup>

The similarities between the two sets of discourses on history and art is perhaps due to the fact that, just as history was used in the early days of film to appeal to middle-class audiences, so art has been used to bolster the respectability of cinema, to much the same sort of dismay and disdain from conservative quarters. One conclusion to draw from this is that a different, and perhaps more rewarding, type of analysis might be provided by critics with a sounder understanding of film, and less at stake in terms of livelihood and status.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> John Whiteclay Chambers II and David Culbert, 'Conclusion', in *World War II: Film and History* ed. by Chambers and Culbert (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp153-4, 157.

<sup>13</sup> In this connection, an article by Denys Arcand ('The Historical Film: Actual and Virtual', in *Cultures 2*, 'Flashback: Films and History') is also revealing. It is consistent with the highly prescriptive approach which characterizes the material considered hitherto, but also candidly discloses some of the prejudices which may motivate it. Following a discussion of the formal inadequacies of film for the purposes of historical representation and exposition, he insists, for example, that cinema is too enjoyable to be good for learning (p23). Furthermore, it is too vulgar to represent the past accurately (pp24-5), being driven by the distorting imperatives of market-appeal. Above all, he explains *why* history on film must be regulated. It allows each spectator the freedom 'to interpret the images according to the intellectual system he wishes' (p17). A history consisting entirely of images 'would imply a complete transformation of our civilization,

The second major problem in work on the historical film is the tendency to adopt an unproblematicized (and highly elastic) definition of the type. Just as we have seen writers on the subject adopt *a priori* conceptions of historical truth, so the same writers have selected and rejected films for discussion according to criteria which have remained largely undisclosed.

In the introduction to *Past Imperfect*, for example, Carnes writes:

Some of the movies we discuss were not regarded as historical when they were made, but have since become important historical documents; for example, *Tea and Sympathy* explored tensions over homosexuality in the 1950s, and *Dr Strangelove*, fears of nuclear deterrence in the 1960s. Even some explicitly "historical" films are chiefly important for what they say about the era in which they were made (p10).

But what is an 'explicitly' historical film? And do films which merely reflect the contexts of their production (as all films arguably do) merit inclusion under the heading *History According To The Movies*?

I turn now to consider some recent reassessments of historical film, and in particular will be asking what new perspectives have been applied to the difficulties I have so far identified.

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and [. . .] the very word history as we know it today would lose all meaning' (p17). And of course all those years at university would be wasted, and Arcand would be in every sense redundant.



## New Work on Historical Film

Three of the most recent volumes to deal with historical film appear to be more methodologically self-conscious than the work produced by Fraser, Carnes and others, evincing much more sympathy to the restrictions and possibilities entailed in adapting history for the screen. However they too ultimately return to a cherished idea of what filmed history really is and how it should best be practised, merely exchanging one hierarchy of approval for another.

In his book *History By Hollywood*, Brent Toplin argues: 'If we hold cinematic historians strictly to the standards of most written history we are almost certain to be disappointed, for filmmakers must attend to the demands of drama and the challenges of working with complex evidence'.<sup>14</sup> Historical film 'can make significant contributions to the public's appreciation of the past', and may provide 'exciting possibilities' for the examination of personalities, emotion, and foreign physical environments (p5). Critics like Parenti, Leab and the contributors to *Past Imperfect* are 'too damning' (p5).

Robert Rosenstone treats these same themes, but rather more expansively, in *Visions of the Past*.<sup>15</sup> He argues that:

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<sup>14</sup> *History By Hollywood: The Use and Abuse of the American Past* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), p10. Toplin is right that not all regions of written history are inimical to historical film; as I shall suggest in chapter four, the British historical film genre has a close affinity with popular history writing, and with the conventions and assumptions of professional history as it was practised in previous eras.

<sup>15</sup> *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995).

history (as we practise it) is an ideological and cultural product of the Western World at a particular time in its development. That history is a series of conventions for thinking about the past [. . .] That language itself is only a convention for doing history - one that privileges certain elements: fact, analysis, linearity. The clear implication: history need not be done on the page. It can be a mode of thinking that utilizes elements other than the written word: sound, vision, feeling, montage (p11).

Like Toplin, he urges that we need to learn to 'read' and 'judge' film appropriately, even if this means reconsidering our historical standards (p66): 'the rules to evaluate historical film cannot come solely from written history. They must come from the medium itself' (p15).<sup>16</sup>

These are noble manifestoes, but neither Rosenstone nor Toplin delivers on his promises. Rosenstone moves away from open-minded consideration of history on film, to quickly become as prescriptive as the writers he himself criticizes. He promotes a new ideal - that of the 'serious' or post-modern historical film.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> To some extent, Rosenstone is drawing on Hayden White's essay 'Historiography and Historiophoty' (*American Historical Review* 93, 1988), which investigates 'the representation of history and our thought about it in visual images and filmic discourse' and which suggests that film is 'better suited than written discourse to the actual representation of certain kinds of historical phenomena - landscape, scene, atmosphere, complex events such as wars, battles, crowds' (p1193). But in fact, Rosenstone goes even further than advocating equality for film, arguing that history not only could but *should* be done on film. With the unpopularity of academic history he compares film, 'the contemporary medium still capable of both dealing with the past and holding a large audience. How can we not suspect that this is the medium to use to create narrative histories that will touch large numbers of people?' (*Visions of the Past*, p24).

<sup>17</sup> To be considered truly and seriously historical, a film 'must not violate the overall data and meanings of what we already know of the past', *Visions of the Past*, p79. Arguing that the *avant-garde* is able to do better justice to the 'realities' and 'truths' of the past, Rosenstone elevates a post-modernist ideal, 'a work that, refusing the pretense that the screen can be an unmediated window onto the past, foregrounds itself as a construction. Standing somewhere between dramatic history and documentary, traditional history and personal essay, the post-modern film utilizes the unique capabilities of the media to create multiple meanings. Such works do not, like the narrative feature film or the documentary, attempt to recreate the past realistically. Instead they point to it and play with it, raising questions about the very evidence on which our knowledge of the past depends, creatively interacting with its traces' (*Visions of the Past*, p12). In Rosenstone's edited volume *Revisioning History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), other authors rally to his banner, with the emphasis on contesting Western norms, reclaiming the past, and achieving a 'truer' history.

This is used to denigrate mainstream historical movies just as surely as any paradigm of scholarly objectivity.<sup>18</sup> Toplin argues that only when filmmakers work 'with a well-informed and sensitive appreciation of history' can they 'make useful contributions to the public's thinking' (p7). Though inquiring attitudes towards historical film are to be encouraged, '[a] consistently open-minded view of the filmmaker's efforts to fictionalize would leave us unprepared to discriminate between an admirably filmed presentation of history and a poor one. It would lead us toward treating almost any fabrication or distortion as a legitimate artistic exercise as long as it contributes in some way to the audience's thinking about the past' (pp9-10), which would be indefensible. Toplin places the highest premium on integrity in dealing with evidence, demanding that filmmakers be responsible and accountable, and that historians (who know the truth of history) be allowed to comment and criticize (p10), and thereby protect the past from interpretative recklessness (p14).

Neither Toplin nor Rosenstone then, gets any closer to taking film on its own terms. While each may claim that film is the equal of written history, clearly some films (in Rosenstone's case, radical and post-colonialist ones) are more equal than others. And though Toplin and Rosenstone are more explicit and satisfying than Carnes or Fraser in determining the bases upon which films

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<sup>18</sup> In *Visions of the Past* his verdict is that most 'historicals' fictionalize and simplify, compressing the past into a single, linear story (p22). They are falsely moral, over-optimistic, too personalized, over-confident, emotional and superficial, creating a 'myth of facticity' (pp55-61). Such films 'deliver the past in a highly developed, polished form that serves to suppress rather than raise questions. Too often such works do little more than illustrate the familiar. Rarely do they push beyond the boundaries of what we already know' (p11). It is interesting to compare Theo Furstenu's essay 'The Nature of Historical Films' which, in anticipating Rosentone's esteem for the vision of an auteur and for intuitive, experimental filmmaking, is also disparaging of 'so-called historical films.' *Cultures* 2, no. 1 (1974), p31.



should be adjudged historical or otherwise, this is at the expense of a serious and sympathetic treatment of the 'fictionalizing', 'superficial' and 'soulless' majority of mainstream historical films. We should not infer from the contributions to Rosenstone's *Revisioning History*, all of which examine material produced with-out the Hollywood aegis, that 'the traditional drama and documentary are incapable of handling the densities and complexities of serious historical representation' (p7), but rather that the historians who contribute are incapable of looking at popular and mainstream film without a specific, rarified ideal in mind.

## **2. Film As Historical Evidence/Cultural Document**

Film remains a relatively young medium, and historical study of it has acquired acceptability only gradually, by association with older methodologies such as those enshrined in standard historiographical practice. The second group of discourses to deal directly with questions of history as they relate to film is an early product of this state of affairs. Here writers debate the possibilities of using film as evidence in reconstructing and interpreting the past: that is, as raw material for the writing of history in its traditional, empirical sense. They assume that films reflect the attitudes and priorities of those who produce them, and of the viewing public as a whole.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Amongst the several works to situate themselves within this tradition are *American History/American Film* ed. by John E. O'Connor and Martin A. Jackson (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1979); *Hollywood as Historian* ed. by Peter C. Rollins (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1983); *Feature Films As History* ed. by K. R. M. Short (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981); Marco Ferro's *Cinema and History* (1977), (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988); John H. Lenihan, *Showdown: Confronting Modern America in Western Film* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1980); John E. O'Connor, *The Image As Artifact*; and

of collective mentality which extend more or less below the dimension of consciousness'.<sup>22</sup>

Kracauer's notion that films are symptomatic of the psychic condition of society is an unexplored and theoretically ungrounded premise, and his criteria for determining what should count as 'persistent reiteration' of the motifs that concern him are vague.<sup>23</sup> However, Marc Ferro suggests at a later point in Smith's volume that conclusions based on this type of 'unwitting testimony' are not unverifiable, as is often alleged. He writes: 'thanks to the analysis of critical reactions, to the study of cinema attendances, to a variety of information on the conditions of production, it is possible to get an idea of at least some of the relations of the film to society.'<sup>24</sup>

The empirical approach to film, then, attempts to be open-minded, and seemingly avoids artistic criteria in its judgements. But as far as the historical genre is concerned, its end results are often not dissimilar to those engendered by the prescriptive analyses considered above, in that it enables (and even encourages) writers to avoid engaging with the nature and meaning of a film's historical content. Thus, for example, O'Connor's article on *Drums Along The Mohawk* finds the film to be little more than a reassertion of contemporary American values, culpably entailing a range of divergences from the true

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<sup>22</sup> Kracauer sets out his method in the introduction to *From Caligari to Hitler*, pp3-11; the quote is from p6. For Smith also, any film 'records the outlook, intentions and capacities of those who made it; it illustrates in some way the character of the society in which it was produced and for which it was designed' (p7).

<sup>23</sup> For an extended discussion of Kracauer's thesis and its influence, see Allen and Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice*, pp159-164.

historical record.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Jackson rejects the notion that *The Charge Of the Light Brigade* represents the past in a valuable or stimulating way, suggesting that its historical significance and utility are confined to the illumination of certain social features of the 1930s.<sup>26</sup>

There are other problems with the film-as-historical-document approach, which are not specifically connected to historical film. For all Ferro's assurances about the availability of corroborative evidence, it remains dangerously easy to generalize about society from a film or group of films, and some writers on the subject have sensibly reissued the caveat that a rigorous theoretical perspective and great sensitivity to the special requirements of film itself are required to avoid this kind of slippage and the distorted conclusions it can lead to.<sup>27</sup> Allen and Gomery's *Film History: Theory and Practice*, the most elaborate of recent contributions to the field, proposes a solution to these problems derived from the 'Realist' philosophy of science. Its essence is a compromise between

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<sup>24</sup> Ferro, 'The Fiction Film and Historical Analysis', in *The Historian and Film* ed. by Smith, p80.

<sup>25</sup> 'A Reaffirmation Of American Ideals: Drums Along The Mohawk', in *American History/American Film* ed. by O'Connor and Jackson, pp98-9 and p110.

<sup>26</sup> Martin A. Jackson, 'The Film and the Historian', in *Cultures* 2, no. 1, p232. See also Ferro's analysis of *Tchapaev* in Smith's *The Historian and Film*, which he offers in support of his point that what a film says about the present is its 'true historical reality', p82.

<sup>27</sup> William Hughes, for example, calls for more awareness of 'those qualities of film that set it apart from more traditional forms of documentation', and the 'substantive differences between various film forms'. He suggests that use be made of analytical techniques derived from film and communications research, and invites recognition of the fact that 'economic, technological, and sociological factors peculiar to the medium may influence the structure and content of the film message' ('The Evaluation of Film as Evidence', in *The Historian and Film* ed. by Smith, pp50-1). In his foreword to *American History/American Film*, Arthur M. Schlesinger overlooks an entire corpus of film theory and methodology when he argues that in looking at the significance of images, persistent themes and so forth, 'historians have much to learn from literary historians and critics as well as from sociologists of art' (pxi). O'Connor and Jackson write that the book will 'illuminate the benefits that can accrue from the application of traditional techniques of scholarship to the historical film' (pxvi), and accordingly, many of the chapters make only vague allusions to the structure and 'tone' of the film in question. However, the fact that most contributors are extremely reticent about actually drawing conclusions from the films themselves



empiricism's emphasis on observation, historical data and 'fact', and the theorizing mandated by 'conventionalist' approaches which pursue the 'deeper realities' behind observable phenomena. This methodology stresses that 'history is interpretation' and that film is a highly complex system.<sup>28</sup>

### **3. The Historical Film as Historical Evidence**

The approaches to historical film that I have discussed above have all assumed the existence of what Janet Staiger has called an 'ideal spectator'.<sup>29</sup> When confronted by a text, 'the ideal spectator behaves in an established manner' (pp24-5), depending upon the critic's hypotheses about meaning and the nature of reading. As Staiger argues:

the characteristics of an ideal reader are not only hypothetical, but they are likely symptomatic of fundamental epistemological and ethical assumptions held by the individual proposing them. Whatever is postulated as the ideal reader reveals more about the critic and the critical method than about the activities of readers. (pp25-6)

Ideal readers rely on 'assertion and common sense' rather than evidence. They have the effect of 'promoting certain types of reading as appropriate or correct' (p26), even though discrimination between a right or wrong reading 'seems

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(preferring instead to read them within the context of more familiar evidence) saves them from misleading generalization.

<sup>28</sup> See Allen and Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice*, pp14-21 and pp213-4. The rest of the book is occupied by a rewarding discussion of the various types of 'generative mechanisms' behind events in film history (aesthetic, social, technological and economic), and the theories associated with them. My own research can be located within the Realist framework, but I have preferred to adopt the (very similar) principles of Bordwell's middle-level research because they are more readily apprehended, and were adduced specifically in relation to contemporary film history, rather than imported from elsewhere.

<sup>29</sup> See Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).



more a consequence of history or evaluation systems than a matter susceptible to proof by any scholar' (p31). Furthermore, 'ideal readers are nearly all unrepresentative in significant ways' (p26); gender is presumed irrelevant, sexual preference is undescribed, race unnamed and so on. Political beliefs are also referred to as biases, a strategy which 'disguises the writer's politics and ethics as universals and everyone else's as local opinion' (p26). Even those few writers I have encountered who are aware of the existence of real-life audiences exhibit these same tendencies.<sup>30</sup>

Work which assumes the existence of an ideal reader also tends to assume that meaning is activated only by the text that is being read.<sup>31</sup> Unlike Fraser and Carnes and the other writers considered in section one of this chapter, the contributors to O'Connor and Jackson's volume consider the social context of a film in relation to its meaning. But significantly, they do so only in very general terms, still assuming a single and, as Staiger puts it, 'automatic' response to the features of a given film from the audience knowing and living in its social context.

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<sup>30</sup> Stuart Samuels' article, 'The Age of Conspiracy and Conformity: *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*', in O'Connor and Jackson's *American History/American Film*, for example, discusses issues of ideology and communication, and offers an unusually sound analysis of the film, but still subscribes to a unitary view of the audience: 'Film "reflects" an agreed-upon perception of social reality, acceptable and appropriate to the society in question' (p205), and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* elucidates a contemporary preoccupation with conspiracy and 'normality'.

<sup>31</sup> Text-activated theories 'assume or imply that the text controls or provides information for the reader's routine, although perhaps learned, activities. Even if the reader's engagement is proposed as constructed by social or literary conventions, once the reader knows the conventions, the response is automatic. Only the texts vary, and hence, the model tends to stress the features of the text that supposedly produce readers' responses. The dynamic of the experience is text-activated. Because of this, the stress in discussion for text-activated theories is answering two corollary questions: what are the specific features of the text? what will the ideal or competent reader do when encountering those features?' (p36).

Staiger's thoughts on the assumptions and values betrayed by ideal readers point to what is at stake in the works discussed in section one of this chapter: namely, what should count as good history on film? And more importantly, who gets to say so? Against the more conservative ideal advanced by Carnes, for example, we have seen Rosenstone suggest a more progressive model. But we have also seen that this gets us no closer to a sympathetic understanding of historical film. Staiger writes: '[t]heoretically, I could construct an alternative ideal reader that might display my politics and ethics to counter the other ideal readers offered.' But, she continues: '[t]o posit another "other" ideal reader is merely to repeat an ideological strategy that I oppose' (p26). It seems to me that one way to move the debate on historical film forward is to ask not 'what *should* count as historical film?' but 'what *has counted* as historical film?'. And a good way of achieving this is by means of reception studies.

As Staiger describes it (pp8-9), reception studies 'has as its object researching the history of the interactions between real readers and texts, actual spectators and films.' As history, and not philosophy, 'reception studies is interested in what has actually occurred in the material world', and does not aim to generalize. Its exponents do not assume that meaning is immanent in the text but rather that it is formed by interaction and context, and they do not regard any one interpretation as superior to another. As Staiger puts it: 'reception studies tries to explain an event (the interpretation of a film), while textual studies is working towards elucidating an object (the film)'. Elsewhere, discussing the contextual factors which can account for an interpretation, she argues that in the immediate context of the communication act, '[a]ll sorts of data might be used

by a reader to hypothesize the appropriate communicative process into which a specific instance fits' (p46). Related to the immediate context of reception is an item's 'aesthetic or textual history'. And beyond that is a further range of 'discursive, social, political, and economic contexts', which are also integral to the act of reading. Part of the historian's job in understanding the reception of a film is thus to identify the 'interpretative frames historically available' to the reader (p21).

In the context of a conception of historical film constituted through an examination of real readers, their preoccupations, their actual responses and relationships with the texts concerned, the second section of this chapter, on 'Historical Film as Historical Evidence/Cultural Document', again becomes relevant. We have seen Jackson and O'Connor approach film as a source for understanding the recent past, with any historical concerns an example might have regarded as a veneer, to be chipped away to reveal information about the times in which it was produced. But this does not explain why certain periods were chosen over others, nor why certain representations of the past have achieved greater popularity. Against this tendency, Pierre Sorlin goes deeper into questions of reception and the reception context, arguing that a historical narrative is not just a substitute or pretext for a story about the present. In fact, historical film has two historical dimensions, reflecting the present *and* the past simultaneously, and may be understood as a type of historiography and used as evidence in the examination of historical consciousness.<sup>32</sup> The trick is thus not

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<sup>32</sup> Pierre Sorlin, *The Film in History: Restaging the Past* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980). Sorlin suggests that the use of the past may represent an appeal to authority, a nostalgic urge to



to ask if a representation of the past is true, but to ask why the representation is as it is, and why it has appeal.

Writers who have followed Sorlin's example - Maria Wyke being one of the most recent examples - have provided some of the best work on historical film to date.<sup>33</sup> Though work of this kind might be seen as an improvement upon the articles in *American History/American Film* because it allows the concept of historical meaning and consciousness into discussion of historical film, it suffers in the same way as the contributions to that volume by applying to historical film only one or two of the interpretative contexts that Staiger describes, and thus tends to invest examples with dominant meaning or significance, and spectators with some of the qualities of ideal readers.<sup>34</sup> Even Wyke, whose work is scholarly and interesting, believes that her texts evoke 'a constellation of specific meanings' (p13), with results that are taken to be predictable and coherent. I intend to contribute to the Sorlin tradition of historical work on specific historical films, by applying to them some of the

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escape from the present, or a quest for origins. The selection of period and treatment may be politically motivated, and may have import for current tensions and controversies.

<sup>33</sup> Maria Wyke argues in her book *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema and History* (London: Routledge, 1997) that though cinematic representations of Roman history are fictions, they are 'fictions that share the usage of a well-defined and limited historical period that calls up a constellation of specific meanings for its mass audiences.' As such they are 'one of the chief transmitters of twentieth-century historical knowledge of the Roman world' (p13). In a number of detailed case-studies she proceeds to show how this has been so, whilst also demonstrating how these films address concerns in the present, from matters of national identity and colonialism, to issues of race and gender. Though she ends by noting that the director of *Fellini-Satyricon* (1969) felt some types of historical film to be truer than others, the sentiment is not explicitly made her own, and overall her inquiries are remarkably non-prescriptive. I shall have comments to make about Vivian Sobchack's book *The Persistence of History* (London: Routledge, 1996), which also relates to Sorlin's model, at a later stage.

<sup>34</sup> Staiger reminds us that '[r]eaders are developed historically, and the interpretative event occurs at the intersection of multiple determinations. Thus, the *interpretation is contradictory*, and not coherent' (p48). And she notes that 'to date theses about what has happened in cinema history, even those supposedly concerned with the reception of texts, have often been argued by



historical rigour and greater attention to historical context(s) that reception studies mandates. I will focus initially on one specific context - the generic character and history of historical film - which I believe will be useful and important in several ways.

Firstly, genre is one of the key aesthetic and social contexts which impact upon the interpretation of a film. Indeed, as an approach to film, is fundamentally concerned with the issue of context. As Tom Ryall has recently written: '[t]he central assumption of genre criticism is that a work of art and communication arises from and is inserted into a specific social context and that its meaning and significance is constrained and limited by this context'.<sup>35</sup> In the case of American cinema, Ryall suggests, this context is formed by interaction between industry, filmgoer, reviewer and film, other films and a range of further factors and experiences, which ultimately generates a set of possibilities and probabilities, a number of expectations and assumptions agreed upon by all involved. By understanding this context, and its relationships to other contexts, generic and otherwise, it becomes possible to understand an individual film and viewing event more fully.

In that genre is a *critical* as well as social construct, its use is again quite legitimate for, as Staiger notes, '[r]eception studies encourages a plurality of philosophical and critical observations that might illuminate a historical case study' (p10). Which is to say that, in line with the precepts of middle-level

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each historian's producing his or her hermeneutics of the text and then inferring conclusions following from those observations' (p12).

research as discussed in my introduction, it is legitimate to apply theory (or a number of theories) to explain one's findings. Psychoanalysis is one such theory of potential value but, on the grounds that much work in the field has been insufficiently historical and insufficiently attuned to actual variations in response for my purposes and preferences, I have looked elsewhere for my explanatory models. In chapter two I will consider the value of the mythic/ritual theory of genre, and will argue it to be a good way of understanding the popular identification of and recorded reactions to historical film.

A second reason for looking at historical film generically is that recent historical work, such as that by Simon Schama and Hayden White, emphasizes that all history is representation, and that to understand different forms of it, one must understand the codes and conventions of the representational medium in question.<sup>36</sup> In that it seeks to understand the internal logic of a particular type, generic analysis is a useful means of doing just that for historical film, and is a way of contesting the unfilmic analyses of the traditional historians whose work I have discussed. In its fullest sense, which I shall explore in chapter two, genre allows into the equation all of the various aspects and complexities of film which we have seen have too frequently been ignored by the historical film's critics. As Ryall argues, it has seemed to be a way to understand the 'historical realities' of Hollywood, at once taking into account the production process,

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<sup>35</sup> Tom Ryall, 'Genre and Hollywood', in *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies* ed. by John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p328.

<sup>36</sup> See Simon Schama's *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations)* (New York: Knopf, 1991), which emphasizes that history can be imagined and written in a number of ways. In Hayden White's *Tropic of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp121-130, there are thoughts on the 'createdness' of history and its dependence on literary and generic convention.

marketing, critical and popular reception, and the features of the films themselves - their conventionality, formulae and use of stars.<sup>37</sup> All of this ‘[j]arred with conventional approaches to artistic production’, and ‘moved against the grain of a criticism dominated both by the individual work valued for its distinctiveness and difference, and by the individual artist valued for the extent to which he or she moved beyond the common to the individual and personal’ (ibid.). Genre is thus an excellent means of moving away from the judgemental project of Toplin, Rosenstone and the rest, who value the innovative and personal historical vision as much as art criticism (and auteurist film criticism) has valued ‘distinctiveness and difference’.

Finally, genre is worthy of attention in connection to historical work on the historical film because, even in the best examples of this type of work, including that by Maria Wyke, there has so far been little understanding of its function and importance.<sup>38</sup> Other, more generically-orientated work has also taken the existence of the generic category concerned for granted, setting aside methodological issues in order to more quickly get down to analysis of the genre’s development, political and cultural significance or sociological

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<sup>37</sup> ‘Genre and Hollywood’, p328.

<sup>38</sup> Wyke ignores the genres adjacent to the unproblematized category ‘Roman epic’, and pays no attention to the differing generic regimes of Italian and American cinema. She makes ‘no claims to comprehensiveness’ (*Projecting the Past*, p32-3), analyzing only a few films. But in the absence of any well-developed sense of the genre from which these films come, there is a feeling that she may not be comparing like with like, and that her conclusions are correspondingly palliated. Thus when Wyke admits to ‘a certain arbitrary quality’ (p32) about her case-studies, because (for example) the assassination of Caesar might have served as well as the rebellion of Spartacus, the danger is that the case studies are doubly arbitrary, for it is not clear that the films which constitute them belong to the same genre, and what might be important differences in their reception and interpretation are overlooked.

function.<sup>39</sup> Like Wyke's studies, this work has offered a number of useful insights into the histories of particular genres and the ways in which they have engaged with contemporary issues, but it remains open to attack on theoretical grounds.

With all of this in mind, I will be asking: What is the genre of historical film? How has the genre been understood in the past? How has it been distinguished from other genres? And how do the codes and practices of the historical film affect its representation of the past? In chapters three and four I will research the British historical film genre as one possible frame of interpretation for a historical film, looking at evidence for what historical films were understood to be between 1930 and 1980, and then analyzing the results to see what the genre is and how it works. Then, in chapter six, I will focus on the British historical film in the 1980s, examining its development during the decade and paying attention to a range of reading frames and contexts other than the genre. In this way, I hope in chapter six to achieve a general, problematized sense of what specific instances of the historical film may have meant to actual audiences.

I shall thus be answering the appeal made by Steve Neale in an important article on genre 'for further concrete and specific analyses, and for much more attention to genres hitherto neglected in genre studies, such as the adventure film, the war film, and the epic'.<sup>40</sup> In choosing to write on the neglected *British*

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<sup>39</sup> A good example is *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Women's Film*, ed. by Christine Gledhill (London: BFI, 1987). Another is Pam Cook's *Fashioning the Nation: Costume and Identity in British Cinema* (London: BFI, 1996).

<sup>40</sup> 'Genre', reprinted in Barry Keith Grant, *Film Genre Reader II* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), p179.



historical film, rather than on Hollywood as most other authors have done, I am also in part responding to Alan Lovell's suggestion that more attention should be paid to British film audiences, and to Sarah Street's calls for more work on British genres.<sup>41</sup> As Alan Williams has argued: 'genre is not exclusively or even primarily a Hollywood phenomenon', and therefore 'we need to get out of the United States'.<sup>42</sup>

In chapter four, I will conclude my historical analysis of the historical film in the period 1930 and 1980 by setting the perspectives it develops within the wider context of historiographic debate. This will provide some clear insights into why history on film has been so often denigrated by historians, and might provide a more informed basis for comparison of historical film with other forms of history, and for judgement of it. I myself have no intention of deciding which films are good or bad history, but the question will not go away, I suspect. My hope in this connection is to be of use to those who intend to comment on history and cinema, particularly historians who for whatever reason do not normally read work on film.

A final set of concerns also relates to 'use'. For Staiger, reception studies has a definite political dimension. In discussing the reasons why so much attention

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<sup>41</sup> Alan Lovell, 'The British Cinema: The Known Cinema?', in *The British Cinema Book* ed. by Robert Murphy (London: BFI, 1997), pp235-43, p235, and Street, *British National Cinema*, p28. Peter Hutchings is right to claim that 'it is unlikely that the response of American audiences to, say, the western is going to be identical with the response of European audiences, and any study of the western should take this into account' ('Genre Theory and Criticism', in *Approaches to Popular Film* ed. by Joanne Hollows and Mark Jancovich (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp74-5).

<sup>42</sup> Alan Williams, 'Is a Radical Genre Criticism Possible?', *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 9, no. 2 (Spring, 1984), p124.

has recently been paid to historical readers, she writes: ‘A significant one, I believe, is constituted by the activities of groups of individuals seeking the opportunity to escape the oppression and repression of the dominant class’.<sup>43</sup> It is an approach which asks ‘what types of interpretative and emotional strategies are mobilized by various spectators? How did these strategies get in place? How might other strategies, perhaps of a more progressive nature, replace them? How can radical scholars participate in encouraging what Judith Fetterley calls “resisting readers”?’ (p13).

The issue of political use-value is critical, and again relates back to the authors considered in section one of this chapter. However, I intend to set it aside for the moment, and will note here only that a study of reception need not have the radical, Marxist qualities which Staiger describes. I shall return to the issue at the end of chapter three, by which stage I will have examined a range of historical sources to provide a working sense of what the British historical genre is. At this point I shall set my understanding amidst other writers’ definitions of the genre.

Before this, I turn in chapter two to consider the question of genre in greater detail. I will consider some of the ways in which critics have approached genre, selecting insights and models which suit my purpose of examining the historical film historically. It is not at all my intention to attempt any new theory of genre. Ultimately, I will show that approaches which are in line with the perspectives

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<sup>43</sup> Staiger, *Interpreting Films*, p10.

of reception studies together represent a useful way of engaging with historical problems relating to what historical film is and has been thought to be.

## CHAPTER TWO: Constructing the Genre of Historical film

*Films by Genre*, a book by Daniel Lopez, lists more than 20 genres, movements, styles or trends that have strong associations with history or the past. The textual exemplars he provides sometimes appear in more than one category, and it is often hard to see how these categories, covering the whole of world cinema, interrelate.<sup>1</sup>

In pages 27 to 34 above, I outlined my intention to research the British historical film genre according to the aims of, and in the general context of, a reception studies approach, eschewing the theoretical and often highly personal models and definitions of historical film devised by Lopez and the historians considered in section one of chapter one. The goal will be to uncover the genre as one of the several frames within which specific historical films might have been interpreted. In this chapter I will look at the ways in which work published on genre and on particular genres may contribute to this project.

Work on specific genres is often unable to resist the siren call of circularity, whereby the films in the author's mind determine the generic method or hypothesis employed, whilst the hypothesis in turn confirms or dictates the corpus of films chosen. I aspire to break this circle, by making my point of departure the question: 'What has historical film been perceived to be and how has it been understood?' I have no pre-existing notion of what historical film is, and no definite idea of the

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Lopez, *Films by Genre: 225 categories, styles, trends and movements defined, with a filmography for each* (North Carolina: McFarland and Company, 1993).



best way to study it generically. My criterion for selecting insights from the corpus of material on genre is simple - can it assist in the empirical aim of uncovering the character of historical film?

### **1. The value of formal approaches**

Some of the earliest attempts to understand film genre focused on iconography, in a general attempt to systematize the bases of generic differentiation.<sup>2</sup> The particular attention paid to the Western and gangster categories in the 1970s as exemplars of genres in general, in Peter Hutchings' words, 'caused rather more problems than it solved', for not every genre has an iconography that is comparably dense and meaningful.<sup>3</sup>

One significant variation in this kind of thinking was pursued by Colin McArthur, who centres his iconographical depiction of the gangster film on the presence of a closely circumscribed corps of actors, including James Cagney and Edward G.

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<sup>2</sup> Ed Buscombe for example argued that 'since we are dealing with a visual medium we ought surely to look for our defining criteria at what we actually see on the screen' ('The Idea of Genre in the American Cinema', *Screen*, vol. 2, no. 2 (March-April 1970), p43). He notes that iconic elements of the Western 'operate as formal elements. That is to say, the films are not "about" them any more than a sonnet is about fourteen lines in a certain metre' (p38). But he goes on to contend that its formal elements will predispose a genre to the treatment of certain themes.

<sup>3</sup> *Approaches to Popular Film*, p63. It is not impossible to apply an iconographic approach to a genre that is more eclectic than the Western in its style and use of location. For example, Richard Maltby notes that only in a musical could large numbers of people have any convincing reason for singing and moving in the same way at the same time. He writes: 'We can recognise gestures, and speak of there being gestural codes, although it is more difficult to attach precise meanings to them than to the iconographic elements [which relate to the Western]'. However, 'not all genres have systems of gestural coding that are exclusive to them, any more than they necessarily have specific lighting or iconographical codes'. See *Hollywood Cinema* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p119.

Robinson.<sup>4</sup> These stars define generic prototypes and may dominate the image of a genre in critical and public discourse. But the presence of a star is not a way of achieving an exclusive definition of any genre. As Tom Ryall points out, 'there are plenty of examples of stars who have worked in particular genres without forging generic identity.'<sup>5</sup>

Iconographical approaches have tended not to consider the place of the audience in either the identification or interpretation of genre. However, these approaches have great potential value as ways of theorizing and explaining an audience's recognition of and response to historical film. The 'star-as-icon' thesis might be particularly valuable. As Richard Dyer and others have established, the presence of the star is a key element in the public's relationship to cinema.<sup>6</sup>

More recent work has tended to steer away from the cartographical project of early genre criticism, espousing the view that 'no strictly deductive set of principles can explain genre groupings.'<sup>7</sup> A related point is that the particular deployment of

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<sup>4</sup> See Colin McArthur, *Underworld USA* (London: BFI, 1972). Similarly, Jean-Loup Borget bases an understanding of melodrama on the presence of Joan Crawford, Bette Davis and Lana Turner, 'Faces of the American Melodrama: Joan Crawford', *Film Reader* 3 (February, 1978), pp24-34.

<sup>5</sup> Ryall, 'Genre and Hollywood', in *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies* ed. by Hill and Church Gibson, p332.

<sup>6</sup> See Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: BFI, 1979), and *Stardom: Industry of Desire* ed. by Christine Gledhill (London: Routledge, 1991). I shall draw upon this work in analyzing my historically constituted genre, in chapter four.

<sup>7</sup> David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (London: Harvard University Press, 1989), p147. As Douglas Pye suggests, the likelihood is that the outlines of any genre will remain indistinct and impossible to chart: therefore genre criticism should 'concern itself with identifying *tendencies* within generic traditions and placing individual works in relation to these.' See 'Genre and Movies', *Movie* 20 (Spring, 1975), p29. In the most elaborate version of this position, Steve Neale argues that 'part of the very function of genres is precisely to display a variety of the possibilities of the semiotic processes of mainstream narrative cinema while simultaneously containing them as genre.' See *Genre* (London: BFI, 1980), p31. In this view, the

elements in an individual genre may change over time. As Douglas Pye suggests, in any single genre film, 'any one or more than one element might be brought to the foreground while others might all but disappear,'<sup>8</sup> the guiding principle being that of difference in repetition.<sup>9</sup> But importantly, as one film attempts to differentiate itself from others of the same genre, this variation then reflects back upon the genre in question, extending the available repertoire of conventions. Thus, reflecting the fluidity of overall generic regimes, 'the elements and conventions of a genre are always *in play* rather than being simply *replayed*; and any generic corpus is always being expanded.'<sup>10</sup>

These insights into the mercurial qualities of genre again relate primarily to the formal features of film texts. But they also promise to be extremely useful in helping to understand the historically-constituted genre of historical film, particularly in accounting for any potential lack of clarity in historical (ie audience/critical/industrial) identifications of and responses to it.<sup>11</sup>

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generic system is a way of differentially deploying the characteristic themes, settings and discourses of Hollywood films, none of which are exclusive to any single genre, and of shifting the balance between narrative and spectacle from one genre to the next. The specificity of a genre thus arises from its particular combination, its relative promotion or relegation, of the typical features of the Hollywood movie.

<sup>8</sup> Pye, 'Genre and Movies', p32.

<sup>9</sup> Steve Neale, *Genre*, pp22-3.

<sup>10</sup> Steve Neale, 'Questions of Genre', *Screen* 31, no.1 (Spring, 1990), p56. This article is reprinted in *Film Genre Reader II* where the cited passage can be found on p170. For the reader's ease, subsequent references to this article will relate to the *Film Genre Reader II* reprint.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Maltby argues that the general fluidity and transgressive tendencies identified by the genre critics I have considered may allow audiences to put genre labels to different (and possibly overlapping) uses, and may thus explain the 'fuzziness [...] in the meaning of the names given to program types' by the respondents of a 1955 audience preference survey. The quotation is from Dallas W. Smythe, John R. Gregory, Alvin Ostrin, Oliver P. Colvin, and William Moroney, 'Portrait



## 2. Writing Genre Historically

The difference between this section and the previous section on ‘formal approaches’ to genre, is mainly a matter of the distinction Todorov draws between theoretical and historical genres.<sup>12</sup> The difference is also the same as that between the often highly personalized notions of historical film developed by the historians of chapter one, and the reception-studies led definition I hope eventually to furnish.

Revising his earlier position on genre to give a much more prominent role to the audience, Steve Neale argued in 1990 that:

genres are not simply bodies of work or groups of films, however classified, labeled, and defined. Genres do not consist only of films: they consist also, and equally, of specific systems of expectation and hypothesis that spectators bring with them to the cinema and that interact with films themselves during the course of the viewing process.<sup>13</sup>

Generic labels appear in the discourses surrounding a film (in criticism and interviews for instance, and in advertising) helping to create and circulate a ‘narrative image’ of any particular example: ‘the cinema’s anticipatory reply to the question, “what is the film like?”’<sup>14</sup> That is, secondary discourses create a generically and historically specific reading context of expectation within which

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of a First-Run Audience’, *Quarterly Review of Film, Radio and Television* 9 (Summer, 1955), p398, and is cited by Maltby in *Hollywood Cinema*, p109.

<sup>12</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic* tr. by Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), pp13-4. The polarity is arguably a false one; ‘theoretical’ critics are writing about films which have a historical existence, and are trying to describe some of the historical features of the genres that concern them. But it will be useful to suspend temporarily our awareness of this.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Questions of Genre’, p160.

<sup>14</sup> John Ellis, *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video* (London: Routledge, 1981), p30.



films may be understood. But this is not the only such interpretative context - as Rick Altman suggests, the historical use of any generic term is merely evidence that 'generic levels of meaning are operative'<sup>15</sup> - and therefore concrete conclusions about the reception and interpretation of a film cannot be drawn from it alone.

### Rick Altman and the Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Genre

Altman's work during the 1980s is of particular interest because of his attempts to situate an awareness of audience, secondary discourse and the 'historical realities' of genre within an overall theoretical and methodological framework. *Film/Genre*, his latest contribution to genre studies, was published too recently for me to take it properly into account. Here Altman revises his stance in light of the criticism it has received (which I shall come to shortly), attending more closely to divergent audience perceptions, questions of the 'uses' to which genres are put, and the principle that 'genres might serve diverse groups diversely.'<sup>16</sup> This new thesis, though stimulating, is much more abstract and speculative than the position elaborated in *The American Film Musical* of 1987.<sup>17</sup> Though I will allude to some of Altman's new insights elsewhere in my investigation, in this section I shall be focussing on his earlier work. I do so partly in order to clarify my own approach against his practical, step-by-step guide to genre construction, and partly because I

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<sup>15</sup> Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (1987) (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), p13.

<sup>16</sup> See *Film/Genre* (London: BFI, 1999), especially pp207-15. The quotation is from p207.

<sup>17</sup> See note 83, below.

will be using some of the suggestions made in *The American Film Musical* in my analysis of the historical film in chapter four.

Altman has suggested 'syntactic' approaches to genre, privileging the structures into which a genre's 'semantic' building blocks are arranged, are a way of moving from an inclusive generic definition, to an exclusive one.<sup>18</sup> Exclusive definitions represent critical rather than popular or commonsensical categories, establishing a smaller corpus of films that have a number of more precise links and common characteristics.<sup>19</sup> In adopting such an approach, there is a danger of missing the big picture, and of distorting the 'true' image of the historical genre by focusing on a fixed, ahistorical core of generic 'prototypes'.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, both the semantic and syntactic, as Altman has described them, are *textual* and theoretical models, with no place for the spectator, or the discourses and expectations that are so important to a genre's meaning and function.

In recognition of the fluidity which characterizes the historical existence of genres, Altman proposes that semantic and syntactic approaches can be combined to

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<sup>18</sup> See Altman, 'A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre', *Cinema Journal*, vol. 23 (1984), no.3, pp6-7.

<sup>19</sup> Compare Buscombe's encyclopaedic *The BFI Companion to the Western* (1988) (London: Andre Deutsch/BFI, 1993) with Bazin's more selective and critical work on the 'essence' of the Western in 'The Evolution of the Western', *What is Cinema? Vol. 2* tr. by Hugh Gray (Berkeley, CA: California: University of California Press, 1971), p149, which typifies the aim of constituting a canon, establishing permanent points of reference by which other accounts of a genre might navigate, and illuminating basic themes, properties and patterns.

<sup>20</sup> As Buscombe points out with regard to the Western, the films that are examined in exclusive accounts are big-budget, main-feature films, though *most* Westerns were cheaply made, often as elements of a series. See *The BFI Companion to the Western*, pp13, 36-40.

engender a fuller appreciation of a particular category.<sup>21</sup> He complains that most genre critics reveal two allied needs: 'to remain faithful to a traditional definition, yet to deal primarily with those texts which correspond most clearly to the methodology and the overall theory [which is being deployed]' (p91). Altman suggests that this would not be a problem, but for the fact that critics are so secretive about it, proclaiming the breadth of a genre in one sentence and limiting it in the next, but refusing to recognize the definitional drift. The process erases evidence that a new corpus is being constituted and hides the choices made, 'thus leaving the reader methodologically where he/she started, able only to borrow other people's conclusions' (p126).<sup>22</sup>

In remedy to these problems, Altman proposes a number of steps for formulating a generic corpus, which lay the process open to scrutiny. He suggests that the critic should begin with the Hollywood usage of the generic label, but argues that in itself

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<sup>21</sup> 'We need to recognize that not all genre films relate to their genre in the same way or to the same extent. By simultaneously accepting semantic and syntactic notions of genre we avail ourselves of a possible way to deal critically with differing levels of genericity. In addition, the dual approach permits a far more accurate description of the numerous inter-generic connections typically suppressed by single-minded approaches.' See *The American Film Musical*, p97.

<sup>22</sup> Alan Williams argues that this is true of Thomas Schatz's book *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Film-making, and the Studio System* (New York: Random House, 1981) in which the treatment of any genre 'depends not on historical or theoretical even-handedness but on tacitly agreed-upon landmarks.' See 'Is a Radical Genre Criticism Possible?', p123. Brian Taves' *The Romance of Adventure* (a volume which examines 'historical adventure movies') is a further instance, beginning with a wide-ranging definition, which is subsequently, repeatedly and overtly revised. Thus for example it is initially argued that the genre is predicated upon altruism and chivalry, and the importance of fighting for liberty and justice (see esp. p13). But Viking pictures are included (p29), as are 'fortune-hunter films', even though, as Taves notes, the fortune hunter is 'simply a private person, asocial and unattached', who effects no changes in the political structure (p47). I suspect that the difficulty behind these examples of inconsistency is that Taves' basic conception of the historical adventure genre is heavily dependent upon the conventional swashbuckler, but is then expanded or contracted as necessary to encompass a variety of alternative forms.



this is insufficient to the definition of that genre.<sup>23</sup> The critic collects together the broadest possible range of films suggested by the Hollywood term to establish a preliminary corpus, and then analyses this corpus in a number of ways. The aim is to achieve a subjectively 'more satisfying' (p10) level of explanatory power and complexity. The critic now constitutes a revised corpus, reflecting his/her new, more fulfilling, complete and complex appreciation of the genre. This naturally means that some films will be left out (see p14). At this point history and the relationship of the genre in question to society also enter the equation.<sup>24</sup>

Altman's model has received pertinent criticism from a number of quarters. Steve Neale for example expresses surprise that Altman berates genre critics, who after all are dealing with an industrial product, for 'accepting terms and categories, provided by an openly self-serving industry.'<sup>25</sup> Neale disagrees that the importance of these secondary discourses relates only to the first step of analysis. He does not accept that the aim of genre analysis is the redefinition of a corpus.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> 'Far from seeking to explain the genre or its texts, far from creating a vocabulary appropriate both to systematic and historical analysis, Hollywood's version of the musical serves only to locate the genre, rather than to provide a method of dealing with its functioning or even of justifying this particular delimitation of the genre.' See *The American Film Musical*, p13.

<sup>24</sup> Altman argues that 'the early stages of generic analysis must accept the fiction that a genre exists outside of time, without a history, for only by temporarily suppressing historical relationships can we perceive systematic relationships.' Ibid., p14.

<sup>25</sup> Altman, *The American Film Musical*, p1.

<sup>26</sup> Neale asserts that such an aim is 'no different [...] from the worst pigeonholing inheritances of neo-classical literary theory. We can easily end up identifying the purpose of generic analysis with the rather fruitless attempt to decide which films fit, and therefore properly belong to, which genres. We can also end up constructing or perpetuating canons of films, privileging some and demoting or excluding others.' See 'Questions of Genre', in *Film Genre Reader II*, p165. Many of the inconsistencies of Taves' canonical study of historical adventure films (discussed in note 22 above) can be understood with reference to his suggestion that the film industry has an insufficient or unreliable grasp of generic distinctions (p74), and his decision to base his analysis solely on his own readings of the severely circumscribed sample of films that he alone has adjudged to be pertinent (ppxiii, 16). He objects that the term 'adventure film' has been too-liberally applied (p4), but this impression springs from the fact that the 'historical adventure film' is a theoretically - rather than



Altman suggests that, in practice, selection and reinterpretation are unavoidable in genre criticism. He does not deny that genres always exist in excess of a corpus of work, nor does he deny the discourses and expectations which define the public circulation of genre. Rather, he argues that by beginning with these key features as the basis for analysis, and by being selective and open about both the choices made and the reasons for making them, the genre critic may make conclusions that are both clear and intellectually satisfying. Neale acknowledges that the historical specificity and changeability of genre helps to make it difficult 'to list exhaustively the characteristic components of individual genres, or to define them in anything other than the most banal or tautological terms'.<sup>27</sup> But to cope with the inherent temporality and mutability of genres, the answer is *more* historical research, not less.

Altman defends the principle of critical redefinition by arguing that it embraces historical change; it accepts that cultural and critical concerns vary from age to age, and that the questions a historian asks always involve curtailing the sum of what his sources have to say. This seems a specious argument because it uses the term 'historical' in a very particular way, which is quite different to that implied by Neale and accepted by film studies as a whole. A historical approach in accordance with the principles of reception studies (into which Neale's views fit snugly) would recognize that all critical categories have historical importance as interpretative

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historically - constructed genre. It may be that, like romance, adventure is a characteristic of almost all Hollywood and Hollywood-inspired product.

frames, and would strive to incorporate them into its historical analysis. But it would also make far greater use of other discourses and sources, and would never attempt to step beyond them.

Ultimately then, Neale's assertion that Altman is 'in danger of curtailing the very cultural and historical analysis upon which [he] rightly insists as an additional theoretical aim' is quite valid.<sup>28</sup> *The American Film Musical* ends up a rather more restrained and self-conscious way of achieving the same neat, incomplete result as work by Fraser, Toplin and Rosenstone, and perhaps one lesson to take from the book is that work on genre will be undermined if it is historical by half-measures. Rather than using a methodology which asks to be judged *partly* on the basis of its suitability for genre history and for making links to society and the wider culture, my approach will take genre history and the historical sources for it and its social existence as fundamental concerns.

However, the semantic/syntactic model provides me with a way of organizing these inquiries and a vocabulary for describing them, and I am persuaded that it can help tackle questions of differing degrees of genericity and intergeneric similarity. I aim to use the notion of generic syntax only as a way of gaining additional understanding of the range of films identified as historical in chapter three, rather than as a means of achieving a new, narrower generic definition. In addition to Altman's ideas, I shall apply a number of the other insights discussed in this

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<sup>27</sup> Neale, 'Questions of Genre', p171.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p166.

chapter, always as ways of explaining and contextualizing - never transforming or redefining - my historical findings.

In chapter six I will go on to my discussion of historical film in the 1980s, paying attention now to the genre's history and to some of the other interpretative frames and contexts available at this time. I will thus be delaying the question of genre history as Altman suggests. This seems unavoidable in view of the restrictions of thesis-writing, and the scope and strong sense of genre that I am aiming for. Some appreciation of history and historical change will be present throughout my analysis. But only after I have established the characteristics, logic and broad history of the historical genre, and the potential significance and meaning of applying it as an interpretative frame, will we be able to identify some of the finer points of change in the genre, its relations to its social and political context, and its standing amongst rival and overlapping interpretative frames.

### Writing Historically on *British* Genres

The regimes into which genre filmmaking can be ordered vary significantly from one national cinema to another. National differences in industrial structures and conditions impact heavily on generic filmmaking, and the particular economic instability that has affected British cinema has arguably inhibited the development of distinctive generic strands.<sup>29</sup> Such considerations as these would seem to suggest

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<sup>29</sup> As Sarah Street writes: '[c]ombine-owned or independent, studios which were run with both creative imagination *and* managerial efficiency were able to sustain popular generic cycles most

that a British genre might be examined within the specific, separate context of Britain's own genre system. In this light, it appears especially problematic that most material on the subject of film genre has been concerned with (or in the case of genre theory, articulated in relation to) Hollywood.

However, it is important to afford due recognition to the prominence of American films in Britain. There have been periods during which British films have been exceedingly popular, the war years usually being cited as the key example.<sup>30</sup> But the norm of American popularity has never been suspended for very long, and indeed persists to the present.<sup>31</sup> It should also be observed that the physical environments within which such films have been exhibited have often borrowed their designs from American models, and have aimed at the provision of 'Hollywood' glamour and exoticism.<sup>32</sup>

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efficiently. Korda's historical films were made at Denham in the 1930s, Ealing comedies are synonymous with that studio under Michael Balcon's control in the 1940s, Hammer horrors were made at Bray Studios and James Bond action films at Pinewood.' See *British National Cinema*, p30.

<sup>30</sup> At this time, Murphy argues, '[t]here was a marked improvement in the quality of British films, reflected in box-office takings'; and films such as *49<sup>th</sup> Parallel* (1941) and *The Man in Grey* (1943) 'rivalled the top American pictures in popularity with British audiences'. See 'Under the Shadow of Hollywood', in *All Our Yesterdays: Ninety Years of British Cinema* ed. by Charles Barr (London: BFI, 1986), p59.

<sup>31</sup> For example the U. S. commanded a 92.5% share of the British exhibition market in 1992, compared to Britain's own paltry 4% (*Screen Digest*, December 1993, p280). British audiences were faithful to American films even when their trans-Atlantic counterparts were not, as Paul Swann reveals in *The Hollywood Feature Film in Postwar Britain* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), p6. However, the same author notes that the effectiveness of the Hollywood pleasure-principle was at times also augmented by propagandist support from the American government (*ibid.*, pp1-2).

<sup>32</sup> The supercinemas of the 1920s, for example, were inspired by American examples, and included the Majestic in Leeds and the Pavillion in West London. See Allen Eyles' 'Exhibition and the Cinemagoing Experience', in *The British Cinema Book*, p218). Similarly, the '80s revival in cinema-going was facilitated by the phenomenon of the multiplex cinemas, under the direction of the American companies which owned them, p224. Eyles further notes that '[t]he spread of the American-style film-going experience of the multiplex has been accompanied by an increased enthusiasm for watching American films', p225. I shall return to the multiplex in later chapters.



Rick Altman contends that the international stature of Hollywood films has meant the generic cinema of other countries has 'by and large generated fewer films and [. . .] been less codified, less widely recognized.'<sup>33</sup> Following the critical rediscovery of British film during the last decade or so, it can no longer be said to be 'unknown.'<sup>34</sup> But having begun to find ways of approaching and writing about British genres, it must be admitted that these genres cannot properly be examined in isolation. As Ryall has observed:

The central presence of Hollywood films in the discussion of the concept of genre is not unconnected to the central presence of Hollywood films in the audience experience in most countries of the world, and, most strikingly, in Britain since the 1920s. British film genres, although developed in the context of currents of the national culture, were addressed to audiences steeped in the "foreign culture" of Hollywood cinema, and a full critical definition of British film genres must take account of that.<sup>35</sup>

American films and genres (and American-style cinemas) have introduced different experiences and expectations to the British reading context, thus potentially complicating the meanings of British-produced films. Furthermore, this effect is likely to have been very subtle, as American imports to Britain were not purely Westerns and gangster movies in the classic style, but also visions of British life, including several treatments of important episodes in British history.<sup>36</sup> An

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<sup>33</sup> Altman, 'Cinema and Genre', in *The Oxford History of World Cinema* ed. by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p277.

<sup>34</sup> On the recent work on British Cinema, see my conclusion, pp383-390. The phrase 'unknown cinema' was first applied to British production by Alan Lovell in 1969, in an unpublished BFI seminar paper. Both the paper and the phrase have since become well known.

<sup>35</sup> Tom Ryall, 'British Cinema and Genre', in *Journal of Popular British Cinema 1: Genre and British Cinema* ed. by Alan Burton and Julian Petley (Wiltshire: Flicks Books, 1998), p23.

<sup>36</sup> H. Mark Glancy notes that in the 1930s and '40s alone, Hollywood produced in excess of 150 of these Anglophile films. See *When Hollywood Loved Britain: The Hollywood 'British' Film 1939-45* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), p1. Addressing the substance of what it was the

important related point is that American films have also meant different things in Britain to the U.S., because of the differences in interpretative context.<sup>37</sup> By looking at the consumption of cinema as well as production, we can set about 'freeing the term "British Cinema" from a narrow nationalist straightjacket.'<sup>38</sup>

Though the recent challenge to the circumscribed study of British cinema has been led by a new focus on audiences, in fact it is reinforced by a more nuanced understanding of film production. Though national film industries and regimes of generic output are indeed extremely diverse, there are nevertheless numerous ways in which the industries and products of Britain and America (for example) are interrelated.

Firstly, the dominant presence of Hollywood in British cinemas has exerted a marked and frequently defining influence on the style and strategy of British

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American films 'sold' in Great Britain during the post-war years, Swann finds that not only did they embody 'a relatively coherent model of the ideal American community', they also 'encapsulated a vision of British society.' Changes in this vision entailed 'a retreat from any attempt to present contemporary British life in a realistic manner. American films about British life were fixated upon either Britain's aristocracy, its empire or its past.' See *The Hollywood Feature Film in Postwar Britain*, pp4-5. In fact, Hollywood has been consistently interested in British history since the beginning of the period that concerns me. On the 1930s, for example, see Jeffrey Richards' article, 'Imperial Images: The British Empire and Monarchy on Film', in *Cultures* 2, no. 1 (1974), pp106-8, where he demonstrates how developments in American attitudes to European intervention are visible in films about British history. The sequence moves from the anti-Elizabeth *Mary of Scotland* (1936), via the discursive *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (1939), to the decidedly interventionist *Sea Hawk* (1940).

<sup>37</sup> All of these points can also be applied to a certain degree to European cinema. Though of course this has never been as popular in Britain as Hollywood, it has nevertheless been prominent in certain discourses and, particularly in recent years, has reached a loyal audience through the 'art-house' network. In chapter three we will see some of the sources for the historical film identifying both American-produced and continental films as historical alongside British productions. See below for a consideration of the problems associated with the notion of a 'British production'.

<sup>38</sup> Sarah Street, 'Popular British Cinema?', in *Journal of Popular British Cinema 1: Genre and British Cinema*, p14.

films.<sup>39</sup> Occasionally, this generalized imitation has also been focussed into a more self-conscious and strategic attempt to counterfeit the American style, as in the case of Korda's output in the earlier 1930s.<sup>40</sup> The profits and plaudits garnered by Korda's *The Private Life of Henry VIII* inspired a particular rash of big-budget productions, made on the trans-Atlantic model and with an eye to trans-Atlantic markets.<sup>41</sup>

A second way in which Hollywood and the British industry are conjoined is through co-production of films. Encouraged to support British filmmaking since the 1922 Cinematograph Films Act,<sup>42</sup> by the later 1950s up to 90% of the films made

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<sup>39</sup> Andrew Higson has observed how '[e]ven those areas of commercial feature film-making which are most strongly and self-consciously differentiated from Hollywood still draw on the traditions of classical Hollywood film. The popular understanding of cinema is so closely based on the watching of American films that to offer something too different is almost to revolt against the very idea of cinema.' See *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p11.

<sup>40</sup> Korda suggested that "[o]ur difficulty [. . .] is that you cannot convey a proper sense of the English spirit [. . .] unless you go down to the roots. Roots strike deep into history and may be very local things. In America where roots are near the surface, they are not easily interested in what lies deep down in other countries, and unless we can interest America, there can be no great market for our films . . ." This quotation appears in Karol Kulik, *Alexander Korda: The Man Who Could Work Miracles* (London: W. H. Allen, 1975), p98. Vincent Porter has also recently suggested that, for much of that decade, and for most of the 1950s too, '[t]he hard commercial reality was that, to cover their costs, most British films, other than those with a very low budget, also had to appeal to overseas audiences, especially those in the United States.' See 'Between Structure and History', in *Journal of Popular British Cinema 1: Genre and British Cinema* (1998), p27.

<sup>41</sup> Ian Jarvie argues against the orthodoxy on *The Private Life of Henry VIII*, that 'close analysis of the career of the film in the U. S. would [. . .] show that it had in fact a limited release, confined to two major cities, and that it gained, by Hollywood standards, a modest return.' See *Hollywood's Overseas Campaign: The North Atlantic Movie Trade, 1920-50* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p144. While this may be so, the contemporary significance of the film as an example of the benefits to be won from Hollywood-style film-making, and as a primary motivation to the boom of the 1930s, remains intact. Rank in the 1940s, Grade in the '70s, and Goldcrest in the '80s also made attempts to duplicate the appeal of American films to both British and American audiences. All met with the same failure as in the 1930s, sometimes on a comparably spectacular scale. On Rank, see Robert Murphy's 'Rank's Attempt on the American Market, 1944-49', in *British Cinema History* ed. by James Curran and Vincent Porter (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1993); on Grade see Linda Woods' *British Films 1971-1981* (London: BFI, 1983); and for a fascinating insight into the decision-making at Goldcrest, consult *My Indecision is Final: The Rise and Fall of Goldcrest Films* by Jake Eberts and Terry Ilott (London: Faber and Faber, 1990).

<sup>42</sup> On the 'quota quickies', see Street's *British National Cinema*, p9.



in Britain derived at least part of their financing from American sources.<sup>43</sup> Robert Murphy also cites a similar figure for the year 1967.<sup>44</sup>

In addition to those films financed wholly or partly from American sources, a very great many others could be described as co-productions in a looser sense, in that they brought together properties, stars and creative personnel from more than one country. Hollywood's early horror classics, for example, were based on the work of British writers such as Mary Shelley and Bram Stoker, whilst leading lights of the genre, such as James Whale and Boris Karloff, were also British.<sup>45</sup> Americans too were regularly imported to feature in British films.<sup>46</sup> Films narrating Britain's

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<sup>43</sup> See George Perry, *The Great British Picture Show* (London: Hart-Davis MacGibbon, 1974), p215.

<sup>44</sup> Robert Murphy, *Realism and Tinsel: Cinema and Society, 1939-49* (London: Routledge, 1989), p258. In fact, of course, for much of the 1960s Hollywood channeled vast sums into British production, attracted by the vibrant reputation of 'swinging London' and other factors (on which see *British National Cinema*, p20). Universal, to take one example, 'provided 100 per cent financing for the British films – it was all Hollywood money, not funds that were already in Britain – and no limit [. . .] was ever fixed for any of the films or indeed the total amount of money to be invested.' Alexander Walker, *Hollywood, England* (London: Michael Joseph, 1974), p344. Dickinson and Street nominate 1968 as the apogee of American investment, when £31.3m was imported for production by British subsidiaries. See *Cinema and State: The Film Industry and the British Government, 1927-84* (London: BFI, 1985), p240.

<sup>45</sup> See Marcia Landy, *British Genres: Cinema and Society, 1930-1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p389. In a slightly later period, '[t]he most successful and clearly typecast male stars, Rex Harrison, James Mason, Stewart Granger and Michael Wilding, all left Britain to pursue careers in Hollywood, where the rewards were far greater' (Andrew Spicer 'Male Stars, Masculinity and British Cinema, 1945 – 1960', in *The British Cinema Book*, p144), whilst in the 1970s, as the charisma and profitability of British films faded and the focus of youth culture reverted to the U.S., British talent again moved abroad (see Murphy's 'Under the Shadow of Hollywood', p66). Sheridan Morley's *Tales of the Hollywood Raj: The British, the Movies, and Tinseltown* (New York: Viking Press, 1983) takes an entertaining overview of the resident British community in Hollywood from its beginnings until recent times.

<sup>46</sup> In 1951 for example, Hammer negotiated an agreement with independent American producer Robert Lippert, which guaranteed a Twentieth Century-Fox release for their product, in return for Hammer's agreement to employ American stars in leading roles to ease their films into the American market. See *The Cinema Book* ed. by Pam Cook (London: BFI, 1985), p44. Michael Balcon, who was responsible for a policy of American importation at Gaumont-British, notes that in many cases the star chosen was inappropriate, and the film concerned failed. See *Michael Balcon Presents: A Lifetime of Films* (London: Hutchison, 1968), p61.



complex history and its dealings with the continent might also have a particular need for European actors.<sup>47</sup>

Parallel to such exchanges, as Hollywood's investment in British filmmaking continued to multiply in the 60s, there began 'an ever-increasing flow of American producers and directors into Britain to swell the numbers of the old-established residents like Kubrick, Lester, Losey, Foreman, Sherison and Stanley Donen.'<sup>48</sup> Kevin Gough-Yates' recent article, 'Exiles in British Cinema', serves additionally as a reminder of the presence and influence of behind-the-camera Europeans in British cinema.<sup>49</sup> The exchange of star performers in particular seems likely to have further complicated readings of British-produced films, since both the star and the gestural codes employed might have 'foreign' and perhaps discordant connotations.<sup>50</sup>

On the one hand then, British cinema must be studied with appropriate regard to European and American determinants, exchanges, influences and contexts. On the other, to borrow Andrew Higson's elastic and wide-embracing formulation, Hollywood should be understood as: 'the international institutionalization of certain

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<sup>47</sup> Thus *Kine Weekly* felt that the involvement in *The First Gentleman* (1948) of director Cavalcanti and actor Jean Pierre Aumont was necessary because 'British as it is at base, there is a strong international flavour in the character of the period.' *Kine Weekly*, 21 August 1947, p14.

<sup>48</sup> Walker, *Hollywood, England*, p341.

<sup>49</sup> 'Exiles in British Cinema', in *The British Cinema Book*, pp104-113. See in addition Duncan Petrie's *The British Cinematographer* (London: BFI, 1996), which charts European influences on British camera-work.

<sup>50</sup> 'Sign of the indigenous cultural codes, institutional metonymy and site of the class war in its national specificity, the signification of the star "naturally" changes according to the social, economic and political environment.' Susan Hayward, *French National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993), p12.

standards and values of cinema, in terms of both audience expectations, professional ideologies and practices, and the establishment of infrastructures of production, distribution, exhibition and marketing, to accommodate, regulate and reproduce these standards and values.<sup>51</sup> These considerations form part of the ongoing debate on national cinema, and have significant implications for my intention to study the *British* historical film.

Higson's position with regard to national cinema is more considered and sophisticated than those advanced by others in the field.<sup>52</sup> He provides a useful summary of the various ideas and discourses entailed in the study of national cinema (pp4-5), and crucially, recognizes the degree to which they overlap and interrelate.<sup>53</sup> Also significant are his assertion of the necessary centrality of

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<sup>51</sup> Higson, 'The Idea of National Cinema', *Screen* 30 (1989), no. 4, p38.

<sup>52</sup> In a recent essay, Stephen Crofts enumerates possible responses to the problems of national film-making and the apparent dominance of world cinema by the U. S.. Broadly speaking, these can be described as imitation of the U.S., domestic competition with the U.S., and product differentiation, which is imagined as an avoidance of competition with the U. S.. See 'Reconceptualizing National Cinema/s', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 14 (1993), no. 3, especially p50. The emphasis is thus very much on production rather than consumption, and there is little appreciation in his essay of the prevalence or the historical importance of national hybrids, compounds and composites. Similarly, Buscombe has asserted that individual national cinema histories can only be written and understood as reactions against Hollywood ('Film History and the Idea of a National Cinema', *Australian Journal of Screen Theory* 9/10 (1981), pp141-153), whilst John Hill has called for an indigenous British cinema on cultural grounds, arguing in favour of a government-sponsored diversity that is 'adequate' to the complexities of modern Britain ('The Issue of National Cinema and British Film Production', in *New Questions of British Cinema* ed. by Duncan Petrie (London: BFI, 1993)). In Higson's analysis, Hill's idea of national cinema, in privileging particular 'non-standard' film types and movements, can be located within a bourgeois and elitist tradition, which ignores popular taste and fears the allure and the ascendancy of mass-produced (and especially American) films. See *Waving the Flag*, pp8-9, 14, 19.

<sup>53</sup> As Higson suggests, though there are four discrete uses of the term 'national cinema', 'any utterance about national cinema will probably mobilize more than one of these' (p4). Swann notes that '[b]eginning in the years immediately after the First World War, there were repeated demands from the political and cultural establishments in Britain for the self-conscious creation of a national cinema'. See *The Hollywood Feature Film in Postwar Britain*, p146. His examples represent compelling historical evidence that national cinema in practice cannot be properly understood from purely economic or cultural perspectives.

audiences to definitions and examinations of national cinema,<sup>54</sup> and his appreciation of the further complications introduced by co-production and the international acceptance of American codes and conventions.

Amongst the range of historical research into British national cinema and particular genres, the prominence Higson affords to popular taste and American influences is rare, and Geoffrey-Nowell Smith has gone so far as to claim that 'the hidden history of cinema in British culture, and in popular culture in particular, has been the history of American films popular with the British public.'<sup>55</sup> It is true that many of the standard texts on British film history simply side-step these issues.<sup>56</sup> When authors have broached the question of the interrelationships between Britain and America (and Europe), they have usually done so from an economic or industrial perspective, confining their discussion to such matters as the advantages generated for Hollywood by vertical integration and block-booking; the corresponding inadequacies of the British infrastructure; and the history of government protection.<sup>57</sup> There is very little on the aesthetic influence of American films on

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<sup>54</sup> '[T]he parameters of a national cinema should be drawn at the site of consumption as much as the site of production of films' ('The Idea of National Cinema', p36). See also *Waving the Flag*, p21, where he relates the enthusiasm of British audiences for American films to visual and narrative pleasure, and contends that it is not purely a question of industrial advantage, as those who oppose themselves to Hollywood have sometimes argued.

<sup>55</sup> 'But do we need it?', in *British Cinema Now* ed. by Nick Roddick and Martin Auty (London: BFI, 1985), pp151-2.

<sup>56</sup> One recent example of this is *Dissolving Views*, edited by Higson himself, who writes in his introduction: 'There have at various times been concerted efforts to construct or embrace a specifically national British cinema, distinct from American cinema; but there have also been many, both inside and outside the industry, who have preferred to work with Hollywood and its traditions rather than against it.' The contributors to this book are, at least on this occasion, mostly concerned with the efforts to construct an indigenous cinema. See 'Introduction', in *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema* (London: Cassell, 1996) pp1-2.

<sup>57</sup> A good example of writing in this vein is Murphy's 'Under the Shadow of Hollywood'. Perhaps a partial explanation for the predominance of industrial discourses is that (relative to the fugitive and



British genres and on the expectations and reading practices of British audiences, subjects which follow directly from the industrial and economic connections. A further flaw in much of this work is that it proceeds by opposing British to American cinema in a rather stark way, which can be very limiting.<sup>58</sup> One book which attempts a more ambitious and nuanced analysis is Paul Swann's *The Hollywood Feature Film in Post-war Britain*, but in a number of ways this is also unsatisfactory.<sup>59</sup>

It is my intention to consider British historical films (again, whatever they may be found to be) that have been co-produced with America and those that have borrowed from America, as well as those films fashioned from more purely British resources. Though I would ideally have liked also to have taken full account of the range of American and other imports to Britain, limitations of space again forbid

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ephemeral traces of popular taste, for example) industrial processes, decisions, relationships and legislation are very well documented. Murphy's essay also participates in the recent concern with protection, and the ambition 'to construct a case against a Thatcherite free-market approach to film production' (Alan Lovell, 'The British Cinema: The Known Cinema?', in *The British Cinema Book* ed. by Robert Murphy, p240). For Hill's more theoretical statement of the interventionist position, see particularly pp17-18 of his essay 'The Issue of National Cinema and British Film Production'.

<sup>58</sup> Thus in his well-known study of Ealing studios, Charles Barr suggests that as a small production centre, Ealing exemplifies one of the two options open to the post-war British film industry, the other being collaboration with the U. S.. See *Ealing Studios* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1977), especially pp4-7. Similarly, Murphy's essay, 'Under the Shadow of Hollywood' narrates the struggle of British cinema against American hegemony.

<sup>59</sup> Swann addresses the meanings of American films for British audiences, and the inherence of Hollywood in British film culture, within the wider context of Americanization and American cultural policy. As I suggested above, he also appreciates the interrelationship of economic and cultural perspectives on national cinema. However, his conclusion that 'British and American films provided the cinema audience with different orders of experience' (p148), the former offering 'modesty' and realism, the latter optimism, drama and glamour (pp147-9), seems to be a reversion to polarity discourse, suggesting again that the history of British cinema should be written in contradistinction to Hollywood. The status of standard British realist genres is upheld, and Swann's analysis of the impact upon British cinema of American films, stars and technicians, is disappointing.



it.<sup>60</sup> I have relied on Denis Gifford for a clear and consistent sense of which of the films described as historical in the sources are British, and though I have referred to such American productions as *The Virgin Queen* (1955) in chapter four, I have accepted the fact that his definition privileges production over the more complex and inclusive issues of consumption and film culture.<sup>61</sup> However, in chapter five and within the limited scope of chapter six, I will try to be sensitive to the status of other forms of American cinema as potentially important interpretative frames for British historicals. It is here that I will examine 'the British historical film' in its broadest sense. In my conclusion, I will return to the issues of national cinema and national identity, and will set my various findings within these contexts.

### **3. Genre as Mythic-Ritual**

Geoffrey Hill has recently argued that '[o]ur participation in cinema is our participation in myth.'<sup>62</sup> Though 'the names, times, and styles have changed, the myths that were familiar to our ancestors are the myths on the silver screen'

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<sup>60</sup> It should be noted however that my thinking and conclusions have been informed by a wide-ranging survey of industrial definitions and conceptions of historical film contained in the trade magazine *Kine Weekly*. This survey exceeded the two decades case-studied in chapter three, spanning the entire period from 1930-1971 and embracing all films described as historical.

<sup>61</sup> In *The British Film Catalogue*, Gifford derives his definition of the term 'British film' from that set out by the 1927 Cinematograph Films Act, with the exceptions that native productions of Commonwealth countries are held to be invalid, whilst those produced by British companies working in co-operative arrangements with foreign studios are not (see pp7-8 for his full methodological discussion). His judgments are based on not only the register of new films mandated by the 1927 act, but also a great deal of primary research which I see no point in re-producing. The main alternative to this sort of approach is the distinctly nebulous notion of a 'culturally British' cinema, as used recently by the BFI for its 'Films of the Century' survey (on which see for example the *Guardian*, 23 September 1999, p3). This offers no sound basis for imposing manageable limits on an inquiry, nor for the comparison of British filmmaking to other national cinemas and the charting of international dealings and exchanges. Furthermore, as British films have addressed

(p14).<sup>63</sup> Films thus provide assorted ways of expressing essential and ancient 'truths' (p9).

These comments embody a number of assumptions about myth which are of limited value in interpreting historical research into specific national instances of the global category of historical film, and its local audiences. Such assumptions owe much to literary theorist Northrop Frye, and entail the search for universal characters, actions and narratives. Fryean notions of myth have strong homogenizing tendencies, emphasizing the general rather than the particular.<sup>64</sup>

An alternative perspective on myth has greater explanatory potential, and owes much more to Levi-Strauss, who argues that 'a dilemma (or contradiction) stands at the heart of every living myth [. . .] The impulse to construct the myth arises from the desire to resolve the dilemma.'<sup>65</sup> Significantly, he suggests that, like language, myth is defined not by content but by syntax, with meaning found not 'in the isolated elements which enter into the composition of a myth', but only in the culturally specific way the elements are combined.<sup>66</sup> Therefore myth is not a

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Russian and German as well as British history, it promises only partial access to the full range of the British historical genre.

<sup>62</sup> Geoffrey Hill, *Illuminating Shadows: The Mythic Power of Film* (London: Shambhala, 1992), p4.

<sup>63</sup> According to the analytical psychology on which he draws, 'each of us has stirring within us the symbols, archetypes, and myths of a vast collective unconscious borrowed from ancestors of the distant and recent past. Through a familiarity with symbols, religion, and mythology, mythic connections can be found in even the most secular films . . .' (p14).

<sup>64</sup> See Northrop Frye, 'The Archetypes of Literature', in *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism: A Reader*, ed. by David Lodge (London: Longman, 1988).

<sup>65</sup> See *The Cinema Book* ed. by Pam Cook, p90.

<sup>66</sup> Claude Levi-Strauss, 'A Structural Study of Myth', in *The Structuralists* ed. by Richard T. De George and Fernande M. De George (Garden City: Double Day, 1972), p105.

universal but a *unique* conceptual model, dependent for its meaning upon the context in which it is encountered.

In mediating reality and helping us to understand the culture in which we live, Barthes argues that the mythic dimension of cultural artifacts operates in a particularly seductive and potent way. He writes that myth is 'read as a factual system'<sup>67</sup>; 'in it things lose the memory that they were once made' (p155). He continues: 'Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact.' It 'organizes a world which is without contradictions', and 'establishes a blissful clarity' (p156).

The essence of this position in cinematic terms is that the tremendous success of Hollywood is owed to the fact that 'the American film industry discovered and used the existing body of mythic oppositions provided it by the local culture. In effect, the great Hollywood czars became naïve, prodigious anthropologists.'<sup>68</sup> In a similar vein, Thomas Sobchack argues that cinema provides a cathartic experience, resolving 'the tensions of cultural and social paradoxes inherent in human experience.'<sup>69</sup> It is able to do this because of the 'high degree of audience

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<sup>67</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1973), p142.

<sup>68</sup> Robert Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p13.

<sup>69</sup> Thomas Sobchack, 'Genre Film: A Classical Experience', *Literature/Film Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (Summer, 1975) p201. For Thomas Schatz, cinema is similarly one of the means 'by which individuals deal with the culturally specific in order to make palatable certain truths about the human condition that people have always found it difficult to contemplate.' See his essay 'The



familiarity with the Hollywood generic product,' and 'the audience's active but indirect participation in that product's creation.'<sup>70</sup> The great advantage of these insights in the context of a reception studies approach to genre is that they are fundamentally concerned with the activities of local viewers, with their lives and preoccupations, and with the range of historically-present interpretative frames available to them.

Developing the notion of American film as a mythmaking process in which both industry and audience participate, Michael Wood identifies a number of filmic forms in terms of the culturally specific myths they produce.<sup>71</sup> Viewed from this angle, different genres may be seen as variant strategies used by society in addressing Sobchack's paradoxes.<sup>72</sup>

A particular prospective value of Wood's reasoning for the interpretation of historical research into a genre, is that it may be an additional way of helping to

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Structural Influence: New Directions in Film Genre Study', in *Film Genre Reader II* ed. by Barry Keith Grant, p97.

<sup>70</sup> Schatz, 'The Structural Influence', p93. The idea is that the industry is keen to please and attract large audiences, and consequently devolves to its customers the authority to designate which films are produced. The selection is conveyed via the box-office, and is made on the basis of current anxieties, nostrums and beliefs, and a naïve judgment of the means most suited to addressing, debating and reinforcing them.

<sup>71</sup> See Michael Wood, *America in the Movies* (New York: Delta, 1975).

<sup>72</sup> The melodrama for example may be seen as a way of mediating tensions arising in connection with the American's relation to his or her family. As Laura Mulvey has claimed, ideological contradiction is 'not a hidden, unconscious thread' in melodrama, visible only to the cognoscenti. Rather contradiction is the 'overt mainspring' of melodrama. She writes that 'the 1950s melodrama works by touching on sensitive areas of sexual repression and frustration', dramatizing and discussing difficulties and tensions in the ways described above. See 'Notes on Sirk and Melodrama', *MOVIE 25* (Winter, 1977-8) pp13-6. Similarly, Andrew Tudor suggests that genres provide structures and images that an audience can use to construct itself socially, and identifies the horror movie as an experience which allows us to experiment with fear and to explore the fearful in its various forms. See *Monsters and Mad Scientists: A Cultural History of the Horror Movie* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), pp5, 213.



theorize and explain the inter-generic distinctions drawn by the industry, reviewer, and audience. For example, if we accept Thomas Sobchack's idea that conflicts 'between the individual and the group, between self-realization and communal conformity' are at the heart of the genre film, and that 'the resolution of the tension between the two poles will always be in favour of the community,'<sup>73</sup> then one might contrast the gangster film's economic slant on these conflicts<sup>74</sup> with the more familial, moral and sexual concerns addressed by the apparently similar category of crime melodrama.

Before moving away from the subject of genre and myth, two connected points might profitably be made here. The first is simply a reminder that the genre-as-myth approach is best applied and appreciated as an interpretative *tool*, and must not be made to answer every question that arises from the sources. Drawing like Wood on the work of Levi-Strauss, Will Wright accounts for the appeal of the Western by revealing its function as cultural ritual.<sup>75</sup> But as Thomas Schatz objects, an understanding of the reciprocal relationship of studio and audience, and the ritualistic character and mythic function of the genre film, cannot explain the form entirely.<sup>76</sup> Hollywood's creative codes (narrative form, closure, variation, the star system etc) are ignored by Wright, who accounts for the development of the

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<sup>73</sup> Sobchack, 'Genre Film: A Classical Experience', p201.

<sup>74</sup> See Robert Warshow, *The Immediate Experience* (New York: Athenaeum, 1971), p136.

<sup>75</sup> *Sixguns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).

<sup>76</sup> 'In treating the Hollywood genre film as a form of mythic expression within a popular art form, we should not fail to consider certain basic qualifications imposed by the nature of the commercial cinematic medium that necessarily affect the narrative and thematic composition of that expression. That is, there are a number of general cinematic codes indigenous to the Hollywood production

Western not in commercial or aesthetic, but in purely extra-cinematic terms. Schatz criticizes him for the omission,<sup>77</sup> though he does note that the particular idiosyncracies of Hollywood filmmaking do not invalidate the idea of genre as mythic-ritual. Rather they 'testify to the fact that the Hollywood cinema's mode of production provides a unique context for mythic expression.'<sup>78</sup> The points made by Schatz in this connection are salutary ones, for they also point toward the vital principle of *pleasure*. Recognition of this principle provides an answer to André Bazin's famous question concerning the popularity of the western - one which does not depend upon Bazin's Fryeian notion of the universal and timeless conflict between 'the forces of evil' and 'the knights of the true cause.'<sup>79</sup>

In sum, an analysis which draws upon notions of myth represents *just one* approach to apply to an historically-constituted profile of a genre (which is to say one that takes into account the 'historical realities' of its codes, conventions and pleasures, and the various discourses and interpretative contexts which surround it). This

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system that influence (and ultimately characterize) all of its products . . .'. See 'The Structural Influence', p98.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p97. For Schatz, the advantage of a mythic-ritual approach is that it 'enables students of the Hollywood genre films to broaden their analytical perspective without violating the integrity of the individual films or the genres in which they participate', p99.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p98. Indeed, according to Altman's semantic/syntactic model, Hollywood's creative codes are inextricably linked to any mythic-ritual meaning a genre might have. Altman writes that audience response 'is heavily conditioned by the choice of semantic elements and atmosphere, because a given semantics used in a specific cultural situation will recall to an actual [audience] the particular syntax with which that semantics has traditionally been associated in other texts. Thus *syntactic expectation*, set up by a *semantic signal*, is matched by a parallel tendency to expect specific syntactic signals to lead to pre-determined semantic fields . . .' See *The American Film Musical*, p101.

<sup>79</sup> 'What can there possibly be to interest Arabs, Hindus, Latins, Germans, or Anglo-Saxons, among whom the Western has had an uninterrupted success, about evocations of the birth of the United States of America, the struggle between Buffalo Bill and the Indians, the laying down of the railroad, or the Civil War?'. See 'The Western, or The American Film Par Excellence', in *What is Cinema? Vol. 2*, p141. Looking beyond the culturally specific function of the Western, it is possible

approach may help provide a number of original insights into the relationship of that genre with its audiences, the historical context of production and reception, and the other genres that surround it.

My final point relates to criticism which, like the mythic-ritual approach, is concerned with the social context and function of genre, but which rejects the concept of audience participation in a reciprocal relationship with the industry in favour of examining Hollywood's 'ideological project'. In the best known (or 'most notorious') piece in this tradition, Judith Hess Wright argues that genre films are fundamentally conservative in nature, in that they 'came into being and were financially successful because they temporarily relieved the fears aroused by a recognition of social and political conflicts; they helped to discourage any action that might otherwise follow upon the pressure generated by living with these conflicts.'<sup>80</sup> Though not offered as a comprehensive model for the understanding of genre, this article is highly susceptible to criticism.<sup>81</sup> However, the principle that Hollywood's output is not ideologically neutral is important to grasp. As Altman has argued, genres may be conceived as 'ideological constructs *masquerading* as neutral categories.'<sup>82</sup>

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to explain its international popularity in terms of its stars and stories, elements connected to its mythicness for sure, but not inextricably so.

<sup>80</sup> Judith Hess Wright, 'Genre Films and the Status Quo', in *Film Genre Reader II*, p41.

<sup>81</sup> Its inadequacies include a tendency to generalize and simplify; a reliance on *a priori* generic categories; its denial of the problems of hybridity and fluidity, and general neglect of historical specificity and change; and finally its patronizing tone and denial of a whole range of factors and contexts other than industrial politics which may influence an audience's reading of a film.

<sup>82</sup> *The American Film Musical*, p5 (my italics).



This last observation does not necessarily invalidate the mythic-ritual thesis. In Altman's view, the function of genre is not simply a matter of rhetorical imposition *or* interaction, and a sophisticated criticism might recognize that both factors may be simultaneously at work, perhaps often complementing one another.<sup>83</sup> Used with appropriate caution, I take Altman's thoughts on questions of ideology and other issues to be another potentially useful way of analyzing the results of historical research into genre and reception.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> He in fact suggests that 'the relationship between the semantic and the syntactic constitutes the very site of negotiation between Hollywood and its audience, and thus between ritual and ideological uses of genre' (ibid., p98). Whenever a lasting genre is achieved, which is whenever a semantic genre becomes also a syntactic one, 'it is because a common ground has been found, a region where the audience's ritual values coincide with Hollywood's ideological ones. The development of a specific syntax within a given semantic context thus serves a double function; it binds element to element in a logical order, at the same time accommodating audience desires to studio concerns'. Ibid., p99.

<sup>84</sup> As noted above, Altman addresses many of the reservations his model of genre has attracted in his new book *Film/Genre*, and has recognized that 'the audience' is not a singular entity, and that 'disparate viewers may perceive quite disparate semantic and syntactic elements in the same film' (p207). However, it seems to me that his new position, breaking down 'Hollywood' and 'its audience' to emphasize the full range of (competing) 'user groups' and asking the broadest possible range of questions relating to the users concerned (see pp213-14), is at once so detailed and so wide-ranging as to be unworkable when applied to a time-frame and body of evidence such as the one I will be working with in chapters three and four. We will also see that aspects of his new position are not borne out by the available historical sources on the British historical film genre. In fact, his position is now a 'total theory' of genre and communication (as Altman himself suggests, pp165, 215), of the kind that I wish to avoid. Elements of his older model, for all its theoretical weaknesses, promise in practice to be a more effective set of analytical tools, particularly with regard to the establishing of general patterns and tendencies.



# THE BRITISH HISTORICAL FILM, 1930-1980

## CHAPTER THREE: Identifying The British Historical Film From the Historical Sources Surrounding It

The variable economic stability of British cinema, the changing nature and extent of American influence in British filmmaking, the mutability of overall generic regimes, and wider developments in society and politics; all this dictates that the historian must be sensitive to shifts in generic usage, and in the logic and composition of the genre under analysis. In later chapters, I will comment on some of the precise factors which have impacted on the character of the British historical film, and will closely chart the progress of the genre in the 1980s. But for the moment I do not intend to develop an elaborate chronological profile; for the sake of inclusiveness and clarity, the approach will be largely synchronic.

In the present chapter, my aim is merely to establish the salient features and contours of the genre. The questions to be addressed are: what evidence is there that generic levels of meaning are operative? And what have been understood to be historical films by those who made, consumed and commented upon them? Having identified some specific examples of the genre (though my intention is *not* to construct an Altman-like corpus) and having attained a basic appreciation of how it is differentiated from other genres, I shall go on to analyze it in detail in chapter four, making further use of the materials discussed in this chapter.

My belief in the scholarly advantages to be gained from scope leads me to examine a wide range of sources. I shall explain the choices I have made as I go along, though it is perhaps worth pointing out here that I have combined original archive research with the use of material conveniently published in readers, anthologies and source books, because not doing so seems like a deliberate waste of time. I have divided the range of available sources into three broad categories – ‘industrial’, ‘journalistic’ and ‘popular’, the last of which represents those sources which collect together audience perspectives and opinions – and have treated each group separately to properly establish its character and utility. This approach is also intended to facilitate alertness to nuance and minutiae in the identification of historical film. Where disparate sources are treated together in the presentation of an argument, the tendency is to collapse distinctions and to obscure points of detail. At the end of this chapter I shall argue that this is something which has distorted the picture of the British historical film genre provided by other writers in the field.

## **1. Historical Film as an Industrial Category**

### **a. *Kine Weekly***

*Kine Weekly* operated as the preeminent trade paper to the British film industry throughout the period which concerns me in this chapter, until its incorporation into

*Screen International* in 1971.<sup>1</sup> In the interests of clarity I have focussed discussion of my researches on the 1940s and the 1960s. The later period was selected to provide some background in anticipation of my close analysis of the 1980s. I chose the 1940s to provide a proper contrast to the 1960s, to complement key audience surveys which were mainly conducted in the '30s and '40s (and which I will come to shortly), and to facilitate engagement in later chapters with recent academic work on the historical film, which has mainly concerned itself with the Second World War period.

*Kine's* usage of the term 'historical film' suggests a remarkably consistent conception of the genre, though this was never formally articulated. The category remained in regular use throughout the period, embracing a large number of films with strong apparent similarities, relating to themes and issues of royalty, government and leadership. These include *Catherine the Great* (1934), *The Young Mr Pitt* (1942), *Lady Hamilton* (1941), *Bonnie Prince Charlie* (1948), *A Man for All Seasons* (1966), *The Lion In Winter* (1968), *Cromwell* (1970), *Mary, Queen of Scots* (1972) and *Anne of the Thousand Days* (1970).<sup>2</sup> The stability of the notion of historical film which underpins this list is revealed with especial clarity when an instance of the type was reissued and re-reviewed in terms which recalled those used to describe it on its initial release. Good examples from the 1940s are *Queen Victoria* (1942), which amalgamated scenes from *Victoria the Great* (1937) and

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<sup>1</sup> A second reason for my choosing *Kine* for detailed attention ahead of its rivals, which will become important in chapter four, is that it is unique in providing regular lists of the country's most popular films.

*Sixty Glorious Years* (1938), *Fire Over England* and *Catherine the Great*, the latter resurfacing in 1947 after some 13 years.<sup>3</sup> *Kine*'s reviews appear to be motivated primarily by utility, offering unfussy summaries of the features of an industrial product, and being usually prefaced by a crisp and decisive generic description. This helps to make patterns in the magazine's usage of the term 'historical film' particularly evident.

The application of alternative typological terms to other films also set in the past seems to be similarly consistent. For example, the biographical category reaches throughout the period, uniting such titles as *The Story of Gilbert and Sullivan* (1953), *The First of the Few* (1942), *Madame Curie* (1944), *Spirit of the People* (1939) and *The Roosevelt Story* (1947), *The Jolson Story* (1946), *Isadora* (1969), *The Music Lovers* (1971) and *Ned Kelly* (1970).<sup>4</sup> The costume/period melodrama is another prominent and persistent grouping. It is important for what I shall have to say in the conclusion to this chapter that *Blanche Fury* (a 'picturesque and violent nineteenth-century costume piece,' 26 February 1948, p15), *Fanny By Gaslight* (a 'period romantic melodrama,' 22 April 1948, p20), and *Jassy* (a 'hearty period

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<sup>2</sup> See respectively *Kine Weekly* 18 January 1934, p21; 25 January 1942, p48; 12 June 1941, p18; 12 February 1948, p21; 1 April 1967, p9; 3 February 1968, p18; 25 July 1970, p6; 1 March 1969, p18; and 28 February 1970, p22.

<sup>3</sup> See *Kine Weekly* 19 November 1942, p34, for a review of *Queen Victoria*; 18 June 1942, p35, for a re-review of *Fire Over England*; and 30 October 1947, p29, for a re-review of *Catherine the Great*.

<sup>4</sup> See respectively *Kine Weekly*, 14 May 1953, p17; 20 August 1942, p18; 3 February 1944, p20; 7 March 1940, p20; 22 April 1948, p19; 3 January 1963, p18; 8 March 1969, p29; 13 February 1971, p8; 27 June 1970, p8. In each instance, the term 'biographical film' is modified slightly ('biographical musical', 'biographical romance', 'biographical adventure' etc.) to suit the film in question. It is notable that *Freud: The Secret Passion* is delineated only as a 'serious tribute': 'It is not a biography of Freud, but takes the years when his theories were being formed, promulgated . . . ' (see the review, 29 August 1963, p12). In shirking biographical orthodoxy, *The Loves of Edgar Allen Poe* is said to 'make a mockery of biography' (5 November 1942, p31), whilst *Fame is the Spur* is described as '[f]iction fashioned in the biographical mould' (15 September 1947, p15).



melodrama' said to be in the same mould as *The Man in Grey*, *Caravan* and *The Wicked Lady*, 14 August 1947, p25) are all unequivocally identified as components of this category.<sup>5</sup>

The stability of this overall taxonomy is undisturbed by fashion. In the 1960s for example, *Kine* bracketed off the mania for films set on the Spanish Main or in the ancient past from the mainstream of historicals, biopics and costume dramas, whether they featured historical events and personages or not, incorporating them into older categories such as 'swashbuckler' and 'spectacle/spectacular'.<sup>6</sup> That *Kine* understood the historical film and biopic to be highly specific and coherent types is also suggested by the several films which at first glance seem well qualified for membership of one or the other type, but which in various ways are carefully distinguished from them. Thus, for example, the seemingly biographical *Scott of the Antarctic* was reviewed as an 'epic adventure melodrama' (2 December 1948, p19), whilst *Lawrence of Arabia* was characterized as a 'real-life adventure melodrama' and a 'World War One melodrama' (3 January 1963, p9, and 28 February 1963, p25 respectively). Similarly, *Nell Gwyn* (1934) is repeatedly refused the title 'historical film', in favour of 'musical drama', 'costume comedy

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<sup>5</sup> Other examples include *The Idol of Paris* ('a highly coloured costume piece' that was '[m]ade by the same team as "The Wicked Lady"', 26 February 1948, p15/18), though Napoleon and the composer Offenbach are featured in it; *Mrs Fitzherbert* (a '[r]omantic costume piece, slenderly based on the tender and stormy association of the Prince Regent and Mrs Fitzherbert', 30 October 1947, pp16, 29); and *Gone With the Wind* (a 'spectacular period romantic melodrama', 25 April 1940, p22). In later years, *Tom Jones* (described as a 'costume film' in the *Kine* of 21 March 1963, p20, and as a 'period romp', 27 June 1963, p10) and *Madame* ('an ebullient costume piece', 11 April 1963, p9) were located within the same category.

<sup>6</sup> In the issue of 19 March 1964, for example, four films identified by *Kine Weekly* as spectacles (including one entitled *Caesar the Conqueror*) are reviewed prior to their release that week (p9). Amongst many others, *The Sign of the Cross* in the 1930s and *The Robe* in the '50s, which were also designated 'spectacles' in the pages of *Kine*, testify to the longevity of the type.

drama' or something similar, whereas *La Marseillaise* (1938) is characterized as a 'cross section of the French Revolution' for 'specialised audiences' (25 April 1940, p22) and *Lancelot and Guinevere* appears as a 'British medieval melodrama' (9 May 1963, p9). Though *Carry On Henry* is described as a 'historical carry on' (29 May 1971, p8), *Don't Lose Your Head* is a 'farce' (4 March 1967, p12).<sup>7</sup>

Crucially, *Kine* affords the opportunity to compare the deployment of generic terms in addressing the film industry with the deployment favoured by producers and promoters themselves, and they are largely congruent. Thus, anticipating the year ahead, London Films served advance notice that *Fire Over England* would be an historical film (14 January 1937, p99), while Gainsborough announced of *The Wicked Lady* that 'like [Leslie] Arliss's earlier success, "The Man in Grey", this film will be a costume piece with settings around the time of Charles II' ('British Studios' review, 14 December 1944, p36). Whole-page advertisements also establish *Peg of Old Drury* as a 'screen drama' (15 January 1948, p19, echoing a *Kine* review which described it as a 'romantic drama', 22 March 1941, p20), and *Zulu* as a 'multimillion dollar adventure drama' ('Production Supplement' 19 December 1963, as compared to *Kine*'s own epithet 'large scale adventure story,' applied 27 June 1963, p5).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> I address the issue of generic hybridity in chapter five, subsection one, particularly in my discussion of *Young Winston*.

<sup>8</sup> Advertisements from companies other than those involved in film production can occasionally provide a further point of comparison. Thus, in a 1964 spread headed 'Pages of History' and illustrated with stills from the newly released *Becket*, the text reads: 'In 1926 the Plaza Piccadilly Circus – equipped of course by Brockliss – opened with Nell Gwyn. This fine theatre opens with

Amongst other material in *Kine* that can elucidate genre and generic usage, information relating to certain kinds of double-bill feature is especially interesting, often disclosing some impression of the trade's sense of what constitutes a strong generic connection. For example, the fact that *The Scarlet Blade* and *The Son of Captain Blood* were released as a swashbuckling pairing in the summer of 1963,<sup>9</sup> affords a more precise insight into conceptions of the 'swashbuckler' at that moment than the fact that *Captain Blood* and *The Secret Mark of D'Artagnan* were separately announced and reviewed as swashbucklers/swashbuckling melodramas.<sup>10</sup> This is because the *Scarlet Blade/Son of Captain Blood* pairing effectively names a generic intertext for each of the films concerned. The similarities between the two films would then constitute those felt to be central to the genre at that time. Such a pairing may also have had a particularly strong impact on public notions of the genre, back-to-back texts highlighting generic patterns and conventions in an uncommonly bold way.

The language in which various films and categories are discussed is equally revealing. Costume films for example are invariably conveyed in terms of mood, morality, emotion and incident, as opposed to the vocabularies of authenticity and leadership which are often used in commenting on historical pictures, and those of ambition, achievement and frustration which are frequently applied to biopics. 'The Showman' column, featuring news of actual promotional activities undertaken by

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another great film – Becket – and we are proud to have been associated with Pathe Equipment Ltd in re-equipping it with PHILLIPS' (23 April 1964, p28).

<sup>9</sup> See in particular Warner's advertisement, 30 May 1963, 'Production Supplement', p2.



cinema managers, is also of value, as are occasional glimpses of historical films that failed to materialize, and the evidence that individual historical films could have several cinematic lives, helping to maintain popular, critical and industrial notions of the genre's history and identity.<sup>11</sup> I shall return to these matters during the course of chapters four and five.

#### b. Memoirs and the Autobiographical Interview

Another rich source of industrial evidence is the filmmaker's memoir or autobiography.<sup>12</sup> In K. R. M. Short's assessment, '[a]ny historian interested in the movies must initially come to terms with the industry's notoriously unreliable literature, the record of over eighty years of legend, fact, rumour and misremembered detail.' Set alongside the fantasies and 'mountains of misinformation' circulated by fan magazines and newspapers, '[t]he memories-in-print of actors, actresses, directors, producers, studio owners *ad nauseam* has produced even more substantial evidence of that acknowledged fact that some Hollywood people believed in the dream world in which they lived.' Ultimately literature of this type is a 'highly enjoyable but mostly barren waste.'<sup>13</sup> However, the value of these sources (as for any source) depends on the questions asked. Thus

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<sup>10</sup> Instances of the application of the term 'swashbuckler' to these films can be found in the *Kines* of 2 May 1963 (p10) and 4 April 1963 (p8) respectively.

<sup>11</sup> Historical films were part of a larger body of films which lent themselves with especial readiness to reissue. As a re-reviewer of *Nell Gwyn* observed in 1940, 'costume does much to conceal the date of [their] manufacture' (18 April, p35).

<sup>12</sup> I do not include biographies in this section, as on the whole they seem to be more akin to journalistic work on film, and seldom include more than a few actual quotations from the filmmaker concerned, often borrowed from (uncredited) interviews by other writers and quoted out of context. I shall discuss interview evidence shortly.



they are perhaps unreliable as guides to Hollywood decision-making and the production process; for such a purpose as this, Short is right to warn of the necessity of corroborative material (p21). But as evidence for what Hollywood *imagined* it was doing, and what it wanted to be *perceived* as doing, memoirs and recollections are invaluable, and provide another important 'interpretative frame' for audiences. Accordingly, I asked of such sources how those inside the industry conceived of the genres in which they worked, and if/how they felt the historical film to be distinct.

Even looked at from this perspective, the autobiography is not free from difficulty. One general consideration is that all the individuals with whom I shall be concerned are themselves real readers of films, and as likely as any member of the public to apply their own personal experiences and interpretative frames. An autobiographer may thus have eccentric ideas about a specific film, which have little to do with the industry in which he or she worked. A more practical problem is that an author might avoid the subject of genre and typology altogether. This is the case with Cedric Hardwicke for example, who appeared in a large number of films, including *Dreyfus* (1931), *Nell Gwyn*, *Peg of Old Drury* (1935), *Tudor Rose* (1936), *Richard III* (1955), *Stanley and Livingstone* (1939) and *The Desert Fox* (1951).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> K. R. M. Short, 'Introduction: Feature Films as History', in *Feature Films as History*, p18.

<sup>14</sup> In *A Victorian In Orbit* (London: Methuen, 1961), Hardwicke views himself as above all a 'knight of the theatre'. He seems rather suspicious of 'motion pictures,' arguing for example that film is not memorable and may do little for one's career (p189), and (a little inconsistently) that indifferent

Writers who are more forthcoming than Hardwicke in discussing their film careers can be equally unwilling to enter into matters such as genre. The reason may be that they assume that any reader interested enough to invest in the book concerned would already be familiar with the author's *oeuvre*, and instead channel their attentions into the provision of salacious revelations and amusing anecdotes. Disappointingly, the number of actors who, like Hardwicke, have appeared in films that might be thought historical in the sense used in *Kine* or in some other sense, but who neglect to advance much information in connection to them, is large.<sup>15</sup>

There are however a few writers who buck the trend, for example Anna Neagle. In her autobiography, Neagle describes *Nell Gwyn* as a 'historical picture'<sup>16</sup> and approvingly quotes a critic who applauded the achievement of *Sixty Glorious Years* in that it 'makes history come alive' (p110). Elsewhere, she describes *Nurse Edith Cavell* (1939) as a drama – it is simply 'a film about Nurse Edith Cavell' (p114) – and though she understands Florence Nightingale to be a 'historical character' (p179), she does not label *The Lady With the Lamp* (1951) an 'historical film'.

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films may irreparably damage one's reputation (p216). He is also unwilling to engage very deeply with the vocabulary of film, and conceives of film as a genre in itself, in contradistinction to theatre.

<sup>15</sup> A good example is Laurence Olivier in *Confessions of an Actor* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1982). Olivier, like Hardwicke, prefers to linger over his theatrical triumphs, and does not discuss *Fire Over England* or *Lady Hamilton* at any length. Another instance is Robert Morley's *A Reluctant Autobiography* (Simon and Schuster, 1966) which makes no mention of *Beau Brummell* (1954), *The Young Mr Pitt*, *Genghis Khan* (1965) or *Marie Antoinette* (1938). Finally, see *Vanessa Redgrave: An Autobiography* (Hutchinson, 1991), which includes scant reference to *Mary, Queen of Scots*, *The Devils* (1971), *Isadora* or *Prick Up Your Ears* (1986), engrossing the reader instead in tales of her father and husband, and her political commitments, as well as her years on the boards.

<sup>16</sup> Anna Neagle says 'There's Always Tomorrow': *An Autobiography* (London: W. H. Allen, 1974), p87.

Some instructive points of comparison are provided by Jack Hawkins, Rex Harrison and others who have published unusually full accounts of their careers. Hawkins describes *Zulu* (1963), *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) and *Angels One Five* (1952), which recreate historical incidents, as war films.<sup>17</sup> By choosing to apply this category instead of 'historical film', which in common sense terms he would seem to be justified in doing, he seems to uphold *Kine*'s distinction between historical film and other films set in and drawing on the historical past.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Rex Harrison characterizes *The Agony and the Ecstasy* as 'an epic about Michelangelo and Pope Julius,'<sup>19</sup> and writes of the most notorious film in which he appeared: 'I suppose Cleopatra was among the first of a long series of very big and extremely expensive Hollywood epics, a genre of film quite different from those I'd made in Hollywood in the forties' (p191). Michael Hordern describes the same film (in which he played Cicero) rather more accurately as 'the epic to end all epics,'<sup>20</sup> and also applies the epic category to *El Cid* (1961, p110).<sup>21</sup>

Strikingly, all of Gainsborough's mid-1940s crop of stars refer to the films in which they appeared as 'period costume dramas,' or some approximation of this, and tend to set them apart from contemporary historical productions. Thus

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<sup>17</sup> *Anything For A Quiet Life* (London: Coronet Books, 1975), pp166, 159, 121 respectively.

<sup>18</sup> In his autobiography, Michael Caine, Hawkins' co-star on *Zulu*, affirms its status as a war movie. See *What's It All About?* (London: Arrow Books, 1993), especially parts two and three.

<sup>19</sup> *Rex Harrison: An Autobiography* (London: Macmillan, 1974), p215.

<sup>20</sup> *A World Elsewhere: An Autobiography* (London: Michael O'Mara Books, 1993), p114.

<sup>21</sup> Under the same heading, Stewart Granger also places *The Robe* (1953) and *The Egyptian* (1954) (*Sparks Fly Upwards* (London: Granada, 1981), pp297, 301), whilst Alec Guinness includes *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964) (*Blessings in Disguise* (London: Penguin, 1997), p207). In *Snakes and Ladders* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1978), Dirk Bogarde seems to use the word 'epic' perjoratively, to distinguish lumbering American films from the European art cinema that he came to love. For example he applies it to *They Who Dare* (1954), p170, and *Song Without End* (1960), pp219, 220, 239. However, this usage is very rare.



Margaret Lockwood categorizes *The Wicked Lady* as a 'period costume story' and describes *Jassy* as 'also a period piece', whilst Stewart Granger understood *Fanny By Gaslight* to be a 'Victorian melodrama' and *Caravan* (1946) to be a 'costume epic.'<sup>22</sup> Amongst other films that could conceivably have been described as 'historicals', Dirk Bogarde regards *Song Without End* (1960) as 'The Liszt bio', and Kenneth More refers to *A Night to Remember* (1958) as 'a reconstruction of the Titanic disaster.'<sup>23</sup>

To give a final, more modern example, Ken Russell trumpets his association with the 'controversial biopic' on the very first page of his memoir *A British Picture*.<sup>24</sup> However, films of this type do not exhaust his range. He describes *Salome's Last Dance* (1988) as a 'fantasy' and *The Rainbow* (1989) as 'an art-house movie,' only with wider appeal (p274), while *Tommy* (1975) is a 'musical' (p212). These are all labels which he might have applied to his biopics, but did not. More important for my purposes is that neither history nor the phrase 'historical film' ever enters into his discussion of *Lizstomania* (1975), *Mahler* (1974) or *The Music Lovers* (1971), though he repeatedly defends his work against charges of misrepresentation with

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<sup>22</sup> See *Lucky Star: The Autobiography of Margaret Lockwood* (London: Odhams Press, 1955), pp108, 119, and *Sparks Fly Upwards*, pp71, 92. James Mason refers to Gainsborough's "escape" movies' (*Before I Forget* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1981), p185) and suggests on p187 that *The Man in Grey* (1943) was 'sustained' by *Fanny By Gaslight* (1944), *Madonna of the Seven Moons* (1944), *Love Story* (1944), *They Were Sisters* (1945) and *The Wicked Lady* (1945). It is unfortunate that Mason mentions *Fire Over England*, *The Young Mr Pitt* and *The Mudlark* (1950), but does not specify a genre for them. Guy Morgan, who as a wartime cinema manager provides a different industrial perspective in his diary *Red Roses Every Night* (London: Quality Press, 1948), also describes *This England* (1941) as a 'costume piece' (p68), and connects *Fanny By Gaslight*, *Love Story*, and *Madonna of the Seven Moons* through the theme of tragedy (p72).

<sup>23</sup> See respectively *Snakes and Ladders*, p232, and Kenneth More, *More or Less* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1978), p171.

<sup>24</sup> Ken Russell, *A British Picture: An Autobiography* (London: Heinemann, 1989).



reference to 'the facts.'<sup>25</sup> The implication again is that historical film is 'something different', and that the term is not applicable to all films set in the historical past.<sup>26</sup>

The confidence and eloquence displayed by these writers in discussing their films contrasts strikingly with the particular reluctance of filmmakers to discuss their 'historical' efforts. This disparity may be related to the fact, which I shall discuss at greater length later in my thesis, that so few actors or directors worked consistently in the historical genre.

The impressions gleaned from published memoirs may profitably be compared to those which emerge from a related set of sources – the interview. A particular problem with these sources in the context of my requirements is that, in formal conversation, the interviewee is prone to be even more respectful of the knowledge and film-going experience of an expert interviewer than the autobiographer is of his audience, and is therefore less likely to discuss a film's content or genre. Another difficulty relates to the tendency of interviewers to constrain their subject's

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<sup>25</sup> See for example p26, where he invokes 'the facts' against Huw Weldon, and pp56-7, where they are deployed against a truculent museum attendant. It is perhaps worth pointing out, however, that Russell has an idiosyncratic appreciation of the nature of 'the fact'. He narrates the events of his life in the same brightly coloured and inventive style as the one in which he makes films, and concludes his account of one particular episode by revealing it to be a work of fiction.

<sup>26</sup> In a later book, *Fire Over England* (London: Hutchinson, 1993), Russell expands upon these insights, and broadens his scope from his own films to British cinema in general. He reasserts his view that the biopic is a separate entity (calling it a genre on p75 and illustrating it with reference to *JFK* (1991) and *Gandhi* (1982) on p116), and sketches some of the ways in which it differs from period melodrama. The latter category is distinguished by its kitchness, romance and feathered hats, and good examples of it are the Gainsborough costume cycle of the 1940s (pp54-5), *Howard's End* (1992, p174, 'a period costumer'), and *Tom Jones* (1963, p84, which 'wasn't far removed from the world of *The Wicked Lady*'). Unlike the biopic, the period melodrama also calls upon a 'never-never world' (p56). In chapter XIII (pp110-19) Russell groups together films that have featured the monarchy. In contrast to the sex, romance and morality of the melodrama, he discusses these films

freedom of response with preemptory questions, whilst in some cases the questions posed may be omitted from the author's report of the interview, which makes interpreting the interviewee's replies still more problematic.<sup>27</sup> It is also the case that in the immediacy of the interview situation (particularly if it is being broadcast) answers to questions may be evasive, unconsidered or ill-remembered.

Despite his reservations about the value of such testimony, the historian's instinct to harvest and preserve impels Short to exhort that '[t]he recording of "oral history" through interviewing [those who have worked in cinema] is [. . .] an essential task for today' (p22). Brian McFarlane has followed this injunction, and the most recent result is *An Autobiography of British Cinema*.<sup>28</sup> Though it manifests several of the limitations identified above,<sup>29</sup> this volume can nevertheless help to corroborate and extend the generic map that has emerged so far.

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in terms of authority, spectacle and national identity, and significantly it is only here that history and the notion of historical accuracy come into his account.

<sup>27</sup> Though Charles Drazin writes proudly of the interviews which underpin his book *The Finest Years: British Cinema in the 1940s* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1998), it represents a good example of the way in which selectiveness and a lack of information in the presentation of an interview can vitiate the value of the replies collected.

<sup>28</sup> Brian McFarlane, *An Autobiography of British Cinema, by the Actors and Filmmakers who made it*, (London: Methuen, 1997). The book recycles material which first appeared in the same author's *Sixty Voices: Celebrities Recall the Golden Age of British Cinema* (London: BFI, 1992). He writes in his introduction: 'From this book, I hope a sort of verbal mosaic will emerge, offering a range of insights, not from critical outsiders who have different perceptions to offer, but from those whose knowledge, practical as it must be, is drawn from within.' Such individuals 'might be expected to have insights that are necessarily denied to the critic or theorist' (pxiii).

<sup>29</sup> For example, Stewart Granger is asked: 'How happy were you with those Gainsborough melodramas – *Fanny By Gaslight*, *Madonna of the Seven Moons*, etc?' and 'What do you recall of filming two later lavish costume melodramas in Britain – *Blanche Fury* and *Saraband for Dead Lovers*?' (pp230-1), when it would have been useful to me to hear how Granger would categorize these films himself. Susannah York's perceptions of *A Man for All Seasons* are curbed by a similarly specific question (p623). In addition, McFarlane's personal interest in issues of adaptation (he is the author of *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation* and *Words and Images: Australian Novels into Film*) regularly diverts respondents away from other areas of concern and seems particularly intrusive in interviews with Glenda Jackson and Sally Potter. However, he does try to avoid the problem of hasty or ill-considered answers: 'I operated on the

Phyllis Calvert, one of the stars of *The Man in Grey*, *Fanny By Gaslight*, and *Madonna of the Seven Moons*, describes these films as 'escapist' entertainments for people who 'wanted films to make them forget the war.' Another of her projects, *The Young Mr Pitt* is by contrast understood to be propaganda, and is regarded more seriously (p110).<sup>30</sup> Jean Kent, who also appeared in *Madonna of the Seven Moons*, as well as *Fanny By Gaslight*. *The Wicked Lady* and *The Magic Bow* (1946), remarks that 'Fanny was one of the better Gainsborough melodramas. It's a good story, isn't it? And it has marvelous sets and wonderful clothes' (p339). Stewart Granger refers to his being 'a good costume actor' (p231),<sup>31</sup> and Sylvia Syms remembers of *The Moonraker* (1958): 'I think that, compared with some of the costume dramas coming out of Hollywood at that time, at least we looked right for the period' (p550).

Elsewhere Lewis Gilbert, director of *Reach for the Sky* (1956) and *Sink the Bismark!* (1960), which recount actual episodes of the Second World War, carefully places them in the 'war film' category (p221), though his comments are

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basis that, whatever they said in an interview, they would have the final say over what got published, and I think this produced a freer discussion' (ppxiv-v).

<sup>30</sup> Similarly, a former managing director of one of Rank's subsidiaries opined to Jeffrey Richards in 1984 that Gainsborough 'made no appeal to history or to patriotism or to moral uplift, as Two Cities did. Gainsborough based itself on being a factory production line churning out what the public liked. The basic theme selected by Gainsborough was "kitchen" romance pure and simple . . .' See *Britain Can Take It: The British Cinema in the Second World War* by Jeffrey Richards and Anthony Aldgate (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p160.

<sup>31</sup> James Mason similarly has often referred to his 'costume films' persona. See for example the brief interview in *A Night at the Pictures: Ten Decades of British Film* ed. by Gilbert Adair and Nick Roddick (Bromley: Columbus Books, 1985), p53. In his autobiography, he recurs again to this costume image, and notes of the relative failure of *A Place of One's Own* (1945) that his fans 'wanted me to appear only as some heroic young lady-killer; or better still, lady-basher' (*Before I Forget*, p143).



invited by a rather leading question.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Guy Hamilton identifies *The Colditz Story* (1955) as a war film (p274), and Virginia McKenna does the same with *Carve Her Name With Pride* (1958, p382), while Richard Todd remarks: 'I do think *The Dam Busters* is the best military war picture ever made' (p565). Michael Hordern again refers to his experiences in 'working on epics like *El Cid*' (p308), but still neglects to mention his (much smaller) roles in *Genghis Khan*, *Anne of the Thousand Days*, *Gandhi* and *Lady Jane* (1986). Finally, John Mills agrees that *The Young Mr Pitt* is an historical film (p414). Desmond Tester, who appeared in *Tudor Rose* as Edward VI, suggests that the film is history, but of a poor standard (p552), and Dorothy Tutin recalls the historical accuracy of *Cromwell* (p583).

As with all the evidence to be considered in this chapter, I shall return to the oral testimony of the filmmaking fraternity in later chapters. I shall also refer back to my discussion of the limitations and advantages of this type of evidence in chapter six, where I will be using material from interviews that I have arranged myself.

### c. The Pressbook

A film's press/campaign book would be produced by its distributor, for consumption by cinema managers. It principally contains ideas for the local promotion of the film (a subject which has been largely neglected by film

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<sup>32</sup> McFarlane asks: 'War films tend to dominate 50s British cinema. Why, do you think?'



historians),<sup>33</sup> and as we shall see in later chapters, is a valuable complement to the 'Showmanship' section of *Kine*. Crucially, it can give the historian further intimations of the industry's notion of and attitude toward its products (and also its notion of and attitude toward its public, and the public's habits and ways of thinking and speaking about film).<sup>34</sup> As an advertising resource, it has a distinct advantage over the evidence of *Kine* reviews and autobiographies in that it impacts directly upon the film-going experience, providing and reflecting back at the public some of the key contexts and frames within which a film may be anticipated, interpreted and enjoyed.

However, in order to extend a film's appeal and to secure the greatest possible audience for it, the campaign book will often suggest that the marketing war be waged on multiple fronts, and will typically categorize a film in a flexible and pragmatic way, reflecting the diverse strands and modes (romance, comedy and so on) of which it is composed. Thus *Bonnie Prince Charlie* is variously described in its campaign book as an epic, a romance, a historical epic and an adventure story.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, notes on *The Private Life of Henry VIII* assert that it is to be understood as a historical drama, then that it is not ('Here is no dull historical drama, but a

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<sup>33</sup> In their essay 'Promotional activities and showmanship in British film exhibition' (in *Journal of Popular British Cinema 2: Audiences and Reception in Britain* ed. by Annette Kuhn and Sarah Street), Alan Burton and Steve Chibnall provide an illuminating and entertaining introduction to questions of exhibition, distribution, marketing and the general day-to-day business operations of the trade, and call for further work in the same field (p95).

<sup>34</sup> Francis Maynell, the publicity chief at Gaumont-British, appealed to advertisers in the 1930s for a more respectful attitude toward the intelligence and sophistication of filmgoers. He argued that the most effective method of showmanship 'is to use the sorts of words which average grown-ups of the theatre-going kind use among themselves.' See 'This Publicity Business', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 5, no. 19 (Autumn 1936), pp66-8, p67.

<sup>35</sup> All pressbooks cited in this and later chapters are from the BFI Pressbooks Collection.

lusty, exciting tale of a king and his six wives'). For *The Iron Duke* (1934) and *Becket* (1964), no epithet, category or label is offered at all. The situation is of course complicated by the fact that each manager is invited to select from these rival options (or, in the case of a film like *The Iron Duke*, to improvise his or her own generic descriptions), according to the policy, situation and character of his or her cinema and locality. There is a need for more studies (especially in British cinema) which examine this selection process and the procedures of marketing at a local level.

The particular features of pressbooks mean that they are predominantly used by film historians as quarries of information, and are rarely examined collectively. But it is possible to draw trends from them, and to negotiate a path through the morass of 'ballies' (that is, attention-generating stunts), promotions, pitches and tips. In doing so I have found that the conception of historical film that has emerged from the evidence so far considered – as a coherent, independent genre or type which is seemingly set in the distant past (which is to say, in a period predating the twentieth century), which is rather serious and worthy, and which is concerned with government and royalty – receives further support.

Thus *Anne of the Thousand Days* ('This film is history and entertainment', a 'landmark in the historical feature film') and *Mary, Queen of Scots* (presenting 'a colourful period of British history') for example, are exclusively delineated as historical dramas. Though emphasis is placed also on romance (*Anne of the*

*Thousand Days* is 'a love affair which changed the course of history'; it is 'the flesh and blood of history'), no generic term other than 'historical film' is applied. Similarly, to take an example from thirty years earlier, the campaign book for *Fire Over England* sells the film's romance and its action-adventure elements, but it is also called a 'lavish historical drama', which is 'of great historical interest.' Notably, *Carry On Henry* (1970), which *Kine* understood to be historical in some way, is described as a 'historical romp' and a 'glance back through history'; it is 'history with the lid off.'

From the same period as *Fire Over England*, it is recommended that *Victoria the Great* and *Sixty Glorious Years* be promoted from the 'passion angle'.<sup>36</sup> But still, when a generic term is adduced, it is again 'historical drama', and both films are described with frequent recourse to history, historical significance and the demands and processes of monarchy and the Empire. *Victoria the Great* for example is 'the screen's greatest historical drama', an 'epic historical drama' and a 'historical and romantic drama', in which 'thrilling historical events that shook the world vie with the tender charm of a fascinating love idyll', and '[h]istory's mightiest march of Empire parades in glory on the flaming screen!' Significantly, comparison is also made with *The Private Life of Henry VIII* and Neagle's other 'historical roles', especially as the lead in *Nell Gwyn*.

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<sup>36</sup> The campaign book for *Victoria the Great* contains a number of stories charting the course of Victoria's relationship with the eventual Prince Consort to be 'fed' to the local press (for example, 'Indifferent suitor was Prince Albert'), and an advertisement to be used in cinemas with the splendidly breathy and hyperbolic heading: 'The Majestic box-office story of a girlish Queen who loved like a human and ruled like a goddess!' Similarly, of *Sixty Glorious Years* it is urged that sentiments such as 'Sixty Glorious Years a Queen . . . and every day a woman madly in love!' be given particular prominence.

Lack of space here once more prohibits me from furnishing further examples, of which there are a number. Though the campaign books for *A Man for All Seasons*, *The Lion In Winter*, *Cromwell*, and others are again diverse in their suggestions for exploitation angles, they too show great assurance in assigning historical status to their respective films. In chapter four, I consider other features of the pressbooks for historical films (and certain films of unspecified or seemingly indeterminate genre, such as *The Iron Duke* and *The Private Life of Henry VIII*), including their tendency to dwell upon a film's educational value, the research behind it, and the accuracy of its re-creations.

With the campaign books for the 'historical' film, compare the one for *A Night To Remember*, for example, which despite a relatively lengthy disquisition on the accuracy of the film, never describes it as anything other than a 'true story'. Similarly, amongst the promotional notes for *The First of the Few* (1942) are a biography of R. J. Mitchell and a digest of relevant aviation history, but this consciousness of the historical importance of Mitchell and the Spitfire never extends to the use of the term 'historical film'. Instead, cinema managers are advised that the film is a 'human story' ('The Greatest Human Story Ever Told', in fact), and enjoined to sell it as such.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Interestingly, the reader is also informed that *The First of the Few* is 'not a war film'. Box-office figures and audience surveys carried out by Mass-Observation (a source that I shall come to later in this chapter) suggest that the war film was an increasingly less popular genre as the war progressed.



Finally, though the campaign book for *The Wicked Lady* again boasts of a painstaking reconstruction of Restoration interiors and costumes, the posters it advertises trade purely in images of passion and calamity, with legends which emphasize excitement, villainy and intrigue. Lockwood and Mason are 'thrown together in mad adventure'; 'their reckless guns and ruthless lips met for danger!', setting the screen 'ablaze with violent love . . . and love of violence.' Similarly, press stories assert the film's themes to be 'murder, gold and reckless romance on the danger-filled highroads of Restoration England', and repeatedly refer to the film as a 'Restoration romance' or a 'seventeenth-century drama' (and on one occasion, as an 'escape movie'). James Mason is also styled: 'Britain's gift to the romantic film.' Unsurprisingly, in view of these rather unedifying discourses, there is no attempt to attract the particular patronage of schools or teachers.

## **2. The Press**

It is extremely difficult to determine whether critical discourse on the cinema has significantly affected film-going behaviour, and it is dangerous to assert a correlation between this discourse and 'public taste'. However, like advertising discourse, critical discourse has an 'agenda setting' function, establishing and revealing to the historian the vocabulary and interpretative frames in use at a given moment. As Janet Staiger argues, film reviews may also suggest how these frames

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See *Mass-Observation at the Movies* ed. by Jeffrey Richards and Dorothy Sheridan (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), pp14-15.

have been prioritized,<sup>38</sup> but this kind of detail exceeds the limits of my purpose in this section. I again have three basic desiderata: to establish the 'historical film' as one frame that has been felt to be useful and significant in interpreting films; to ascertain which films constitute the frame; and to uncover the press's perspectives regarding the genre's position in relation to other genres. In chapters four, five and six my analysis of reviews and other journalistic materials will be more intricate, as I examine the implications of using the historical film as an interpretative frame and tackle the question of the genre's history and development.

For the present, to reveal some impression of the range of what lies buried in newspaper and magazine archives, I have elected to dig three separate trenches. My first case-study will focus on a particular (broadsheet) critic, the second on a particular 'high-brow' publication that specializes in cinema, and the third on a diversity of popular 'low- and middle-brow' writing, as collected around the career of a particular star.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films*, p90. For a demonstration of this principle, using the example of *Rear Window*, see pp81-95.

<sup>39</sup> The low/middle/highbrow distinction is one used by Sue Harper. She writes: 'This terminology does not, of course, exactly correspond to social distinctions between the upper, middle and lower classes, nor to political orientation. It has to do with status, intellectual pretensions, and definitions of culture'. See *Picturing the Past*, p56. A potential fourth investigation related to magazines produced by individual cinemas and circulating locally. Writing in *Kine Weekly* in the 1930s, S. H. Hope advocated the adoption of this practice at all cinemas (22 March 1934, p60), and though it is impossible to say how many such publications existed, they may have had a significant impact on the expectations and generic mindset of many filmgoers. I once edited a cinema's in-house magazine, and found that what my readership wanted above all else was a simple answer to the question: 'What kind of film is it?' I determined not to pursue such an inquiry mainly because of the difficulties of locating ephemera of this type in substantial quantities. Another reason is that I suspect the terms used in this context would not have diverged significantly from those used in trade papers like *Kine Weekly*, though in this matter local research of the kind I proposed above might prove me wrong.

### a. Dilys Powell

I have settled upon Dilys Powell as the subject for my first case-study for a number of reasons. Firstly, as Brian McFarlane observes in his brief biography of her: 'Her long life [1901-1995] overlaps almost the entire history of the cinema, and no other critic could match her overview of its developments.'<sup>40</sup> Moreover, her weekly column at the *Sunday Times* ran from 1939 until 1976, and thus encompasses the period with which I am currently concerned. As a serious film critic with a passion for film, 'her work helps us to understand the cultural context in which cinema was viewed . . .'<sup>41</sup> She has also been massively influential; as a subheading in Dirk Bogarde's obituary of her avers: 'Nobody's opinion was as important as hers.'<sup>42</sup> A 1963 survey suggested that filmgoers read Sunday newspaper reviews more often than those in any other type of publication,<sup>43</sup> and it is arguable that 'our present sense of which films are significant in the history of the cinema has to a great extent been determined by reviewers like Powell.'<sup>44</sup> Finally, Powell's reviews featured what Christopher Cook has called a 'democratic spirit' (px), a conversational style which encouraged the reader to think about film for him- or herself. In addition to her avowed intention to do justice to each film, and to

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<sup>40</sup> *An Autobiography of British Cinema*, p462.

<sup>41</sup> Christopher Cook, 'Preface', in *The Dilys Powell Film Reader* ed. by Christopher Cook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pxiii.

<sup>42</sup> 'Dilys: a lifetime's love for the cinema', *Sunday Times*, 4 June 1995, p2.

<sup>43</sup> *Cinema-going in Greater London 1963: A Study of Attitudes and Behaviour* (London: Federation of British Film Makers, August 1963). See especially p42. The same survey indicates that reviews were as important as posters and other advertising in creating interest and expectation (see Table 2.6c and p41), and this tends to justify my decision to devote a whole subsection of this chapter to consideration of the press. However, by 1963, cinema at large was in the midst of dramatic change, and the survey therefore does not lend itself well to temporal generalization.

<sup>44</sup> 'Preface', in *The Dilys Powell Film Reader*, pxi.

represent it fairly and precisely, this means that she is attentive to typology and quick to draw comparisons with similar texts.<sup>45</sup>

To take up where I left off in my discussion of the pressbook, Powell understood the Gainsborough costume cycle to be constituted by 'cheaply romantic costume pieces'<sup>46</sup> and significantly her swingeing appraisal of *The Wicked Lady* makes no allusion to history or the historical film:

Highwaymen, doxies, poisoned cordials, Tyburn hangings with song, dance and huzzah – the hoary, the tedious and the disagreeable are married with an infelicity rare even in costume.<sup>47</sup>

*Idol of Paris* (*Sunday Times*, 7 March 1948, p2) was described with similar reference to sex, romance and its incident-packed narrative, and *Fanny By Gaslight* characterized as a 'romance for schoolgirls.'<sup>48</sup>

Compare this with Powell's review of *Cromwell* (*Sunday Times*, 19 July 1970, p21), which provides a (somewhat facetious) summary of the historical film's essential elements:

With the British historical cinema – cinema, that is, about some character or some episode in history – one usually knows what to expect. There will be a hard-trying, basically honourable central figure, probably some battles, and one or two illustrations of the popular British historical sport of decapitation.

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<sup>45</sup> See her article, 'Credo of a Critic', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 10, no. 38 (Summer 1941), pp26-7.

<sup>46</sup> *Films Since 1939* (London: Longmans, Green and Co./British Council, 1948), p36.

<sup>47</sup> Dilys Powell, 'The Wicked Lady' (1941), reprinted in *The Golden Screen* ed. by George Perry (London: Pavilion Books, 1989), p54.



Powell also notes: 'The popular cinema is no place for revolutionary interpretations of history', and argues *Cromwell* to be an informative lesson in the issues of government at the time of the civil war, which is also 'okay for national self-esteem.' *Anne of the Thousand Days*, *A Man for All Seasons* and *The Lion in Winter* are added to the genre in another review of the same year (*Sunday Times*, 1 March 1970, p58), where the author again laments the predictability of historical film, and adds that 'nasty patches of history are the material of cinema . . .' She also discusses the centrality of politics, royalty and the succession to *Anne of the Thousand Days*, and admires the authentic detail of its *mise-en-scène*. I shall return to the implication that British historical films are different to those produced by other nations in chapter four.

With Powell's sense of the themes, images and expectations central to the historical genre, compare again the following paragraph on *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and the biblical epic. For all the scholarship supposedly invested in DeMille's production, it nevertheless was sure to incorporate:

the usual bath, with water-throwing and girlish squeals; the usual whipping (poor Joshua, bounding to the rescue of an unfortunate virgin, is nearly cut to bits); and the usual orgy, with a dark mass of extras flailing around the Golden Calf and the more athletic swinging the girls around by any limb which offers.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> *Films Since 1939*, p36.

<sup>49</sup> *The Dilys Powell Film Reader*, p305, review dated December 1957.

*The Robe* is located within the same category,<sup>50</sup> as is *Ben Hur*,<sup>51</sup> *King of Kings* (1961), *Samson and Delilah* (1949), *Solomon and Sheba* (1959), *Barabbas* (1962), and *The Sign of the Cross*.<sup>52</sup>

Powell also implicitly distinguishes between the historical film and another 'historical' type, namely the biopic. In 1939 she cavilled at the inaccuracies of *Nurse Edith Cavell* ('This is after all a biographical film,' she writes; 'Why not, then, show Edith Cavell as she really was?')<sup>53</sup>, and thirty-four years on, ascribed *Lady Sings The Blues* to the same category.<sup>54</sup> The latter review is another which usefully elaborates on the generic frame that is being applied. It begins:

Somehow it always comes out much the same. There are the humble beginnings in small-town society or in the poor Jewish family; there is the conviction, shared by nobody, of potential talent; then the move, if a journey is necessary, to New York; snubs, struggles, disappointments, followed by the lucky break [...] Fame! But frailty intervenes, love intervenes. The domestic partner feels out of things; the marriage cracks up, there is the resort to the bottle, the failure of inspiration, life slumped in a garret. But in the biopic, as the biographical picture has come to be called, there is still hope, there is regeneration . . . (pp317-8).

Studies of Eddie Cantor and Al Jolson, Grace Moore and Gertrude Lawrence, Zeigfeld and George M. Cohan, Cole Porter and Fanny Brice, and Tchaikovsky, Chopin, Liszt and Wagner are cited as further instances of 'showbiz biopics'. Later

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p302, review dated November 1953.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p306, review dated December 1959.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., pp307-8, review dated November 1961.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p314.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., pp317-9, review dated April 1973.

in the same piece, various other titles are ascribed to the biopic category as Powell ponders the genre's development:

Looking back, I recognize various phases of biography on the screen. Reformers were once favourably received; you may remember Spencer Tracy in *Boy's Town*. Inventors had a run. Don Ameche, playing Alexander Graham Bell, invented the telephone. Mickey Rooney as Young Tom Edison began the career which was to be carried on in *Edison the Man* by guess who? Spencer Tracy. (The great Tracy must have had peculiar affinities with biography, for he was an explorer too: remember Stanley and Livingstone?) And scientists – I miss the scientists . . . (p318).

*Madame Curie*, *The Story of Louis Pasteur* (1935) and *Dr Ehrlich's Magic Bullet* (1940) are offered as exemplars of the scientist strand, whilst *Patton* (1970) and *Young Winston* (1972) (soldier biopics), *Moulin Rouge*, *Savage Messiah* (1972) and *Lust for Life* (1956) (painter biopics), and *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* (1960) and *Lady Caroline Lamb* (1973) (author biopics) are also mentioned.<sup>55</sup>

In summary, though Powell is often concerned with American rather than British films, the 'historical film' can again be seen as a distinct constituency of films set in the historical past. Extrapolating from all the Powell reviews I consulted, it is

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<sup>55</sup> More of Powell's thoughts on the biopic can be found in her reviews of *They Flew Alone* (*Sunday Times* 24 May 1942, p2) and *The Magic Box* (*Sunday Times*, 16 September 1951, p2). In connection with the former film, she debates the 'aesthetic propriety' of 'films about people still living or recently dead'; 'Can a director make a first-rate film about a living character? Perhaps, if the character is well enough masked to escape the libel laws and skirt the ground of personal sensibility. But can he openly present a living public figure and dare to make it a living human figure?' She concludes that Wilcox's film 'is not and could not be successful. Society as it is now constituted cannot allow the employment of the whole truth in the biography of a contemporary; and without at least the possibility of handling and interpreting the truth a good film is unattainable.' (See also the column dated 23 April 1942, p2, in which similar ideas are applied to *The First of the Few*). Powell's appraisal of *The Magic Box* is interesting for a distinction which broadly divides biographical pictures into two groups: 'There is the Hollywood way, all love-story, drama and boom-boom. There is the way which depends on the study of character. "The Magic Box" mixes the two.'



less recent and perhaps less optimistic than the biopic, more intimate than the epic, more serious and intelligent than the costume drama. Above all its themes are different, being those of government, royalty and the nation.

### b. Sight and Sound

With regard to its identifications of and attitudes towards historical film, *Sight and Sound* is divisible into two distinct periods. The first extends from the inception of the magazine in 1934 to roughly the end of the Second World War, and is characterized by an enduring debate (conducted in terms similar to those explored in chapter one) concerning the educational properties of historical feature films. Participants in this debate regularly specified *Victoria the Great*, *Fire Over England*, *The Private Life of Henry VIII* and *The Young Mr Pitt* as historical films,<sup>56</sup> while *Lady Hamilton*, *Rhodes of Africa* (1936), *Tudor Rose* and *Mary of Scotland* (1936) were advanced as further examples.<sup>57</sup> Such films are explicitly distinguished from educational or documentary film-making on historical

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<sup>56</sup> See for instance R. S. Miles, 'Topical Topics,' vol. 8, no. 32 (Winter 1939/40), pp138-9, p138 ('producers apparently regard History films necessarily as replicas of such films as *Henry VIII* or *Victoria the Great*'); 'Historical Entertainment Films,' vol. 6, no. 21 (Spring 1937), p2; Rachel Reid, 'The Young Mr Pitt,' vol. 11, no. 42 (Autumn 1942), pp50-1, p51; and Evelyn Russell, 'This Quarter's Films,' vol. 11, no. 42 (Autumn 1942), pp41-4, p42 (*The Young Mr Pitt* being 'the finest historical film we have made').

<sup>57</sup> See respectively for example Rachel Reid, 'Lady Hamilton', vol. 10, no. 39 (Autumn 1941), p54; Alistair Cooke, 'Films of the Quarter', vol. 5, no. 17 (Spring 1936), pp22-5, p25; Alexander Mackay, 'Primary Schools and Films', vol. 7, no. 25 (Spring 1938), p45 (listed alongside *Henry VIII* and *Rhodes of Africa*); and James Laver, 'Dates and Dresses', vol. 8, no. 30 (Summer 1939), pp50-1, p51. Other writers disclosed a sense of the 'essence' of historical film. For example, in discussing the modifications that might render theatrical releases more useful to teachers, Elizabeth Cross appealed for a break with the usual stories of Kings, Queens, great personalities, battles and events See 'Historical Films', vol. 8, no. 31 (Autumn 1939), pp123-4, p123.



subjects,<sup>58</sup> and are implicitly differentiated from a mass of other popular titles, which are allocated to a range of alternative genres and categories. Thus for example *Lloyds of London* (1936) was described as a 'costume piece', *Buccaneer* (1938) and *In Old Chicago* (1938) as epics, *Captain Blood* (1935) as a 'sword and cloak film', and *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1935) as a melodrama.<sup>59</sup> In one interesting piece, which understood *Victoria the Great* to be historical, that film was set apart from *The Story of Louis Pasteur*, *The Life of Emile Zola* (1937) and *Parnell* (1937), which were collected under the heading 'biography'.<sup>60</sup>

The later of my two periods begins as the educational controversy recedes from prominence, to be replaced by other preoccupations and issues. One developing interest was in the new European cinema and its exponents, and this helped to force British historical films, increasingly perceived as the hidebound embodiment of British cinema's many inadequacies, further down the critical agenda. When *Alfred the Great* (1969) was described as an 'excursion into Dark Ages Cinema' (vol. 38,

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<sup>58</sup> Thus H. L. Beales and R. S. Lambert discussed the educational possibilities of *Medieval Village*, which used 'historical survivals and documents as they exist today instead of the reconstruction of historical places and the costume dramatization of historical events and characters' familiar from mainstream historicals ('Living History', vol. 5, no. 18 (Summer 1936), pp18-20, p18). In a later issue, reviewing a report by The History Committee of the Education Panel of the BFI, Beales was less guarded in arguing that 'the historical entertainment film is not history.' He sees brighter prospects for the shorter and plainer 'Teaching Film.' See 'A Report on History Teaching Films', vol. 6, no. 21 (Spring 1937), p43.

<sup>59</sup> See respectively Alan Page, 'Penny Plain – Ninepence Coloured: Films of the Quarter Reviewed', vol. 6, no. 22 (Summer 1937), pp78-82, p80; Alan Page, 'Snow White and Fiery Red: Entertainment Films Reviewed', vol. 7, no. 25 (Spring 1938), pp22-3, p23; Alan Page, 'The Old Lamps Burn Brightly: The Quarters Revivals and a Few New Films', vol. 7, no. 26 (Summer 1938), pp84-5, p85; Alistair Cooke, 'Films of the Quarter', vol. 4, no. 13 (Spring 1935), pp16-9, p17.

<sup>60</sup> Graham Greene, 'Movie Parade, 1937', vol. 6, no. 24 (Winter 1937/8), pp206-7, p206. Other films understood to be biographical include *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* (1940) and *Dr Ehrlich's Magic Bullet* (1940) (the latter being said to follow the pattern of *The Story of Louis Pasteur* (1936)). See Herman G. Weinberg, 'An Honest Film', vol. 9, no. 33 (Spring 1940), pp14-5, p14. See also John Marks, 'Films of the Quarter', vol. 5, no. 19 (Autumn 1936), pp78-82, p79, which describes *The Great Zeigfeld* as a biography.

no. 4 (Autumn 1969), p220), the reviewer was probably speaking culturally and artistically as well as historically, and a film such as *Anne of the Thousand Days* might be cursorily dismissed as '[a]rmchair history at its most padded' (vol. 39, no. 2 (Spring 1970), p112). In a climate of such uninterest, a title designated historical by *Kine Weekly* or Dilys Powell might pass without enlightening comment.

On the rare occasion of a sustained discussion of a film elsewhere understood to be historical, there is also an apparent tendency to eschew the denomination 'historical film'. In preference, *Sight and Sound*'s reviewers delineate and discuss the film's historical elements and perspectives, the facts upon which it is based, and the sources from which it is derived. Thus for example Brenda Davies expounded upon the 'historical hindsight' of characters in *The Lion in Winter*, its technique of 'cutting history down to size', and its representation of medieval castle life, whilst also comparing O'Toole's performance to the real Henry II and Goldman's play to Shaw's 'historical comedies' (vol. 38, no. 1 (Winter 1968/9), p44). The same practice is evident in articles on a variety of other films, including *The Four Musketeers* (1975), *Viva Zapata!* (1952), *All the President's Men* (1976), *Little Big Man* (1970) and *Young Winston*.<sup>61</sup> The overall impression, in the absence of established generic terminology, is that the historical category has been either dissolved or massively expanded.

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<sup>61</sup> See respectively Geoff Brown, 'The Four Musketeers', vol. 44, no. 2 (Spring 1975), pp124-5; Catherine de la Roche, 'Viva Zapata!', vol. 21, no. 4 (April-June 1952), p170; Richard Combs, 'All The President's Men', vol. 45, no. 3 (Summer 1976), pp189-90; Philip French, 'Little Big Man',

It is important to note of this second period that contributors are generally reticent in applying generic frames of reference. This can be interpreted as a product differentiation strategy, as the magazine sought to distance itself from more utilitarian or populist journalism, such as the reviews in *Kine Weekly* or those by Powell in the *Sunday Times*, with pieces of a more theoretical and analytical bent.<sup>62</sup> *Sight and Sound*'s reviews also now become much longer than the rather desultory 'Films of the Quarter' round-ups of the first period, and reviewers may have felt less obliged to rely on the convenient shorthand of generic typology. Nevertheless, in the brief listings pages, terms such as epic/spectacle, war film, Western, costume drama, romantic comedy and thriller continued to be used. It is also notable that the 'biography' (or 'biopic') retained the strong sense of identity that it had in the '30s and '40s, incorporating such titles as *The Great Caruso* (1951), *Houdini* (1953), *Reach for the Sky, Star!* (1968), *Song of Norway* (1970), *Valentino* (1977) and *The Elephant Man* (1980).<sup>63</sup> The failure of historical film to appear in these listings<sup>64</sup> does seem to mark it as a category which had come to attract serious 'highbrow' reservations and doubts as to its generic status.

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vol. 40, no. 2 (Spring 1971), pp102-3; and Penelope Houston, 'Young Winston', vol. 41, no. 4 (Autumn 1972), p232.

<sup>62</sup> *Sight and Sound* has always had a firm notion of its place in film publishing. For Darrel Catling in 1940, for example, there were 'fan magazines', 'trade papers' and 'technical-cum-artistic' journals, the latter category embracing the short-lived *Close-Up* and *Cinema Quarterly* as well as *Sight and Sound*. See 'Ourselves and Our Contemporaries', vol. 9, no. 33 (Spring 1940), pp16-7, p16.

<sup>63</sup> Again respectively, see vol. 20, no. 2 (June 1951), p34; vol. 23, no. 3 (January-March 1954), p118 (where *Puccini* is also described as a biography); vol. 26, no. 25 (Autumn 1956), pp97-8, p97; vol. 37, no. 4 (Autumn 1968), p216; vol. 40, no. 2 (Spring 1971), p116; vol. 47, no. 1 (Winter 1977-8), p66; and vol. 49, no. 4 (Autumn 1980), p276.

<sup>64</sup> Formulations such as 'account of . . .', 'lesson in . . .', 'episode from . . .', or 'version of . . .' are employed where one might (on the basis of information from other sources) have anticipated something firmer. See for example *Khartoum* in 'Film Guide', vol. 35, no 3 (Summer 1966), p156; *The Black Shield of Falworth* in 'A Guide to Current Films', vol. 24, no. 2 (October-December 1954), pii; *The Devils* in 'Film Guide', vol. 40, no. 4 (Autumn 1971), p232; and *Becket* in 'A Guide to Current Films', vol. 33, no. 3, (Summer 1964), p158.



### c. Responses in the Popular Press to the Films of Robert Donat

My final case-study is an attempt firstly to provide a wide-ranging complement to my sharply-defined inquiries into *Sight and Sound* and Dilys Powell, and secondly to explore a range of less exalted criticisms.<sup>65</sup> While many of the writers considered in the 'Memoirs and Autobiographies' section of this chapter might have served as a means of focussing this investigation, and though his career was curtailed by illness long before the end of the period which concerns me at present, Robert Donat was the most appealing choice. One reason for this is that he appeared in films which seem to encompass several of the types identified in previous sources, and indeed in films specifically designated as historical.<sup>66</sup> Thus this section represents an opportunity to test some of the generic distinctions and individual categorizations observed so far. Donat is also the subject of a newly-opened archive at the John Rylands library in Manchester, which in addition to a wealth of unpublished letters, scripts and photographs, contains a comprehensive cuttings collection.<sup>67</sup> On the whole, the Donat-related news and reviews carried by fanzines, and tabloid and local newspapers reinforce the taxonomy which has been emerging.

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<sup>65</sup> In pursuing these aims, I have taken regional and local newspapers into account; as the *Cinema-going in Greater London 1963* survey suggests, press other than the national dailies and Sunday newspapers might have a substantial impact on filmgoers. See especially p40: 'for the great majority of cinema goers who do not form their ideas about a film and the desirability of seeing it until shortly before they are likely to see it, the national press is of much less importance than the local press.'

<sup>66</sup> See Kenneth Barrow's *Mr Chips: The Life of Robert Donat* (London: Methuen, 1985), pp74, 79, where Donat is quoted expressing his intention to avoid being confined to any particular type of film or role.

<sup>67</sup> I have cited only those cuttings for which a clear provenance and date has been furnished. Page numbers are seldom included in the collection, and consequently do not appear in my own references.



*The Young Mr Pitt* for example is unambiguously described as historical in the majority of the publications consulted, including the *Daily Mirror* (3 July 1942) and the *Star* (4 July 1942), the *Evening News* (a 'graphic reconstruction of history', 3 July 1942), *What's On* (3 July 1942), and the *Wiltshire Times* ('one of the most spectacular, appealing and authentic historical dramas yet offered', reviewing a reissue, 26 February 1944).<sup>68</sup> Significantly, with a view to comments I shall make about American historical cinema in chapter five, transAtlantic criticism of *The Young Mr Pitt* often identified it as a biographical study.<sup>69</sup>

By contrast to *The Young Mr Pitt*, *Captain Boycott* (1947), which also features an eponymous historical personage, was variously understood in Britain to be an 'unusual drama' (*Pictureshow*, 1 November 1947), a 'thrilling adventure' (*Daily Sketch*, 29 August 1947), a melodrama, (*News of the World*, 31 August 1947), and even, with reference to its rolling vistas, horse chases, fist fights and rather unclouded sense of morality, an English Western (see for example the *Star*, 29 August 1947). The *Glasgow Evening News* (15 November 1947) declined to nominate a genre, but was emphatic that the film could not be considered

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<sup>68</sup> Significantly, in both the *Nottingham Journal* and the *Birmingham Gazette*, a syndicated Molly Hobman review of 4 July 1942 referred to the film as 'a study of' Pitt but explicitly stated that the film is *not* biography, rather an exercise in historical reconstruction and in the drawing of historical parallels. All of the *Young Mr Pitt* articles I have quoted are contained in The Robert Donat Special Collection, Other Cuttings Books, Item 37: Film Cuttings, *Goodbye Mr Chips*, *The Young Mr Pitt*, *Adventures of Tartu*, *The 39 Steps*, 1939-52.

<sup>69</sup> See for example the *San Francisco News*, 22 March 1943, which describes the film as the 'life story of [the] famed British Prime Minister.' The *San Diego Tribune Sun* (24 March 1943) and the *Salt Lake City Tribune* (20 March 1943) categorize it in a similar way, and the *Los Angeles Examiner* of 25 March 1943 compares it unfavourably to 'our American biographies.' The *Portland Journal* (22 March 1943) describes it as a 'historical feature' which is also a 'biography of William Pitt.'

historical.<sup>70</sup> Donat's involvement in the film was confined to a much-lauded three minute cameo as Charles Stuart Parnell, and in the rare review which (though avoiding the term 'historical film') did feel the film to be 'a chapter of history' (the *Manchester Evening Chronicle* for 27 September 1947 being an example), his performance is very much to the fore. It is also notable that where Dilys Powell and Caroline Lejeune steer clear of any generic terminology,<sup>71</sup> popular reviews, which are often much shorter, apply them freely. For example, the *Daily Herald's* evaluation (24 October 1947) reads: 'Racy, well-flavoured melodrama of 1880 Irish isolation; well acted.' The first four words of this review appear to be a matter of linguistic economy, quickly and securely establishing what one might generally expect of the film before moving on to other salient points.

Finally, over more than a year of extensive coverage, *The Magic Box* was consistently understood to be a further manifestation of the biographical genre, and was described in terms congruent with those used in *Kine* and *Sight and Sound*, in the criticism of Dilys Powell and elsewhere. Thus Maud Hughes in *Picture Show* summarized it as '[t]he film version of Ray Allister's biography' and outlined the course of Friese-Greene's achievements and vicissitudes (13 October 1951), whilst the *Manchester Evening Chronicle* termed it a 'screen biography' (9 September 1952) and *To-day's Cinema* baldly began its review with the one-word sentence 'Biography' (13 September 1951).

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<sup>70</sup> All *Captain Boycott* material can be found in The Robert Donat Special Collection, Other Cuttings Books, Item 19: 'Captain Boycott, 1947'.

The popular press was equally reliant on the term 'biographical picture' when discussing news from the set and reporting on promotional activities in anticipation of *The Magic Box's* release. The *Daily Mail* for example telegraphically informed its readers: 'Time will slip back 60 years in Albermarle Street, Piccadilly, tomorrow morning. Police will rope off 100 yards of it to allow film cameras to record the scene as it would have looked in 1890. The result will appear in "The Magic Box", a biography of William Friese-Greene, pioneer of cinematography' (2 June 1951). This trend perhaps relates to the fact that, as in the case of popular reviews, such articles are typically brief and to the point. In comparatively complex and detailed news items, the terminology remained the same, but featured far less prominently. In *Picturegoer* (a magazine for enthusiasts who in fact were surely cognizant of such a prestigious project as *The Magic Box*), lengthy interviews and reports pertaining to the film almost always included a reminder of the film's generic mark, but did so unobtrusively.<sup>72</sup> Only in the weeks immediately prior to the film's premiere did the generic epithet fall out of favour, the nature of the film presumably now being considered a matter of familiarity to consumers of showbiz gossip and industry hype. At this juncture *The Magic Box* is often only described as

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<sup>71</sup> Their reviews appear in the *Sunday Times* and the *Observer* (both 31 August 1947) respectively. Each prefers to tease apart the film's fabric, dwelling upon its various story-lines, its performances, its use of scenery, and its basis in and apparent attitude towards certain facts and features of the past.

<sup>72</sup> See for instance the edition of 2 June 1951, which recounts the meteorological obstacles to completion of the final scene of the shooting schedule. Three paragraphs into the article, in an aside, the film is characterized as 'the story of movie pioneer William Friese-Greene.' Even several months into its run, an article on its box-office prospects retained memory-jogging references to the film as a commemorative 'life of'/'life story' (19 January 1952). This tendency toward repeated reiteration of the film's character and type may be an early symptom of the magazine's declining circulation and increasing confusion about who would be reading and whom it was supposed to be aimed at, features which define the years prior to its demise in April 1960. See Bob Baker's 'Picturegoes', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 54, no. 3 (Summer 1985), pp206-9.

‘the Festival Film’, though the generic term regains its currency in the film’s reviews.<sup>73</sup>

Part of the explanation for this critical consensus is perhaps to be found in the numerous press releases issued by the all-industry company behind *The Magic Box*.<sup>74</sup> However, it is also true that across the range of industrial and journalistic sources studied in this chapter, the biopic has seemed to be an especially recognizable and coherent subsection of films set in the past.

### 3. Audience Surveys

Addressing the history and historiography of movie-going, Allen and Gomery write: ‘Although the social historian cannot poll movie audiences from the 1930s [for example], he or she can make use of sociological, statistical, marketing, and demographical data collected at that time. Such sources can provide the historian with evidence that is otherwise unobtainable, but the quality of these data as historical evidence depends on the rigor with which the original studies were conducted, their ostensible purpose, and the questions the historian asks of the data.’<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Examples include the *Manchester Evening News* of 6 September 1951; *Gloucester Echo* of 15 September 1951; *Daily Graphic* of 19 September 1951; and *News of the World*, 16 September 1951.

<sup>74</sup> An example dated 12 February 1951 characterizes the film as ‘the special Festival Film based on the life story of movie inventor William Friese-Greene’ (Robert Donat Special Collection, Miscellaneous Papers, Item 5: ‘Press Release, 1951’).

<sup>75</sup> Allen and Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice*, p157.



The research conducted into film audiences of the 1930s and '40s by Mass-Observation is the first of the two collections I have chosen for discussion in this chapter. As Jeffrey Richards and Dorothy Sheridan, who have worked on this material, have warned, it can be highly impressionistic, and was gathered by a self-selected group, in many cases culturally and intellectually remote from the subjects being studied.<sup>76</sup> There are fewer methodological problems with J. P. Mayer's inquiries into audience preferences and film-going habits, conducted through competitions advertised in *Filmgoer* magazine.<sup>77</sup> As a professional sociologist, Mayer is acutely aware of the potential difficulties of this type of research,<sup>78</sup> and the questions he puts are rather more general than those formulated by Mass-Observation, being in fact more in the manner of suggested topics. He also helpfully spells out some of the limitations of his sources for those seeking to make generalizations.<sup>79</sup> It is significant that the documents included in the book were selected by Mayer from a much larger number of responses; in all, 110 from 400

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<sup>76</sup> See *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, pp1-18, p221. On the methodological limitations of Mass-Observation, see also Mark Abrams, *Social Surveys and Social Action* (London: William Heinemann, 1951), pp105-115, and for an excellent overview of the origins and development of the organization, the contents of the Mass-Observation archive and other publications relating to Mass-Observation, *Speak for Yourself: A Mass-Observation Anthology, 1937-49* ed. by Angus Calder and Dorothy Sheridan (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984), pp1-6, 246-259.

<sup>77</sup> For the sake of space, I shall be concerned here only with the later of these researches, published in *British Cinemas and their Audiences* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1948), constituting two separate investigations entitled 'Films and the Pattern of Life' and 'A Study in Film Preferences'. The book is compared in its preface to Mayer's earlier *Sociology of Film*: 'From the author's point of view the present work is more mature, less groping with a new and difficult subject-matter.' His first book was 'to some extent a personal experiment in sociology, whereas the present volume ventures to present its problems more objectively' (p1).

<sup>78</sup> For example, in the advertisement which initiated his research into 'Films and the Pattern of Life', he urged respondents to 'be truthful and frank, and not to feel any restraint in writing fully about [...] intimate personal experiences' (p14).

<sup>79</sup> He recognizes for example that the 'autobiographers' of the first survey do not constitute a representative sample of cinema-goers, the majority of documents being 'contributed by clerks and other "black-coated" workers, and only 10 per cent by members of the proletarian working class' (p144). However, he notes approvingly that they are geographically diverse, with only five per cent coming from the Greater London area (ibid.).

(p2). But amongst his chosen entries I can detect no overarching scheme or covert political aim.<sup>80</sup> Nor can I find any evidence of the 'hearty dislike of popular historical films' which Harper imputes to him.<sup>81</sup>

As Janet Staiger writes: 'reception studies research cannot claim to say as much about an actual reading or viewing experience by empirical readers or spectators as it might like. Several factors intervene between the event and any possible service data available for its study'.<sup>82</sup> In addition to the various selections, reorganizations, curtailments and assessments made by Mass-Observation and Mayer, the mediating presence of language is especially pertinent here, as respondents may lack the fluent prose of a reviewer or actor, and might struggle to express their thoughts with precision. But together the two resources I have considered provide a rare and valuable (if very incomplete) sense of which films were popularly thought to be historical in the periods they cover, and in later chapters I will show that the insights they have to offer are supported by other sources, including letters to fanzines, the Bernstein film questionnaires, and the *Cinemagoing in Greater*

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<sup>80</sup> He asserts that preference respondents were chosen purely 'to obtain the largest amount of variation' (p154), but is evasive about the principles of selection behind the autobiographies survey. In general, he 'did not want to burden this book with methodological reflections' (p2). However, he also states of the autobiographies: '[i]t is not our intention to drive home a specific point' (p15). In his conclusion to the preferences survey he writes of 'the hope of raising film taste' (p243) and the need for 'a leading and responsible elite' to take action (p244) in 'regulating the mental and moral health' of the community (p250). But these perspectives do not seem to have influenced his selection of documents (they by no means all support this conclusion), nor the initial, very neutral question asked ('He wants to know the films you like and dislike, and wants you to give reasons for your likes and dislikes', p154). Finally, though his material does largely support his assertion of the relevance of Aristotelian catharsis to modern cultural matters (see pp148-150, and pp240-243), there is no reason for suspecting that this demonstrates anything more than Mayer's astuteness in choosing interpretative models. His analysis may thus be seen as a good piece of middle-level research.

<sup>81</sup> See *Picturing the Past*, p136.

<sup>82</sup> See *Interpreting Films*, p79.

*London* survey of 1963. The latter is particularly welcome as a counterbalance to the concentration of this type of evidence in the 1940s, providing a clear indication that the category 'historical film' was still perceived as a meaningful and independent one.<sup>83</sup> In due course, I shall also refer to material generated by the recent 'Cinema Culture in 1930s Britain' research project, a different kind of survey to the ones I shall consider in the present chapter, and one which, though revealing, entails its own particular set of evidentiary problems.<sup>84</sup>

#### a. The Historical Film as Revealed by Mass-Observation

In Mass-Observation's Bolton Survey, dated 1938, historical film received a high popularity rating relative to other types.<sup>85</sup> The limited range of alternatives offered in the comparative popularity question might have led respondents to include a range of genres under the 'historical' heading.<sup>86</sup> But in the comments invited at the

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<sup>83</sup> The survey found that 'people automatically classify films into types' (pp61-2). Respondents were able to distinguish historical films from Biblical films, war stories and Westerns (see p64, Table 3.8a, and the methodological note on p62).

<sup>84</sup> Cinema Culture in 1930s Britain: Ethnohistory of a Popular Cultural Practice, ESRC Project R000235385, directed by Annette Kuhn, Department of Theatre, Film and Television Studies, University of Glasgow. Some of the weaknesses of oral testimony as a source for history can be seen in the most recent publication to come from the project, where one 78 year-old interviewee is at times hazy and incoherent, and prone to misremember details. See Annette Kuhn, 'Memories of Cinema-going in the 1930s', in *Journal of Popular British Cinema 2: Audiences and Reception in Britain*, especially pp102 and 108, and p107 where the interviewee describes his 'schoolboy' responses to *Goodbye Mr Chips*, although he must have been at least 22 years old upon its release. I am informed by Annette Kuhn that the research project has generated a wealth of material, but that much of it is unavailable at the present time, owing to recording and cataloguing. Accordingly, I will be confining myself to those parts of the project which have been formally published.

<sup>85</sup> See *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, p34. It comes joint third with crime, on 11% of the total votes, behind 'musical romance' (30%) and 'drama and tragedy' (18%). It is also high on the list for each of the individual cinemas (which together represent a range of seat-prices and serve a variety of localities, pp35-6), and its popularity might therefore seem to be impervious to differences in class, unlike the crime film and social comedy (p36).

<sup>86</sup> The survey required respondents to '[n]umber the following types of films, putting number one for the sort you like the best, and two for the second best and so on: crime, westerns, war, spying,



end of the questionnaire, the same respondents unpromptedly and repeatedly refer to historical film, illuminating it with reference to the same titles identified elsewhere in this chapter, and providing evidence that they feel it to be a distinct and independent category.

Many of the references to historical film give no examples of the type, and no indication of the writer's conception of it. But *Victoria the Great* is repeatedly identified as historical.<sup>87</sup> And the handful of writers who elaborate on their preference for historical film do nothing to undermine the notion that the genre has much to do with depictions of government and royalty. As one young woman argued: 'The Historical films should be shown because when one leaves school one is apt to forget the builders of our Kingdom and our heritage' (Odeon Women, Doc. 2, p106).

In spite of such sentiments, and though the comparative popularity question suggests that nearly everyone approved in some way of 'historical' film, in the answers to a question which invited respondents to identify which of a list of subjects and genres they wanted more of, 'royalty and aristocrats' met with a

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historical, cartoons, nature and reality, travel and adventure, musical romance, drama and tragedy, slapstick comedies, love stories, society comedies' (ibid., p33).

<sup>87</sup> See *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, for example Odeon Women, Doc. 127, p126: 'I don't as a rule like historical films but I thought the film *Victoria the Great* was wonderful . . .' Other films felt to be historical include *The Charge of the Light Brigade* and *Captain Blood* (ibid., Odeon Women, Doc. 94, p121), *Rhodes of Africa*, *Camille* (1936), *The Private Life of Henry VIII* and *Queen Christina* (1933) (ibid., Odeon Men, Doc. 97, p94). All subsequent Mass-Observation citations also refer to *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, unless otherwise stated.



minimum of enthusiasm.<sup>88</sup> Does this mean that the majority of respondents dissented from the view of historical film that has emerged from the sources considered so far?

In fact, as Richards and Sheridan suggest, 'cinema-goers' reservations probably extended principally to more aristocrats, given the high proportion of them appearing as characters particularly in British films' (p40).<sup>89</sup> Thus one regular film-watcher could remark: 'Royalty we need as our Empire leaders. Aristocrats too uppish and too real especially for children gets them vain' (Odeon Men, Doc. 157, p104). Another said he would not touch royalty and aristocrats 'with a barge pole', but went on to express his approval of historical films (Palladium Men, Doc. 78, p53).<sup>90</sup> It is regrettable that Mass-Observation's researches into 'the Empire' and

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<sup>88</sup> See *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, pp36-9. Overall, 'royalty and aristocrats' came seventh in a decreasing order of the ten themes, surpassed only by the unpopularity of religion, politics and killing. What respondents most wanted more of was humour. At the Palladium (the more working class of the three cinemas), women were equally dismayed to see royalty/aristocrats and 'killing', and only unhappier to see more politics, while men wanted nothing less than to see more upper class figures.

<sup>89</sup> This would accord with the fact that 'More people like you and I' was the subject contributors fourth-most wanted to see more of in film (see p36). At the Odeon and Crompton Cinemas, it was placed still higher (p37). A number of respondents elaborated on this desire for greater realism in their comments. One woman for example suggested: 'I don't think the films of today are in comparison at all to the lives of over 60% of the people and I think they ought to be more natural and not as artificial and more like our everyday lives' (Odeon Women, Doc. 71, p117).

<sup>90</sup> The general hostility towards aristocrats finds a resonance in several other writers (5 in total) who express a dislike for 'Oxford accents.' The significant thing here is that these writers seem to be talking about genres other than the historical film: 'Maybe you have noticed I voted American films best? The reason really is I hate to hear an "American gangster" with an Oxford accent and we get plenty in English pictures' (Odeon Men, Doc. 73, p89). Though it is entitled 'More Cabbages, Fewer Kings', an article in *Kine Weekly* by Alfred Hitchcock, which also uses the term 'Oxford accents', is similarly only concerned with 'modern-dress cinema' (*Kine*, 14 February 1937, p30). Thus the antipathy seems to be towards aristocrats in movies which are *set in the present*.

‘the Royal Family’, which seemed likely to shed light upon popular notions of history, in fact do not.<sup>91</sup>

The notion that aristocrats might be afforded more tolerance if they happened to be royalty or were appearing in a historical film is supported by the fact that historical films seem generally to have been judged according to different criteria to those applied to other types. Several writers forcefully called for more entertainment and more opportunities for imaginative escape, in categories ranging from comedy to romantic drama. By contrast, historical film is almost always discussed in terms of quality, patriotism and educational value. Thus in one tautological reply it is suggested that ‘Education, Knowledge Films and History are educating’ (Bolton Survey, Odeon Men, Doc 157, p104). Elsewhere, historical films are felt to represent a sort of cinematic ‘gold standard’ (see Odeon Women, Doc 92, p120), whilst the same are sometimes felt to be the exception to the rule of poor quality British cinema.<sup>92</sup> Again, the impression that historical film is a coherent, separate category with its own rules and expectations is reinforced.

Further support is provided when respondents differentiate historical film from adjacent types. A particularly clear distinction is drawn in the comments of a frequent attendee of the Crompton cinema:

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<sup>91</sup> See Mass-Observation Archive, File Report 247, July 1940, ‘The Royal Family: Public Opinion’; and Mass-Observation Archive, File Report 1158, March 1942, ‘The British Empire.’ Both documents are in the Mass-Observation Archive, at the University of Sussex. It is also disappointing that Mass-Observation did not undertake research on the specific question of popular attitudes towards history and the past.

<sup>92</sup> See chapter four, page 197-8.

There are far too few historical films, which give tremendous scope for really good acting and dramatic interest. Until recently the working class public does not seem to have appreciated this type of film, because too often we get a mere costume film (Crompton Men, Doc. 33, p65).

Others provide examples of the costume type, which significantly do not coincide with any of the films thought in the same survey to be historical.<sup>93</sup>

In the 1943 survey of Mass Observation volunteers, which canvassed a generally more educated and perhaps refined range of opinion (which might have been exposed to a broader range of films or to critical categories not often used in the popular press), historical film is again conceived as a relevant category, and viewed in much the same way as amongst the Bolton respondents. A 33 year-old sales manager for example described *The Young Mr Pitt* as '[t]he record of the historic fight between [Pitt] and Fox', and noted: 'I am interested in History and for that reason I thoroughly enjoyed this film' (Men, Doc. 43, p237). Another respondent wrote: 'I am not at all keen on cinemas. I always go when there is an educational or historical picture. Something you can bring away and think about' (Men, Doc. 91, p249).

This corroboration is important, but the real value of the 1943 survey for my purposes is that, without using esoteric generic terms or categories, it provides a greater number of generic descriptions, and thus can help to further clarify the identity of the historical film. For example, *The Man in Grey* is repeatedly

identified as a 'romance.'<sup>94</sup> *The Moon and Sixpence* (1942) is a 'film about the life of the artist Gauguin' (Men, Doc. 79, p245), and though *The Black Swan* (1942) is called 'an episode in the life of Capt. John Morgan,' it is characterized not as history but as 'good straightforward blood and thunder' (Men, Doc. 81, p246).<sup>95</sup> *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942) is described in terms of the musical,<sup>96</sup> and *The First of the Few* as a 'war film' (Men, Doc. 6, p223).<sup>97</sup>

#### b. Historical Film as Revealed by Mayer

The material gathered by Mayer provides further instances of films popularly felt to be historical. It is true that several films identified as historical in other sources are not afforded any kind of generic label (*The Prime Minister* (1941), for example), but the term 'historical drama' again has a wide currency.<sup>98</sup> *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* and *The Private Life of Henry VIII* are described as 'historical romances' ('A Study in Film Preferences', Doc. 29A, p205), whilst *Victoria the Great* and *The Young Mr Pitt* 'make the History Books seem much more interesting

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<sup>93</sup> See for example Crompton Women, Doc. 27 (p74), who identifies *Anthony Adverse* as a costume film.

<sup>94</sup> It was 'just romantic escape from wartime' (Women, Doc. 20, p263). See also Men, Doc. 12, p226, and Doc. 31, p231.

<sup>95</sup> Later, a housewife also describes *The Black Swan* as a horror film (Women, Doc. 82, p282).

<sup>96</sup> That is, in terms of their music and singing. On *Yankee Doodle Dandy* see Women, Doc. 54, p274.

<sup>97</sup> Elsewhere, the Leslie Howard film is described as 'a clear and simple dramatization of something topical . . .' (Men, Doc. 40, p233), while another writer distinguishes between the historical and war genres when he remembers of 49<sup>th</sup> *Parallel*: 'I had been expecting a quasi-historical film and not a present-day war story' (Men, Doc. 22, p229).

<sup>98</sup> General references to the type, which do not advance examples, include from the 'Films and the Pattern of Life' survey: Doc. 45, p107 ('English history always interested me and historical films were not much to my taste'); Doc. 3, p22 ('I soon found that I enjoyed historical films best . . .'); and Doc. 48, p114 (where the author confesses 'to learning more from historical films than from my history book!').



and alive' ('A Study in Film Preferences', Doc. 10A, p174). *Henry V* (1945) is variously described as 'Shakespeare adapted for the screen' ('A Study in Film Preferences', Doc. 33A, p214) or 'a bold venture in filming Shakespeare' ('A Study in Film Preferences', Doc. 48A, p236). But significantly, in light of the outline of historical film which has been emerging in this chapter, it is also referred to as filmed history ('A Study in Film Preferences', Doc. 37A, p223).

Mayer's respondents seem to have the most developed sense of genre and type of all surveyed audiences,<sup>99</sup> and several list historical film alongside other well-known and widely accepted categories. For example, the author of Doc. 29A, quoted above, wrote that she relished 'historical films, thrillers, sophisticated comedies, super-natural film, and all the "frankly impossible" epics from *Tarzan* to *Dumbo*' ('A Study in Film Preferences' p206). Elsewhere in her reply she also mentions dramas, slap-stick, musicals, costume musicals, detective films and Bette Davis films.<sup>100</sup> Others make firm distinctions between historical and war films – 'I enjoy very much historical films, but not very many seem to be made nowadays. War films seem to be having a long run, and I do not like them very much' ('A Study in

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<sup>99</sup> Writers frequently describe their experiences and preferences in terms of types. The usual pattern is for them to adhere to familiar industrial and critical labels like Western, comedy, melodrama and musical (see, in addition to the examples below, 'Films and the Pattern of Life', Doc. 29, p72, and especially 'A Study in Film Preferences', Doc. 36A, pp219-221). One respondent even expresses a distaste for generic mixing: 'I do not like a film which starts out as a farce and then tries to be a serious drama' ('A Study in Film Preferences', Doc. 1A, p157). A few others however use 'home-made' or 'common-sense' categories. Thus one young woman reflects on 'murder films', '*Scarlet Pimpernel* films' and 'torture films' ('Films and the Pattern of Life', Doc. 3, p23). The author of Doc. 28 in the same survey, who 'deplore[s] the fact that ninety-nine per cent of every film issued can be typed', is in a very small minority (p69).

<sup>100</sup> Another respondent, exploring her film-going habits at the age of about 16, explains: 'Musicals my favourite, with comedies next, crazy or sophisticated, "tough" films, such as "gangster" themes, "horror", and mystery. And any film that had a sentimental strain. I *dis*-liked historical, romantic, and "straight" films . . .' ('A Study in Film Preferences', Doc. 60, p138).

Film Preferences', Doc. 32A, p211) – and between historical film and period drama. One respondent, having revealed her enthusiasm for historical film, observed that 'British producers seem to be particularly good in period films,' and she connects this type with James Mason, Margaret Lockwood, Stewart Granger and Phyllis Calvert ('A Study in Film Preferences', Doc. 10A, p174). Another wrote: 'I like period films of both the musical and straight types – particularly *Jane Eyre*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Barretts of Wimpole Street*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Gone With The Wind*, of the straight type' ('A Study in Film Preferences', Doc. 16A, p184).

The films described as 'biographical pictures' are similarly distinct from those called 'historical', examples being *Madame Curie*, *The Adventures of Marco Polo* (1938) and *Wilson* (1944), but not *The First of the Few*.<sup>101</sup> *A Song to Remember* (1945) and *The Great Mr Handel* (1942) are described as or in terms of either musical films or biographies or both.<sup>102</sup> Period adventure films are also excluded from the historical group: 'Adventure Romances will always be my favourites . . .

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<sup>101</sup> On *Madame Curie*, see 'A Study in Film Preferences', Doc. 37A, p221. The author of this response makes the biopic a subset of the melodrama: 'For dramatic & melodramatic films, I prefer those with a real story, such as the biographical type, like *Madame Curie* etc . . .' For the author of 'Films and the Pattern of Life', Doc. 44, '[f]ilms of the lives of famous men always made me long to invent or discover as they did. *The Adventures of Marco Polo* was such an example.' (p108). Another wrote: 'first in my list would come the life-stories of great men and women . . . Several examples come to mind as I think of this kind of film. The foremost is I think – *Wilson* . . .' ('A Study in Film Preferences', Doc. 10A, p174). Tellingly the same author is quoted above for her discussion of 'period films' and her identification of *Victoria the Great* and *The Young Mr Pitt* as historical films. Finally, in 'A Study in Film Preferences', Doc. 11A (p177) *The First of the Few* is identified as a film 'to do with the war', and is grouped with *The Gentle Sex*, *In Which We Serve* and *The Way Ahead*.

<sup>102</sup> *The Great Waltz* ('A Study in Film Preferences', Doc. 13A, p181), *Song of Russia* (ibid., Doc. 4A, p161), and *A Song to Remember* (ibid., Doc. 6A, p165) are all described as musicals, and praised specifically for their music. *A Song To Remember* is also called a biography (ibid., Doc. 5A, p164, and Doc. 27A, p201). One writer links the types in discussing *A Song to Remember* and *The*

Since seeing *The Black Swan* and *Frenchman's Creek*, I love them all the more. . .’ (‘A Study in Film Preferences’, Doc. 13A, p180). And so too are ‘Cloak and Sword Dramas’, which are held to be separate from historical films by dint of their ‘Ruritanian’ setting (‘A Study in Film Preferences’, Doc. 36A, p220). Another writer who referred to *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1935) and *King of Kings* (1927) might very well have described these as historical, but instead she calls them both ‘spectacular films’ and ‘costume films’, and groups them together with *Moon of Israel*, *Ben Hur* and *The Sign of the Cross* (‘Films and the Pattern of Life’, Doc. 6, p30).

## Conclusion

Rick Altman has recently suggested that ‘those who actually pronounce generic terms and invoke generic categories do so in such a fundamentally contradictory way as to preclude associating permanence or universality with the notion of genre’, and that ‘the past century has seen major changes in the definition and deployment of genres.’<sup>103</sup> ‘Entrenched users’ of generic terminology, who are satisfied with the generic status quo, stand accused of inventing ‘myths of distant origin, continued coherence and permanent inviolability in order to maintain stability’ (p206). Though far from constituting proof of ‘permanence’ or ‘universality’, we have seen that across a range of very different sources, representing a wide variety of periods and perspectives, the historical film has

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*Great Mr Handel*, referring to ‘films dealing with the lives and music of great composers such as Chopin, Handel, etc’ (ibid., Doc. 3A, p159).



emerged as a coherent type. Altman adduces some persuasive instances of 'regenrification' and change, but in the period with which I am currently concerned, the historical film cannot be added to them.

There is naturally by no means an absolute consensus among the sources I have examined. But I have shown that there is such a thing as historical film, that it is regarded with a certain respect, and that, as far as the sources for its reception are concerned, it is *not the same* as costume drama, biography, or a range of other types which are set in the (near or distant) past. Richard Maltby may be right in general terms that within the Hollywood system, history *can* be regarded as a 'production value.'<sup>104</sup> But in Britain at least, 'history' also connotes something much more specific in a film context.

The generic distinctiveness of historical film is very important, for recent writers who have touched upon the subject of the British historical film have done so with little appreciation of the way it has historically been regarded and defined. I intend to challenge the interpretations and conclusions advanced by these writers, prompted by the certainty and agreement with which the sources assembled in this chapter identify the type, and with full cognizance of the principle that specific audiences and individual viewers *may* have entertained different, less exclusive notions of what counts as a historical text.

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<sup>103</sup> Rick Altman, *Film/Genre*, pp193-4.

<sup>104</sup> Richard Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction*, p311. See also Tom Ryall's forthcoming book, *Britain and the American Cinema* (London: Sage Publishers, 2000), where he will argue in chapter six: "History", like romance, might be considered a staple component of the Hollywood



The most recent critic to discuss British historical film is Sarah Street in her book, *British National Cinema*. Street follows Sue Harper in including in the category ‘fictional stories with historical settings/period costumes’ (p40), such as *The Man in Grey* and *The Wicked Lady* (p57).<sup>105</sup> These films are described as ‘historical costume melodramas’, though in the sources I have considered they are never associated with history at all.<sup>106</sup> Pam Cook refers to *The Man in Grey* and other Gainsborough films of the same period as ‘costume romances’ and costume dramas.<sup>107</sup> But she proceeds to discuss them as ‘historical films’ (in chapter iv). During this discussion, in remarking on the high standards of historical accuracy often censoriously applied to historical films, she notes:

At the bottom end of the scale, where the more disreputable costume romances belong, one would imagine more leeway might be granted. These films rarely deal with lofty subjects or the more epic aspects of history, and if they do feature the lives of famous people, it is generally from the perspective of gossip about their amorous escapades [. . .] Costume romances mobilize history as a site of sexual fantasy rather than a record of great deeds or celebration of national heritage.<sup>108</sup>

A large part of Cook’s motivation for studying the ‘neglected’ Gainsborough melodramas is that they were so popular (much more so than the attention-grabbing

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system of genres, sometimes playing a background role in a film dominated by other concerns, sometimes foregrounded as the principal theme of a film.’

<sup>105</sup> Harper’s aim is ‘to address the social function of historical film’, but she argues that ‘it is inadequate to deal only with films which represent real historical events’, *Picturing the Past*, p2. The historical category must be extended ‘to cover all costume films, all historical biopics, and indeed all films set in the past’, *ibid.*, p10. Throughout *Picturing the Past*, Harper uses the designations ‘historical film’, ‘costume drama’, and ‘period film’ interchangeably.

<sup>106</sup> Later Street also refers to heritage movies as ‘quality historical films’ (p103) and even suggests that the historical film *turned into* the heritage genre, by way of Ken Russell’s ‘gothic biopics’ (p112). I shall return to these ideas in later chapters.

consensual cinema), and thus are revealing of a marginalized aspect of British national identity.<sup>109</sup> She lays repeated emphasis on the importance of audiences and reading activities, and criticizes authors like Julian Petley for their neglect of such matters.<sup>110</sup> But we have seen members of contemporary audiences (including reviewers and industry workers) distinguish Gainsborough films from the historical type, the latter being marked precisely by its 'lofty subjects', 'famous people', 'great deeds' and 'national heritage.'<sup>111</sup>

As both Street and Cook are writing about Gainsborough in historical context (and are therefore not concerned to construct theoretical categories), why do they overlook evidence of original generic conceptions? Street helps to account for the dearth of historical research into British historical film, referring to the 'stigma' of Anna Neagle's association with 'patriotic historical films'.<sup>112</sup> She explains that Neagle's appearances 'became symbols of a blinkered national nostalgia, a comforting sense of Britishness, an idea associated with past certainties of class and national unity, material comfort, stoical individualism, patriotism and, above all, those White Cliffs of Dover' (p134). By mixing such a hidebound conservative type with more progressive genres, a critic may neutralize the former's political

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<sup>107</sup> See Pam Cook, *Fashioning the Nation*, pp5 and 6 for respective examples.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p76.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, p11 and chp. v (especially p84) respectively.

<sup>110</sup> See especially chp. iii on 'Costume and Identity'. Petley's offending article 'The Lost Continent' (in *All Our Yesterdays* ed. by Charles Barr) includes Gainsborough's melodramas in a discussion of 'underground' films, despite their successful showing at the box-office, and is criticized by Cook in *Fashioning the Nation* on p23.

<sup>111</sup> Cook also argues that a 'broad range of movies' qualify as historical: 'westerns, biopics, period romances and musicals, biblical epics, almost anything that takes "history" as its subject matter and dresses it up in period clothes and decor' (p67). But these types also have historically been credited with a separate, independent existence.

<sup>112</sup> *British National Cinema*, p124.

force.<sup>113</sup> Thus Cook for example, calls for a less ‘educative, instructional conception of history’, that might accommodate a ‘feminized’, inauthentic past. She also locates this within the hoped-for framework of a less masculine and misogynistic national identity.<sup>114</sup> Cook’s attempt to escape from the sort of highly prescriptive notions of historical truth observed in chapter one of my thesis is to be applauded.<sup>115</sup> But in this chapter we have seen historical films to be discussed precisely in terms of truth and educational value in their original contexts, and the absence there of any sense that Gainsborough melodramas were themselves historical highlights the fact that, like Carnes, Toplin and Rosenstone, Cook has her own agenda.

A further point that is worth making here concerns recent analyses of films that *are* historical according to their original audiences, and the tendency to discover in them tensions for which there is little evidence. Street for instance argues of Neagle that ‘[i]n the context of the 1930s and 1940s, her image reveals contradictory messages about whether women should be traditional or progressive.’ In conclusion Street finds ‘on the one hand Neagle is the epitome of Britishness, while on the other she is an iconoclast of sorts’ (pp131-2).<sup>116</sup> The evidence for audience

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<sup>113</sup> When, in chapter one, I suggested that the lack of generic perspective in Marcia Landy’s *Cinematic Uses of the Past* was tendentious, I was objecting to another instance of the same strategy. Landy in effect submerges the ‘monumental’ historical films that she aims to challenge by ignoring generic distinctions between historical films and those that are merely set in the past. Several categories are thereby collapsed into one, and the ‘monumental’ historical film made to seem a minor and aberrant element of a larger and more acceptable grouping.

<sup>114</sup> See *Fashioning the Nation*, pp75, 64, 77, and 115 respectively.

<sup>115</sup> See *ibid.*, pp67-70, criticizing the search for historical purity and absolute authenticity.

<sup>116</sup> Landy similarly approves of *The Scarlet Empress* because it is so critical, a parody of traditional, monumental histories (*Cinematic Uses of the Past*, pp10-11). For reasons that will become clear in chapter five, her assertion that the film is exemplary of American uses of history is badly misleading, and, one might say, a case of wishful thinking.



response to these films is anything but complete, as I have suggested, and it is entirely possible that they provoked feelings and reflections that for whatever reason were not recorded, even by those moved to put pen to paper. But where a spectator or reviewer offers any explanation of his or her enthusiasm for Neagle's films, or for historical film in general, it is almost always related to patriotism and the moral value of witnessing in action the great men and women of royalty and government. Street believes in the possibility of 'readings against the grain which are not purely the province of film scholars.'<sup>117</sup> But she offers no evidence that real audiences interpreted Neagle's films in the way she suggests.<sup>118</sup>

Trusting in the evidence, for all its flaws, and using it extensively, I shall develop an analysis of the British historical film genre in the chapters that follow. I will also briefly explore and attempt to theorize the differences identified in the sources between historical film and adjacent genres, and will show how and why the genre appears to be politically conservative.

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<sup>117</sup> *British National Cinema*, p199. For another example of supposedly concealed meaning see p43, where Street is discussing the subtextual contradictions which characterize the imperial epics of the 1930s. Addressing the same films, Jeffrey Richards, who approaches film from a more right-wing perspective, perceives no such fissures or ambiguities. See his *Films and British National Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997) p34, where *Sanders of the River* (1935) is seen to conform to colonial selection criteria, and p36, where *The Drum* (1938) is described as extremely patriotic. All such films are held to promote notions of duty and the validity of British rule.

<sup>118</sup> It is notable that Street's notion of reception seems to have little to do with historical evidence and 'real readers'. She defines reception as 'the connection between a film's popularity and its ideological significance.' Her almost exclusively textual approach is revealed when she observes: 'A study of the wide range of films produced in the 1930s illustrates how at any given moment a variety of discourses co-exist, each being representative of particular contemporary fears and anxieties which can be seen to operate on textual and subtextual levels.' She continues: 'A film's discourses will compete for the viewer's attention, often producing a "preferred" reading which stifles a "resistant" one which can be derived from notions of "textual excess."' See *British National Cinema*, p40.



Here the question of political use-value, noted at the end of chapter one, resurfaces. Without going into detail, I should make it clear that I have none of Staiger's Marxist inclinations. In so far as I have a political intention, it is to reclaim what seems to be a conservative and 'consensual' genre from a critical history of misrepresentation. To this extent, I will be showing that an approach deriving from reception studies need not have the radical and transformative aims that Staiger invests in it.

## CHAPTER FOUR: The British Historical Film 1930-1980: A Generic Analysis

In chapter three, a study of some of the sources which concern themselves with historical film produced an outline of the genre and identified a number of specific examples of it. Confining myself to these examples (provided they accord with the general outline and appear in Gifford's catalogue) so as not to exceed the sources, I will now analyze the genre in some detail. Applying some of the models of genre analysis discussed in chapter two, I will look for internal consistencies, while charting and accounting for changes. As I recognised in both chapters one and two, British film cannot be properly understood in isolation from American and (to a lesser extent) other national cinemas and generic regimes. I defer these matters to chapter five, where I shall refer often to American historical cinema, and will compare and contrast it with its British counterpart. The exception to this rule is the American historical film (like *The Virgin Queen* (1955)) that seems to fit comfortably into the mould of the British historical category, which I shall discuss during the course of the present chapter.

I will revisit the discourses and materials examined in chapter three, and bearing in mind the assessments and caveats expressed in that chapter, will use them here with greater freedom to ask how they contribute to the images and conceptions of the genre in public circulation. My analysis is not intended to be exhaustive. It merely aims to answer the question: 'What is the significance of reading a film as part of the British historical genre?' In terms of reception studies, my aim is to define and interpret one of the contexts or sets of intertexts which may be deployed in reading an individual historical film. This is the first step away from the prescriptive writing discussed in chapter one, towards a more filmic, historically grounded and richer interpretation of

historical film. In later chapters, I will set the generic frame of interpretation identified in this chapter alongside adjacent genres and other (social, political and cultural) frames, and will interpret a small number of films more fully.

My discussion of films in this chapter is variously based upon viewings on video, television and at the BFI's National Film and Television Archive. I am aware that films may exist in a variety of different versions,<sup>1</sup> and that the smaller screen, in 'panning and scanning' a film, may fail to give a true impression of its spectacle. I have seen films at the cinema as often as possible, but the large number of films involved, and the expense and inconvenience of using original prints, were cogent arguments in favour of video-tape. In later chapters (especially chapter six) where my analysis goes into greater textual detail, I have relied solely on big-screen viewings.

## **Semantic Features of the British Historical Film**

### **1. How do British Historical Films Signal Their Status as Historical Texts?**

#### **a. Historicizing Titles and Voice-Overs**

A historical film may immediately situate itself as a historical narrative by means of a post-credits title sequence which sketches in the historical context of the film, and creates a series of audience expectations. As Gore Vidal remembers: 'one [. . .] knew

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<sup>1</sup> Censorship in particular contributes to this phenomenon. James C. Robertson notes of *Dreyfus* for example that 700 feet (almost 8 minutes) were cut from the original print, and 'it is improbable that a full version now exists in Britain.' See *The Hidden Cinema: British Film Censorship in Action, 1913-1975* (London: Routledge, 1989), p171.

exactly what to think about *Fire Over England*, thanks to a series of title cards that start the film' (p48):

The first title card tells us "In 1587, Spain, powerful in the old world, master in the new, its king, Philip, rules by force and fear." Hitler and Mussolini immediately spring to mind. The next title card offered hope. "But Spanish tyranny is challenged by the freemen of a little island, England." It was now safe to start on the popcorn (ibid.).

*The Private Life of Henry VIII* is similarly preceded by a title which establishes the film's particular tone and provides some indication of its narrative trajectory:

Henry VIII had six wives. Catherine of Aragon was the first; but her story is of no particular interest. So Henry divorced her. He then married Anne Boleyn. This marriage was also a failure – but not for the same reasons.

The effectiveness of this title in setting the stage for what was a ground-breaking historical film lies in its flippancy, which seems deliberately contrasted with the portentous quality of titles like the ones which preface *Fire Over England*.<sup>2</sup> More obviously comedic and satirical historical films undermine the authority of the historical title in the same way. *Carry On Henry* (1970) for instance begins:

This film is based on a recently discovered manuscript by one William Cobbler which reveals the fact that Henry VIII did in fact have two more wives. Although it was at first thought that Cromwell originated the story, it is now known to be definitely all Cobbler's . . .

The presence of this kind of parody is important, because it presumes that the conventions parodied are very familiar to the audience, and therefore signals that, at

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<sup>2</sup> On the status of *The Private Life of Henry VIII* as 'a milestone not only for London Film Productions but for the British industry itself', see Rachel Low, *The History of the British Film, 1929-1939: Film Making in 1930s Britain* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1985), p167.



least by 1972 when *Carry On Henry* was made, the historical genre was a well-established and easily recognisable type.<sup>3</sup>

Titles which announce in these ways that a film is intended to be read as a historical text often attain an additional measure of historicity by appearing in script. This is true of both satirical and 'authentic' historical films. For example, the titles of *The Private Life of Henry VIII* and the credits of *Henry VIII and his Six Wives* (1972) are each set in the bold, but slightly ornate printing style of the Tudor period, while the later film also supports the effect with lute music that is both lyrical and august. Similarly, the credits of *Up the Chastity Belt* (1971), which is set in the time of Richard the Lion-Hearted, are designed to evoke the Bayeux Tapestry.

However, while some notable British historical films make use of such titles, the majority do not. Instead they depend upon the kind of dramatic prologue that is common to most classical narrative cinema, in which expectations are again formed and the issues with which the film will be concerned are crystallised.<sup>4</sup> Thus in the opening minutes of *Cromwell*, we are introduced to the eponymous reformer, and hear him chafe at the repression and religious intolerance which he identifies with and blames on the king. Similarly, the first sequence of *A Man for All Seasons*, in which a letter is carried from Wolsey to More across the countryside, establishes the themes of nature, transition, and the status of the written word.

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<sup>3</sup> Parody and satire similarly confirm (though the issue is not in doubt in these cases) the generic status of the Western (*Blazing Saddles* (1974) being the obvious example) and the swashbuckling adventure film (as witness *The Court Jester* (1956) and *Robin Hood: Men in Tights* (1993)).

<sup>4</sup> As Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson note, title cards, from being a staple of silent cinema, disappear in the sound era as 'other film techniques take on [the] role of foregrounding the narrative.' See *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, p26.

By contrast, those American films which fit the general outline of the British historical film almost always make use of historical titles. To take further examples from the Tudor period, this is true of *Young Bess* (1953), *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* and *Mary of Scotland*. It is perhaps significant that *Fire Over England* and *The Private Life of Henry VIII*, the two British historicals whose historical titles I have commented upon, were made with the American market partly in mind.<sup>5</sup>

Omniscient author/voice-of-history voice-overs may perform the same function as historicizing titles in providing salient (contextual) details and orienting the viewer. In *The Young Mr Pitt* for example, a glut of information is condensed with rhetorical force worthy of Pitt himself.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, *Khartoum* begins with a sequence of travelogue images of the Nile and the North African desert, accompanied by a voice-over which sets the historical scene and establishes the film's key themes of mysticism, vanity and heroic service. However, *Pitt* and *Khartoum* are alone amongst the films identified in chapter three as historical to use such a voice-over.<sup>7</sup> As Sarah Kozloff observes, the impersonal voice-over appears most commonly in the documentary and epic (which is another genre that will concern me in chapter five).<sup>8</sup> Voice-overs do frequently appear

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<sup>5</sup> *The Private Life of Henry VIII* was part of Korda's policy of pursuing international success (on which see above, p50), while, as Gore Vidal goes on to observe, *Fire Over England* seemed intended to prick American consciences at a time of international isolationism. See *Screening History*, pp50-1.

<sup>6</sup> For audiences who were aware of it, the fact that this voice-over is delivered by Carol Reed, the director of the film, might have added an additional element of authority.

<sup>7</sup> *Carry On: Don't Lose Your Head* (1966) was not identified as historical in chapter three with the same confidence evident in the case of *Carry On Henry*. But it begins with a lengthy voice-of-history narration which intersperses the facts (dates and characters) with jokes about 'freshly-sliced loaves' and 'queue jumpers'. In *History of the World, Part One*, which a number of sources described as historical, the voice-over is delivered by no less an authority figure than Orson Welles.

<sup>8</sup> Sarah Kozloff, *Invisible Storytellers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p73. To take examples from the epic genre, which is most like the British historical film of the two types Kozloff identifies, *Quo Vadis* (1951), *Solomon and Sheba* (1959), *El Cid* (1961) and *Samson and Delilah* (1949) all begin with an authoritative voice-over which establishes the date of the action, and produces an historical (and in fact often markedly ideological) context. When historical films utilize this convention, they seem more likely to be borrowing documentary (i.e. truthful and reliable) associations.

in British biopics, like *The Magic Box* and *Scott of the Antarctic*, but we will see that here the voice-over is of a distinct and different type.

### b. The Historical Self-Consciousness of Characters

The historical importance of the events and issues which a historical film foregrounds is more often asserted within British historical films by the film's characters than by voices outside the diegetical world. In *Beau Brummell* (1954) for example, the King's arrival at Calais amid great splendour is described by a French observer as 'a great moment in history.' At other points in the film, the Prince/King and his advisers discuss the historical importance of current events and processes, especially industrialization and America's move towards independence. Similarly, Eleanor expounds on the 'role of sex in history' in *The Lion in Winter*, whilst Henry comments: 'My life when it is written will read better than it was lived.' And at the close of *Mary, Queen of Scots*, after the characters involved (especially Mary) have shown consistent awareness of the momentousness of their actions, Mary is concerned about the way posterity will perceive her.

Occasionally, historical films also feature a type of *mise-en-abyme*, when characters are seen reading or handling historical texts or history books. In Korda's abortive *I Claudius* for example, the Emperor was to have been engaged in writing an account of the times,<sup>9</sup> whilst Beau undertakes a similar project in *Beau Brummell*.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See *Kine Weekly*, 4 February 1937, p41.

<sup>10</sup> It is notable that the time-travelling central characters in the historical comedy *Time Flies* (1944) also tackle some of the confusion and danger that arise from being pitched back to Elizabethan London by referring to a handy history book.



### c. Quotation of Sources

To further fortify the notion that they are historical narratives and are historically reliable, British historical films also make habitual reference to sources and images that have an association with the period, persons and events shown. Such quotations also point towards the research invested in a historical film, which is an area I shall come to in due course.

One type of quotation is the contemporary photograph. *Victoria the Great* begins with a sort of national family photo-album, featuring images of Melbourne, Peel, Palmerston, Wellington, Lincoln, Disraeli and Gladstone. The same film also quotes the invention of the camera which produced these photographs, and *Sixty Glorious Years* the unveiling of the Magic Lantern, thus adding an element of self-reflexivity which may have helped to increase the status of the two films by emphasizing the medium's historical roots. We shall see that the biopics identified in chapter three also made use of photographs, and in fact, being generally centred on twentieth-century figures, do so more frequently than historical films.

In place of photography, historical films more often have intertextual recourse to contemporary paintings. It is typically the case that historical characters will look, or will gradually assume the look, of their most famous and recognizable image. At the end of both *Mary, Queen of Scots* and the American film *The Virgin Queen*, for example, Elizabeth has begun to closely resemble the imperious and rather icy Queen of the 'Ermine' and 'Ditchley' portraits by Nicolas Hilliard and Marcus Gheeraerts respectively; both narratives have been constructed to achieve their resolutions on this



point of familiarity.<sup>11</sup> In a film that adheres less closely to the letter of the historical record, like *Fire Over England*, in which the character of Michael Ingolby for example is a fiction, this kind of quotation plays an important part in establishing credibility. In providing information on Flora Robson, the pressbook for that film promises that:

Meticulous care was taken to ensure that she looked as much like the Queen as possible. Old prints were studied, a plaster cast was taken of Elizabeth's death mask which is housed in Westminster Abbey . . . Miss Robson joined in the spirit of the thing. She consented to her eyebrows being shaved off, and agreed to have her nose specially built-up . . .

Henry VIII's numerous celluloid incarnations also recall the most celebrated likenesses of him, both in terms of bearing, and make-up and dress. In *Henry VIII and his Six Wives*, we see Henry progress from an unrecognizable youth through various stages in which his beard, rich clothing and prodigious girth are gradually acquired to bring him into line with Holbein's portraits.

In addition to the costuming and make-up of leading characters, historical films may also momentarily evoke contemporary art through their *mise-en-scène*. This usually occurs when a forceful impression of importance or a sort of cultural validation is required, disrupting the narrative and marking a particular point of the story as worthy of stylization. Thus for example *General Gordon's Last Stand* by G. W. Joy (1885), in which Gordon stands at the top of a flight of stairs and meets his fate at the hands of the dervishes, was 'realized' in both *Sixty Glorious Years* and *Khartoum*.<sup>12</sup> In that these images represent 'static moments appreciated as isolated *wholes* rather than as *parts* of a larger process', Charles Tashiro has observed that 'films that employ them must

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<sup>11</sup> *Anne of the Thousand Days* ends with a similar image in miniature, with a shot of Elizabeth as a petulant infant.

<sup>12</sup> On this, see Jeffrey Richards, *Films and British National Identity*, pp44-6.

recover to allow the narrative to proceed'; such images must be 'moved into and away from with elaborate care.'<sup>13</sup> Olivier's *Henry V* avoids these problems by incorporating contemporary engravings of Elizabethan London and the Globe theatre only at the very beginning and the very end of the narrative, and underlines the potential of this kind of quotation for expressing production resources and contributing to the pleasures of spectacle.<sup>14</sup>

Other sources which may appear as part of the *mise-en-scène* include: political cartoons (*Punch*'s satirical view of the youth of Pitt, the newly appointed Prime Minister, which attracts a crowd in *The Young Mr Pitt* is one example); handbills (the sixteenth-century style flyer or poster which advertizes a performance of *Henry V* at the Globe, initiating Olivier's film of the play); proclamations (the announcement of the death of William IV and the accession of Victoria in *Victoria the Great*); newspapers (Beau Brummell denounces the king and his government to the *London Chronicle*, for example); and novels (as in *The Prime Minister*, which begins with a sequence in which Disraeli makes the acquaintance of a reader of *Constantini Fleming*).

On a much larger scale, original locations may also be quoted, often in compilation shots which introduce a new scene. *Anne of the Thousand Days* makes extensive use of Hever Castle, while *Henry VIII and his Six Wives* features exterior shots of Hampton Court. Authentic settings are an especially important aspect of *Victoria the Great* and its marketing. One poster advertised in the pressbook suggests that:

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<sup>13</sup> Charles Tashiro, 'When History Films (Try to) Become Paintings', *Cinema Journal* 35, no. 3 (Spring, 1996), pp20-1. Tashiro provides an instructive discussion of the problem as it appears in *Desiree* (1954) and *Juarez* (1939).

<sup>14</sup> I shall have more to say on this feature of *Henry V* in chapter six.

\$5000,000,000 couldn't remake this picture. Filmed in the actual places where the youthful Queen Victoria's astonishing romance took place. No money in the world could buy the right to set scenes in such places as Blenheim Palace, Windsor Castle, St James' Palace, the State Coronation Church . . .

Another poster prominently thanks the authorities concerned for the use of these properties, as well as St Paul's Cathedral, Ten Downing Street and Kensington Palace.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, and perhaps surprisingly, the campaign book for *Carry On Henry* records that '[t]he unit was given special permission to film location sequences at Windsor Castle, the Long Walk and green stretches of Windsor Great Park. "By keeping our sets and costumes as genuine as possible", adds director Gerald Thomas, "the effect is much funnier when you add the 'Carry On' stars and situations.'"

The presence in a film of historical sources is often pointed out in the text of a pressbook, where freer and more wide-ranging quotation may also be made. Thus the pressbook for *Alfred the Great* discusses Asser's biography of the king, remarking that he is 'one of the most important chroniclers of the time.' The glossy brochure for *Anne of the Thousand Days* authenticates the film by printing copies of original correspondence between Henry and Anne, while the publicity for *Victoria the Great* boasts that the film comes 'out of the pages of Victoria's own diary.'

A less tangible guarantee of historical authenticity is made in the historical film by music and language. Both have sometimes been used to do more than add to the period 'feel' of a film. The pressbook for *The Private Life of Henry VIII* for example encourages cinema managers to make it known that 'What shall I do for love?', sung

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<sup>15</sup> Gratitude is also expressed for the loan of the 'original Honeymoon Train of 1841', artillery guns of 1837, and Victoria's Diamond Jubilee carriage.



by Binnie Barnes as Catherine Howard in the film, was composed by Henry himself, while Henry's music is also mentioned within the texts of *Henry VIII and His Six Wives* and *Fire Over England*. Similarly, a title card at the beginning of *The Young Mr Pitt* informs the audience that 'the speeches by the Earl of Catham and William Pitt in the Houses of Parliament are authentic', while the pressbook for *Sixty Glorious Years* promises that '[a] large part of the dialogue in *Sixty Glorious Years* is taken verbatim from the Queen's record of governmental and domestic affairs', and is therefore totally accurate. Such claims might also be made of a less 'serious' historical film such as *Nell Gwyn*, the campaign book for which notes that segments of dialogue are borrowed from the diaries of Pepys. However, it is notable that the *Kine Weekly* reviewer reported that 'the dialogue is very modern and contains coarse invective and vituperation . . .'<sup>16</sup> *The Iron Duke* cleverly creates a sense of linguistic authenticity by interspersing Wellington's dialogue with aphorisms ('Except for defeat, there's nothing more tragic than victory', and so on), which *sound* attributable to the historical figure, though no claim to this effect is explicitly made.

The use of accurate, 'authentic' language in historical film is again satirized by historical comedy. For example, Sid Field, the hero of *Cardboard Cavalier* (1949), punctuates his otherwise very modern patois with the occasional 'zounds' or 'forsooth', and he is insulted when Nell Gwyn is called a 'jade', even though he does not know the meaning of such an archaism.<sup>17</sup> Thus Sue Harper's criticism that 'the language is uneven' in the film seems to miss the point.<sup>18</sup> The 'foreignness' of historical idiom also

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<sup>16</sup> *Kine Weekly*, 9 August 1934, p20.

<sup>17</sup> Sid's love poem, which is revealed as a series of crosses on a piece of paper, is a further joke on the language of historical films, and also takes a swipe at the frequent quotation of letters and documents in historical film.

<sup>18</sup> See *Picturing the Past*, p160.



facilitates some characteristic punning in *Carry On Henry*, as where Henry asks of a potential bride: ‘Has she been chaste?’, and is told: ‘All over Normandy, sire.’

#### d. Period Detail

The historical specificity of the various types of quotation I have considered receives a measure of support from the more general attention to detail that is applied to historical film. *The Iron Duke* pressbook for example is typical in its emphasis on the effort put into ensuring the accuracy of costumes:

The clothes, uniforms, orders and decorations worn by George Arliss as the Duke of Wellington are authentic. Nothing that the actor wears actually belonged to the Hero of Waterloo, yet every single one of his costumes had been copied stitch for stitch from some recognized portrait or other source.<sup>19</sup>

In a film where it functions as a ‘wearable quotation’ on a leading character such as Henry VIII or Elizabeth I, the attire of lesser figures is also a constant reminder of a more or less specific ‘pastness’. Thus the pressbook for *The Private Life of Henry VIII* points out that: ‘Due to the fact that any but the most expensive materials are immediately shown up by the camera, it was necessary to spare no expense in the fashioning of the costumes used . . .’, and costumes for all, rather than just the iconic Laughton, are said to be facsimiles.

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<sup>19</sup> Charlton Heston, recounting an anecdote in his autobiography *In the Arena* (London: Harper Collins, 1995), suggests that those who worked on the costumes for *Khartoum* (1966) may have gone one step further. The purpose of one scene in which Gordon appears, he says, ‘was to show his tunic, which had been copied from an extant photograph of him wearing it. Designed to impress on the Egyptians the power of Empire, the whole front of the coat was solid with gold bullion braid [. . .] I complimented the tailor from Berman’s, the oldest and best costume and uniform house in the world, on their skill at copying the tunic so accurately from a single faded photograph. “Oh, it wasn’t difficult sir,” he said. “We made the original, you see. We still have the patterns.” He was quite an old man [. . .] I was suddenly

This kind of meticulousness can cumulatively be very impressive, even to the extent of eclipsing other elements of the text. Dilys Powell found this to be true of *Anne of the Thousand Days*, for example. Upon leaving the cinema, she found herself thinking ‘not so much of the people as of the clothes, jewelled, furred, lined with riches, stiff with the fear of death.’<sup>20</sup> However, we shall see that whatever claims are made for costume, in historical films or other types, costumes are never wholly accurate.

In other areas of the *mise-en-scène*, a comparable degree of detail is often apparent. The cathedral set in *Becket* for example is lavishly intricate,<sup>21</sup> while publicity material for *The Young Mr Pitt* argues that the film ‘presents the richest collection of period furniture and fine art ever amassed for one motion picture. Connoisseurs of art will be interested to know that every stick of furniture, every accessory, every jewel and article of interior decoration used in the production is genuine.’<sup>22</sup> Historical expectations may also be established and satisfied by the presence amongst the detail of familiar *types* of objects, like the accoutrements of the medieval joust in *The Lion in Winter*, and the hansom cabs of *Victoria the Great* and *The Young Mr Pitt*,<sup>23</sup> and conversely by the appearance of surprising details like the straw which covers interior floors in *Henry VIII and his Six Wives*. Despite these efforts, historical films have still been regularly lambasted in some quarters for their inattention to the finer points of historical

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seized with the eerie conviction that he’d worked on the first jacket as well, a century before. Naah, couldn’t be’ (p362).

<sup>20</sup> Dilys Powell, ‘Royal goings-on’, The Arts/Books Section, *Sunday Times*, 1 March 1970, p58.

<sup>21</sup> The film’s pressbook proudly proclaims that it took 17 weeks to build, and required a great deal of imagination as well as research, because no definitive image of it as it stood in 1170 exists.

<sup>22</sup> Louis XVI footstools, Dresden vases and Wedgwood coffee sets are amongst the items cited as examples. The pressbook for *The Private Life of Henry VIII* similarly provides a press story in which attention is drawn to the real Tudor playing cards used in the film, and also to the harps, lutes and guitars especially borrowed from Tudor collections.

<sup>23</sup> This is another main source of comedy in historical satires, as in *Up The Chastity Belt*, where Lurkalot jousts with a droopy lance, and makes a living selling the virtue-protectors of the film’s title.

appearances.<sup>24</sup> It is notable that films proclaiming an uncommonly high commitment to historical detail, such as *Drake of England* and *Bonnie Prince Charlie*, have often performed badly at the box-office.<sup>25</sup>

The general commitment to detail in historical film may clash with the financial and logistical realities of the filmmaking process. Speaking of the difficulties encountered on *Becket* and (particularly) *Anne of the Thousand Days*, art director Maurice Carter remembers:

I was building Tudor sets, a period when ceilings rarely exceeded eight or nine feet high, so the sets obviously needed ceilings to be seen. You couldn't shoot the length of a palace room without having a ceiling but the producer, Hal Wallis, insisted on no ceilings because he reckoned it slowed up shooting as they would have to be lit with reflectors and so forth. On this, I collided head-on during the making of those pictures, but he had to give way to me in the end. I couldn't build a set that went up ten or twenty feet high, it just looked absurd . . .<sup>26</sup>

It is also the case that the degree of accuracy used has often been determined by the state of technology at the time. As Carter points out elsewhere in his interview:

There was a big difference between using wool and artificial fabrics, for example. Wool fabrics usually give fairly true colour to the Technicolor process, whilst artificial fabrics – certainly things like nylon – and even cotton looked very different than as seen by the eye. So you had to know about how much colour error the fabric would give on the screen. It was much more difficult than

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<sup>24</sup> Witness for example the astounding pedantry of Charles R. Beard in his article 'Why Get It Wrong?', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 2, no. 8 (Winter 1934), pp124-5, p124. Lamenting the 'hopeless ignorance of almost all the material details' of the sixteenth century in *The Private Life of Henry VIII*, Beard wondered: 'Why was the executioner of Queen Anne furnished with a German two-hand fighting sword of 1580 and not the proper headsman's weapon?'

<sup>25</sup> The eagle-eyed Charles Beard, cited in the previous footnote, was 'director of historical research' on *Drake of England*, but the film failed to appear in *Kine Weekly's* popularity listings. Korda took out an advertisement in the *Manchester Guardian* (issue dated 12 November 1948) to inform film-goers of the towering standards of authenticity and scholarship they could expect to see in *Bonnie Prince Charlie*, but again there is no sign that the film was successful.

<sup>26</sup> McFarlane, *An Autobiography of British Cinema*, p118.



designing for the stage. Now, of course, the latest colour processes present colours almost as you see them.’<sup>27</sup>

The costs and energies invested in solving such problems, allied to the costs of producing or assembling accurate costumes and furniture in the first place, may have helped to cement the position of the historical film as a genre, in that they represent a powerful incentive to put skills, sets and other ‘raw materials’ to further use.

At a more general level than costumes, furnishings and set design, the colour of an historical film also helps to trigger historical associations and confirm expectations of historicity. Writing of *Henry V* in his autobiography, *Confessions of an Actor*, Laurence Olivier says he ‘remembered my Tres Riches Heures de Duc de Berri’ and ‘so The Style was found.’<sup>28</sup> The vivid reds and greens of the film recall to mind an illuminated manuscript, and seem to lend extra authenticity to the costumes and elaborate battle scenes. Similarly, the campaign book for *Anne of the Thousand Days* crows: ‘In colours sumptuous and bold as if they had been lifted from the palette of Holbein, the cameras of Arthur Ibbetson have brilliantly illuminated the occasion . . .’ And an article on John Bryan the production designer, in the long pressbook for *Becket*, shows how colour can appear ‘authentic’ at the same time as it assists in clarifying narrative issues:

The artistic planning extends also to the costumes. Bryan decreed that the colours should be ‘earthy’ for the English scenes, moving to pastels when the story switches to France, and ‘pure jewel-like colours’ for the ecclesiasticals.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p119. Thus less authenticity in the fabrics used might now be required. But on the other hand, the gradual improvement in image definition has necessitated more care in production design. As Carter again recalls: ‘with films like *Becket* and *Anne of the Thousand Days*, we had really heavy, carefully-treated plaster and gave detail much more attention [than on films from the 1940s], because by this time cameras had so much improved that it became a necessity. As camera definition improved, we gradually improved the quality of the sets.’ See *ibid.*, pp117-8.

<sup>28</sup> Olivier, *Confessions of an Actor*, p99.



However, it should be remembered that early Technicolor printing processes could produce striking departures from the accepted master copy, as Olivier was dismayed to discover was true of *Henry V*,<sup>29</sup> and that colour has often faded with the passage of time.<sup>30</sup>

#### e. Other Ways of Reinforcing Historicity, Including the Emphasis Placed on General Research

A number of other strategies which help to generate an interpretative *context* that is conducive to those features of the text which assert its historical status, might also be employed by a historical film to bolster its historical credentials. Here the pressbook, which we have seen to generally emphasize and support the historical features of a film, takes on roles which are often specific to itself.

For example, the pressbook for a historical film often suggests to local cinema managers ways in which their cinemas might be decorated to provide an appropriate viewing environment for the film in question. Thus the pressbook for *Anne of the Thousand Days* suggests that tickets be sold by staff in Tudor costume, that galleries and museums be persuaded to exhibit or even loan period artifacts, and that the foyer be festooned with heraldic banners, and dotted with documents and displays which underline the film's historical qualities.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, the pressbook for *The Lion in Winter* observed: 'If there is any special local angle of historical significance in relation

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., pp138-9.

<sup>30</sup> On this subject, see Bill O'Connell's article 'Fade Out', in *Film Comment* (Sept-Oct 1979), pp11-18.

<sup>31</sup> Other historical films broaden the focus beyond the theatre to encompass the entire town. For *Sixty Glorious Years* for example, it is recommended that 'Victorian Weeks' and 'Victorian Balls' be organized, newspapers be encouraged to interview people who actually saw Victoria in the flesh, and

to the picture, this will be all to the good', and advised managers: 'Make your street stunts dignified.' As we shall see in chapter five, this is an area in which generic differences are marked, the decorative tone for *Robin Hood and his Merrie Men* (1952) for example being altogether more frivolous and whimsical.<sup>32</sup>

Pressbooks also help to generate an historical reading context for the historical film by referring to congruent films and other examples of the genre. A promotional tip for *Anne of the Thousand Days*, for example, urges that: 'Although there is not the gluttony that one saw in the Charles Laughton performance in "The Private Life of Henry VIII" it might be a good idea to lay out a refectory table or something similar [...] as if a banquet were about to take place.'<sup>33</sup> The pressbook for *Mary, Queen of Scots* also remarks of *Anne*: 'in some ways the new film is an extension of the former one'; it is said to be 'in the same tradition.' In a biographical section, the same document notes: 'In a remarkable feat for a producer not involved with a chain of sequels, Hal Wallis had filmed three motion pictures with Elizabeth I in the cast of characters.'<sup>34</sup>

In the case of historical comedy too, connections are made to other historical films. In the case of *Carry on Henry*, the pressbook informs us that:

Sidney James adopts the crown so regally worn by the late Charles Laughton (in "The Private Life of Henry VIII") and, more recently,

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museums make attractions of their Victorian portraiture. A realistic mock-'newsflash' poster, reporting the attempted assassination of 1842, is also supplied for distribution to local shops and venues.

<sup>32</sup> American studies suggest that marketing and promotion can impact heavily on audiences' expectations of a popular genre, and on the meaning and pleasures they derive from it. See Janet Staiger, 'Announcing Wares, Winning Patrons, Voicing Ideals: Thinking about the History and Theory of Film Advertising', *Cinema Journal*, vol. 29, no. 3 (Spring, 1990).

<sup>33</sup> Pressbook for *Anne of the Thousand Days*, BFI Pressbook Collection.

<sup>34</sup> The third film, coming before *Mary, Queen of Scots* and *Anne of the Thousand Days*, is *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex*. The pressbook for *The Iron Duke* refers even further back in film history than 1939, noting that Waterloo was seen on screen in the very early days of cinema: 'On that memorable occasion the Duke of Wellington's charger bore a cloth emblazoned with "V.R."! Victoria was born in 1819 and came to the throne in 1837, but this film's Wellington anticipated events by years.'

Richard Burton (“Anne of the Thousand Days”). With television contributing to celluloid history with Keith Michell in “The Wives of Henry VIII”, the public seem conditioned for a Tudor romp which throws history books out of the window and lets the “Carry On” team’s imagination run riot for some spicy goings-on you never learnt at school.

Sid James is also said to wear Burton’s robes from *Anne of the Thousand Days*. Film reviewers were alive to intertextual information of this kind, or at least felt the same kind of information to be of importance and interest to their readers. *Kine Weekly*’s review of *Nell Gwyn* is a good example among the many available; it argues that ‘the treatment is fashioned mainly in the successful “Henry VIII” tradition.’<sup>35</sup>

In relation to the generic intertextuality visible in pressbooks and publicity, it is also worth pointing out here that the actual texts of historical films may also refer, overtly or implicitly, to other historical films. *Henry VIII and his Six Wives* for example seems to refer to *The Private Life of Henry VIII* when, being resistant to the prospect of performing his nuptial responsibilities with Anne of Cleves, he says he will do so only to satisfy the realm and the needs of his people. This echoes Laughton’s famous lament in the same situation, ‘The things I do for England!’, but in a way which is reflective of the more sombre and political tone of the later film.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, the actor playing Thomas More in *Anne of the Thousand Days* bears rather more of a resemblance to Paul Scofield, who took the role to great acclaim in *A Man for All Seasons*, than to contemporary portraits of More. A far more direct reference is made in *Cardboard Cavalier*, when Sidcup meets a woman named Amber and makes a joking reference to

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<sup>35</sup> *Kine Weekly*, 9 August 1934, p20.

<sup>36</sup> The Henry of *Henry VIII and his Six Wives*, unlike Laughton’s version, agonizes over international politics and the need to raise taxes, and we see him in discussion with his parliament and ordering the torture of rebels.



*Forever Amber* (1947), an American film about Charles II featuring George Sanders.<sup>37</sup>

As noted in chapter three, major historical films were not infrequently reissued, which may have facilitated this kind of quotation, or in some instances helped to make it more effective.

Another pressbook tactic for the construction of a historical reading context entails publicizing the endorsement of relevant family members, survivors of battles, and so on. In chapter five we will see that this frequently happens in the case of the biopic, in part for reasons of legal protection, whilst the same genre has also occasionally featured a biographee taking his or her own part. Naturally, given the temporal remove at which they are always set, and the standing of the figures involved, the British historical film has never featured a figure appearing as him- or herself. However, the genre *has* occasionally sought and publicized the endorsement of those associated with its principal characters.<sup>38</sup> Herbert Wilcox's *Victoria* films are illuminating examples of this.

Wilcox suggests in *25,000 Sunsets* that Edward VIII himself encouraged him to make *Victoria the Great*, and Anne Neagle writes in her own autobiography of the royal

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<sup>37</sup> Another satirical example occurs in *Up the Chastity Belt*. Preparing to face an enemy, Lurkalot delivers a *Henry V*-inspired oration, which is filmed from below in the style of Olivier's St Crispian speech: 'Well men, this is it. Outnumbered we may be, out-classed we may be. But remember, you are fighting for every-thing you hold dear. If we stick together, who knows; this may be our finest hour. And gentlemen of England, now abed, will think themselves accursed they were not here. Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood, imitate the action of the tiger . . . and run like bloody hell . . .'

<sup>38</sup> The case of Prince Yussoupov, who sued M.G.M. in the '30s, is a reminder that producers needed to guard, not only against a forgotten entertainer's poor relations, excited by the scent of easy money, but also (and perhaps to a greater extent) royal families. See David Napley, *Rasputin in Hollywood* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1990). Yussoupov, one of the assassins of Rasputin, brought a libel against the suggestion in *Rasputin and the Empress* (1932) that one of the reasons for his participation in the murder was that Rasputin had ravaged his wife.



family's heart-felt approval of the finished film.<sup>39</sup> Assistance was also leant by the royals on *Sixty Glorious Years*, in the pre-production period for which Wilcox wrote to King George VI with his requirements:

The king replied, granting his requests and finished his letter by saying: 'If you propose showing the scene of Queen Victoria leaving Buckingham Palace to drive to St Paul's Cathedral on the occasion of her Diamond Jubilee *would you mind* using the Windsor Greys – any other horses would lack authenticity.'<sup>40</sup>

Furthermore, a visit was paid to Windsor castle with Lady Antrim, 'a lady-in-waiting to the Queen during the last ten years of her life', while 'Princess Helena Victoria, a grand-daughter of the Queen, talked to me too, and showed me many precious mementoes of grandmother' (ibid.).<sup>41</sup> Neagle recalls that Queen Mary the Queen Mother attended the opening night with Lady Antrim (p109), who afterwards wrote an extremely approbatory letter.<sup>42</sup> Thirty-five years later, the presence of Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother marked a second gala performance, and she was moved to tears by the experience (p222-3). As we have seen, the pressbooks for both films, but particularly the latter, made much of this royal endorsement. It should be noted however that royal connections of this kind of intensity are rare. Less intimate links are asserted in the campaign book for *The Young Mr Pitt*, for example, in a publicity story under the heading: 'King of England Inspired by Film's Timely Message.' Such prestigious approval, being one of the genre's most visible types of endorsement, helps to set the historical film apart from the British and American biopic.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> See respectively *25,000 Sunsets* (London: Bodley Head, 1967), p111; and *There's Always Tomorrow*, p103 (for example), where Lady Elphinstone, elder sister of the Queen Mother, expresses her approval of the film and pleasure at its accuracy.

<sup>40</sup> See *There's Always Tomorrow*, p104.

<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, as Jeffrey Richards notes in *Age of the Dream Palace* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), special permission was granted for an actor to play Edward VII, p266.

<sup>42</sup> The letter is quoted in part in *There's Always Tomorrow*, on p110.

<sup>43</sup> In the publicity material for the films which have concerned me, no specific associates or family members other than royals and government ministers are quoted for their approval, though alternative

In this connection, the Royal Film Performances are important, for they favour British (or British-style) historical films over American, and the British historical film very much more than British biopics or costume dramas. Since the Second World War, *The Mudlark*, *Rob Roy*, *Beau Brummell*, *Anne of the Thousand Days* and *Mary, Queen of Scots* may be counted among historical presentations, while *Scott of the Antarctic* alone is considered a biographical film amongst the sources considered in chapter three.<sup>44</sup> Though of course the present royal family has no close hereditary link with some previous royal houses, it is at this level and in this unique way that familial endorsements of historical film most often happen. However, in view of the monarchical misadventures and peccadillos that the historical genre has revealed, such endorsement is not always appropriate, and Stewart Granger amongst others found *Beau Brummell* to be 'a most tasteless choice, as it showed one of Her Majesty's ancestors, George III, as a raving lunatic.'<sup>45</sup> Historical films such as *Khartoum* and *Waterloo* (1970), perhaps because of their higher prestige but also because of their bigger promotional budgets, are also more likely than biopics to have a royal film *premiere* (as distinct from a Royal Film Performance).<sup>46</sup>

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guarantors of a film's reliability might be mobilized. In his autobiography *In the Arena*, Charlton Heston elaborates on comments in the pressbook for *Khartoum*: 'Aside from the battle scenes, the most important sequence we had to shoot in Egypt was Gordon's arrival in Khartoum.' He was 'greeted by an ecstatic crowd of hundreds, welcoming me as the Saviour of the city. Our PR people claimed that there were people in that crowd whose grandfathers had known Gordon. I don't know if that's true, though I talked to one old Sudanese who claimed to remember his grandfather's description . . . Certainly the crowd remembered Gordon. As our steamer approached the dock, they began an undulating Arab cry, interspersed with shouts of "Gor-doon! Gor-doon! ..." (p366).

<sup>44</sup> Also present in the list are *The Three Musketeers* (1974) and *The Slipper and the Rose* (1976) which, in the absence of any generic category from chapter three, we might call swashbuckling adventure and costume romance respectively. The majority of Royal Film Performances in the post-war period have had a contemporary setting.

<sup>45</sup> Stewart Granger, *Sparks Fly Upward*, p312.

<sup>46</sup> The BFI's archive material on *Scott of the Antarctic* and *Chariots of Fire* (1981), in the Michael and Aileen Balcon Special Collection and David Puttnam Special Collection respectively, features documents which suggest that (national) prestige has not always been the only or even paramount factor in determining selection for the Royal Film Performance. For coverage of the Royal Premieres of *Khartoum* and *Waterloo*, see for example *Kine Weekly*, 16 June 1966 and 3 October 1970 respectively.

A further extra-filmic strategy for reinforcing the historicity of a British historical film relates to the language used in advertizing it. Though we saw in chapter three that hyperbole and purple prose are not alien to the genre and its advertising, promotional material supporting the British historical film differs from the biopic or American historical film in that it often uses a more sombre, stately and erudite tone. For example, amongst excerpts from actual reviews provided for local advertising campaigns, the pressbook for *Anne of the Thousand Days* includes one which announces: 'An instant classic. It has a hammer-lock on history . . .' Another concludes:

This is undoubtedly one of the finest films ever made, so lovingly is it delineated, so majestically is it mounted, and so eloquently is it delivered . . .

Similarly, a souvenir brochure for *The Lion in Winter* also peppers a lengthy essay on the history of the period with archaisms, evoking the style of a medieval chronicle.<sup>47</sup>

Linguistic differentiation of this type seems to assert a separate generic identity for the historical film in a more subtle and abstract way than the ones considered so far. However, I complete this subsection on the ancillary ways in which the historical status of a historical film is emphasized in Britain by returning to the obviously historicizing issue of research.

In this chapter we have seen that pressbooks and publicity materials emphasize how particular details on the screen are the product of careful scholarship and dedication to



accuracy. But in a much more general way, which is not directly tied to specific features of the *mise-en-scène*, the whole *research effort* of an historical film is a typical feature of its promotion.

Thus pressbooks for historical films often cite the presence of a general expert on the period concerned as an historical supervisor. In the case of *Khartoum* for example, an article entitled 'Mary Bruce had the Answers' is offered to the press:

Working night and day, for four months, Mary delivered a mass of information culled from official records, private correspondence, authoritative works on the subject, newspapers of the time and museums [...] one of the most complete and thorough documentations ever prepared for a motion picture.

The pressbook for *The Private Life of Henry VIII* makes a selling point of research entered into more anonymously. Similarly, it is claimed of *Fire Over England* that no trouble or expense was spared in 'assembling authentic and original materials', whilst in the case of *Cromwell*, the goal of historical accuracy 'was the desire of each of the stars, and months were spent in studying contemporary portraits and records...'<sup>48</sup> The problems of finding appropriate images of the interior of the House of Commons as it looked in the 1640s are discussed, and cinema managers are encouraged to make a feature of the research that went into achieving such a convincing look.

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<sup>47</sup> Thus the essay refers to individuals being 'kept in durance vile' and characterizes the period as 'a fierce and prideful age.' See 'Of Kings and Castles and A Queen', *The Lion in Winter Souvenir Brochure*, Film and Television Ephemera Collection, BFI.

<sup>48</sup> In memoirs and autobiographies, actors often elaborate on the effort invested in a persuasive historical performance. Anne Neagle for example was a particularly energetic researcher. See her autobiography *There's Always Tomorrow*, p79 for *Nell Gwyn*, and pp89,104-5 for *Victoria the Great*. See also *Mr Chips*, a biography of Robert Donat, p59, where Donat describes his research for *The Private Life of Henry VIII*.



Whereas the American biopic is frequently derived from a pre-existent secondary source,<sup>49</sup> British historical films are only occasionally developed from plays (*A Man for all Seasons* and *Becket* being good examples), and are rarely said to have resorted to resources like a well-known memoir, biography or history book.<sup>50</sup> Instead, they trumpet the originality of their own research. Indeed, British historical films have sometimes claimed to surpass secondary material, making an independent contribution to scholarship. The pressbook for *Alfred the Great* announced that the American explorer, Robert Marx, would test the research conducted for the design of the film's Viking vessels:

Marx is to sail "The Alfred the Great" across the Atlantic to show that these longships were suitable and seaworthy for the trans-Atlantic voyages undertaken by the Vikings and perhaps by previous nations, such as the Irish, Phoenicians, Romans and Portuguese.

Likewise, the pressbook for *Victoria the Great* claims that its use of Victoria's own diary takes the film beyond written history; it is an undertaking that 'sheds an entirely new light upon the personal life of the Queen', which is in any case usually ignored by historians. Posters for *Sixty Glorious Years* also froth with the claim: 'Personal diaries tell the story the world never knew.' The British biopics and costume dramas identified in chapter three never almost make claims of this type.

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<sup>49</sup> See George F. Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992), pp178-9. I shall return to this issue in chapter five.

<sup>50</sup> Significantly, the *Anne of the Thousand Days* pressbook quotes a number of biographies, but only to confirm that the film, adapted from Maxwell Anderson's play, is on the right historical lines.

#### f. The Development of an Educational Profile and Educational Presence in Schools

The final way in which the historical status of a historical film is reaffirmed relates closely to the emphasis placed on original research, as examined in the preceding section. But it is important enough to merit a section of its own. We shall see that it is often stressed as a commercial advantage for a British historical film that the events depicted are well known. But historical films do not merely rely on audiences to be educated enough to enjoy them; they actively promote themselves as a tool for historical education.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the prevalence in the 1930s and '40s of sentiments such as 'history films (with few exceptions . . .) are repellent to the teacher', being perilous distortions of 'true history',<sup>51</sup> the campaign books for British historical films almost always underline their educational value, and encourage cinema staff to target teachers and schoolchildren. Managers are urged 'to arrange special theatre parties of schoolchildren to see "The Young Mr Pitt", under the chaperonage of their teachers', and stills from the same film were made available as 'an especially fine visual aid for history classes.' Campaign books also take the trouble to explain exactly why the characters, events and issues featured are historically significant or interesting.<sup>52</sup> Thus,

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<sup>51</sup> See H. L. Beales, 'A Report on History Teaching Films', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 6, no. 21 (Spring 1937), pp43-4, p43. Other hostile opinions from the pages of *Sight and Sound* in this period were cited in my introduction.

<sup>52</sup> In this context, *Richard III* is interesting. It was not widely considered by contemporary critics to be historical, despite fitting the overall generic outline with its themes of monarchy and government. *Richard III*'s pressbook helps us to understand how this might have been so, because it plays down the historicity of the events shown. We are informed that the film 'does not attempt to reproduce a chapter of dubious history but is a screen version of Shakespeare's dramatic stage entertainment.' Brief mention is made of the historical controversies surrounding the king. However, a far greater importance is placed on melodrama, intrigue and death than on history in the promotional material in general, and the posters feature dramatic, chiaroscuro images of skullduggery and sex, and promote the excitement and the spectacle of villainy above all. The emphasis on such elements may arise from the fact that

in an extensive educational kit encompassing maps and replica documents, *Alfred The Great*'s importance as a lawgiver and 'founder of the British navy' is emphasized, while the central relationship in *Becket* is discussed in terms of the conflict between church and state. On a more general level, the British historical film sketches in the historical background to the events featured, and lists relevant dates and details. In the case of *Fire Over England* for example, the facts of the Armada and Elizabeth's reign are clearly spelled out, for use in foyer decoration and (presumably) impressing teachers.

Occasionally, a film's producers might step beyond educational marketing, reworking it as a purely educational product. In 1947, Gaumont-British for example serialized *Henry V* into four parts to 'help teachers during the present shortage of historical films.'<sup>53</sup> A number of contributors to *Sight and Sound* had been calling for such initiatives since the 1930s.<sup>54</sup>

The educational element of historical film promotion is reflected in the responses and opinions collected by Mayer and Mass-Observation. One respondent to Mass-Observation's Bolton questionnaire, an attendee of the town's 'middle ranking' cinema, observed:

I think a good story is the main thing with good actors in the cast.  
If the story is true, so much the better. An historical picture such as

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Shakespeare's *Richard III* has a clear tragic trajectory, whereas *Henry V* is the only single-monarch Shakespeare play that does not end with the king's death.

<sup>53</sup> See *Kine Weekly*, 26 June 1947, pxiii for a report on this.

<sup>54</sup> See for example Alexander Mackay, 'Primary Schools and Films', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 7, no. 25 (Spring 1938), pp44-5, p45 ('some organisation should be set up to preserve and issue in a 16mm. edition for school use the educationally valuable portions of such pictures as *Henry VIII*, *Tudor Rose* . . .'); and R. S. Miles, 'There Should be "Dramatic" Films in History Teaching', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 11, no. 42 (Autumn 1942), pp53-54.

Victoria the Great is educational and still first class entertainment  
(Crompton Women, Doc. 7, p71).

Similarly, a patron of the more expensive (and therefore perhaps more middle-class) Odeon, favoured historical films 'because you get some knowledge knocked into you' (Men Doc. 146, p102).<sup>55</sup> The same kind of sentiments appear in each of Mayer's surveys. A sixteen year-old female office assistant for example writes: 'Britain has also given us such films as *Victoria the Great* and *The Younger Mr Pitt* [sic] which make the History Books seem much more interesting and alive. I have often seen a film of a certain person's life and then found a book on that subject and thoroughly enjoyed that book which might otherwise have been very uninteresting . . .' ('A Study in Film Preferences', Doc. 10A, p174). Another young woman confesses 'to learning more from historical films than from my history books' ('Films and the Pattern of Life', Doc. 48, p114). This last statement in particular illustrates the lack of any historical or audience-reception dimension to Landy's work, and its basis only in theory. On the evidence of Mass-Observation and Mayer at least, her assertion that historical films contain no surprises and are entirely about effect is untrue.<sup>56</sup>

In newspaper reviews too, the educational function is frequently commented upon. Of *Sixty Glorious Years* for example, Sydney Carroll, the *Sunday Times*' reviewer, declared:

it merits exhibition as an historical and authentic document not only in every school and educational institute in the United Kingdom but in every cinema where the English people have a claim to attention through their Victorian values of freedom, loyalty and friendship (16 October, 1938).



This kind of belief in the educational value of historical film confirms that, as a genre, it was often accepted as historically reliable or 'true'.

## **2. How Do British Historical Films Measure Up to their Claims to be Accurate, 'Authentic', Original and Exhaustive?**

The issue of the actual standards of accuracy, authenticity and research that lie behind the claims made by the makers and promoters of historical films is the one which primarily concerned many of the writers considered in chapter one, including Toplin and those who contributed to Carnes' tellingly-entitled book *Past Imperfect*. To some extent, I shall be asking how far historical films live up to the claims they make, and what perspectives on the matter have been held by audiences and contemporary writers. However, my main interest here is to consider the nature of the accuracy and authenticity in which a historical film trades, and to delve deeper into the way in which historical films set out to convince their audiences of their historical reliability.

### **a. Originality and Completeness**

In terms of originality, though a British historical film might claim to make the occasional new discovery or historical innovation, the overall tendency is for producers to give the punters what they know. Because expectations are fulfilled, this is a way of further confirming the impression of accuracy and reliability. Thus the pressbook for the supposedly ground-breaking, revelatory *Sixty Glorious Years* promises:

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<sup>55</sup> For other examples of appreciation of the educative value of historical films amongst Odeon Men, see *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, Docs. 157 and 159, pp104-5.

<sup>56</sup> See Landy, *Cinematic Uses of the Past*, p24.

See – The Crimean War – The fall of Sebastapol – Florence Nightingale – The Massacre of Gen Gordon's Garrison at Khartum [sic] – Kitchener's conquest of the Sudan – Charge of the Light Brigade – The First World Fair . . .

These of course are all well-known 'highlights' of the Victorian era. Similarly, of *The Private Life of Henry VIII*, Elsa Lanchester writes:

At first the film was to be about Henry VIII and Anne of Cleves. All the comedy situations appeared to be about that queen and I was to play the part. I did play Anne of Cleves, but another wife came in, then another, as it became obvious that what the public knew about Henry VIII was that he had a lot of wives, and that was what they wanted to see. Korda was right.<sup>57</sup>

*Henry VIII and his Six Wives* promises to cover the same familiar ground even in its very title. The various incarnations of Elizabeth I also confirm the popular stereotype of a jealous and unhappy, but passionately patriotic woman, and when the occasion of the coronation of Elizabeth II was marked by the appearance of *Young Bess* (1953) and *The Sword and the Rose* (1953), and the re-issue of *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex*, James Morgan criticized their numerous similarities in style and content, noting: 'those colourful Tudors have always implied the amours of Bluff King Hal and the splendours of the Virgin Queen.'<sup>58</sup> Similarly, in the historical comic-fantasy *Time Flies*, Tommy Handley's passage back through time is marked-off against well-known historical personalities, including Lincoln, Louis XIV, and Elizabeth.

The mere appearance (or mention) of a range of 'B-List' historical characters in support of a familiarly rendered historical star like Elizabeth I or Henry VIII might further

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<sup>57</sup> Elsa Lanchester, *Charles Laughton and I* (London: Faber and Faber, 1938), p120.

<sup>58</sup> James Morgan, 'Coronatiana U.S.A.', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 23, no. 1 (July-September 1953), pp43-6, p43. In *The Virgin Queen*, as in *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* and the British *Fire Over England* and *Mary, Queen of Scots*, Elizabeth has a quick temper and seems keenly aware of her sexual

reassure an audience of a film's authenticity. Members of this supporting cast have strong popular associations with a particular period, and are often artistic figures in minor roles of little relevance to the actual plot. Thus Holbein has a presence in *The Private Life of Henry VIII*; Byron figures in *Beau Brummell*; and in *Victoria the Great*, the Court Circular section of a newspaper is quoted as saying that Strauss will appear at a dinner in honour of Albert. One reviewer described the assortment of such figures in *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* as a 'portrait gallery', and this seems to me to capture the way in which they are unobtrusively 'quoted', forming part of an authentic background in the same manner as contemporary art.<sup>59</sup>

In focusing on the most 'memorable' characters and episodes of history, the British historical film recalls *1066 and all that*, a satire on popular history which claims to be 'the only memorable History of England, because all the History you can remember is in this book . . .'<sup>60</sup> In *1066*, the 'wave of Egg-kings' of Anglo-Saxon England is ignored because 'none of them [. . .] succeeded in becoming memorable . . .' (p15); a sentiment which is very similar to that expressed in the first title-card of *The Private Life Of Henry VIII* (quoted above), when the audience is informed that Catherine of Aragon will not feature because she is too respectable (and therefore of course dull and forgettable). However, Henry V (p54), Shakespeare (p62), Drake (p66), Bonnie Prince Charlie (p88), Pitt and Fox (p97), Wellington (p98) and Disraeli and Gladstone (p115) are all found to be memorable and are included in the book, as are memorable incidents like the Gunpowder Plot (p70), The Civil War (p71), the Crimean War (p109) and Khartoum (p115). The Tudors are said to take the throne because the Plantagenets have

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status. She flirts with Raleigh, and rails jealously against Throckmorton. She asks her lover 'am I old?', and informs him that she is a woman as well as a Queen.

<sup>59</sup> See *Kine Weekly*, 14 March 1940, p18.

<sup>60</sup> W. C. Sellar and R. J. Yeatman, *1066 and all that* (London: Methuen and Co, 1984), p5.



become increasingly less memorable during the Wars of the Roses (pp55-6), and amongst the Tudors, by far the most attention is paid to Henry VIII and Elizabeth I, the 'big two' who sandwich the 'smaller' Tudors Edward VI and 'Broody Mary'.

First published in 1930 then, *1066 and all that* reads almost as a fifty-year production schedule for British historical cinema, predicting all subsequent historical topics and also those topics that have been ignored. It suggests that historical films are referring to and locating themselves within the context of the 'popular historical consciousness' which the book plays upon, and which derives from other historical films, historical fiction and biography, 'historical tourism' and the museum, television and radio, history societies and oral history groups, state pageantry, commemorative events, and so on. In other words, historical films do not seem to aspire to the standards of academic history, as Toplin and Carnes suppose they should.<sup>61</sup> Thus, contrary to the argument recently advanced by John Whiteclay Chambers II and David Culbert, historical films do not simply 'create' or 'construct' a public memory of the past; rather they interact with this memory in a complex way.<sup>62</sup> Nor is the historical consciousness to which the genre refers as vague and limited as Moya Luckett has recently - and rather patronisingly - suggested.<sup>63</sup>

Dilys Powell points to these same conclusions when, having lamented the predictability of the historical genre – its 'inability to keep a narrative secret' – she asserts that *Anne*

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<sup>61</sup> Thus the 'history books' that *The Iron Duke*, *Khartoum* and others are said in their pressbooks to be 'bringing to life' can be seen as popular works rather than scholarly volumes. See the conclusion to this chapter for examples of this genre of historical writing.

<sup>62</sup> See *World War II: Film and History*, especially pp6, 155.

<sup>63</sup> See Moya Luckett, 'Image and Nation in 1990s British Cinema', in *British Cinema in the 90s*, ed. by Robert Murphy (London: BFI, 2000). Of *Elizabeth* (1998), she writes: 'Audiences familiar with Elizabeth's portraits are unlikely to know much more about her reign than a vague connection with Sir Walter Raleigh, Mary Queen of Scots and the Spanish Armada,' p90.



*of the Thousand Days* refers to those fragments of history ‘which cling in the memory of those of us who never at school got much beyond the reign prophetically hailed at the end of the film, of Elizabeth I.’<sup>64</sup> *Kine Weekly* also identified the deployment of memorable, well-remembered history as a specific point of appeal in films such as *Becket* and *Anne of the Thousand Days*.<sup>65</sup> I shall return to *1066 and all that* in the conclusion to this chapter, where it will help me make a number of further points about the British historical film, its historiographical roots, and the popular historical knowledge upon which it draws.

#### b. Accuracy and Authenticity

I have begun with these thoughts on subject matter, despite promising to leave this area for later consideration, because the issue of thematic originality provides a useful introduction to the twin concerns of accuracy and authenticity. Just as its subject matter seems to have been governed by estimates of popular knowledge and historical preferences, the narrative of a historical film was shaped by particular expectations regarding what historical errors audience members and critics might fail to register. For example, the fictitious meeting of Mary and Elizabeth I in *Mary, Queen of Scots* might be expected to go unnoticed because it was not widely known that they did not meet. At the same time, the promotional materials for that film boasted loudly of the research that had been done to ensure accuracy, whilst the film otherwise confirmed historical expectations in the kind of ways outlined above. Certainly, reviews of the film were generally approving of its version and portrayal of events.<sup>66</sup> Thus while Darryl Zanuck’s maxim ‘[t]here is nothing duller on the screen than being accurate but not

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<sup>64</sup> Dilys Powell, ‘Royal goings-on’, *Sunday Times*, 1 March 1970, p58.

dramatic' seems to be a reliable guide to the priorities of historical filmmakers,<sup>67</sup> within the films they produced this preference for narrative excitement was rarely so clear, being effectively 'disguised' by various assertions of historical credibility. In this connection, it is also important to recognise that, as Robert Birley has argued, such apocryphal moments and stories may encapsulate a true facet of a historical period, however untrue the facts upon which they are based.<sup>68</sup> I shall have more to say on license and the illusion of historical authenticity shortly.

Audience surveys do reveal a certain resistance to the apparent liberties taken by historical film. For example, an art student opined in Mayer's 'Study in Film Preferences' survey that '[h]istory is very much abused at times' (Doc. 27A, p201). In Mass-Observation's Bolton survey, an 18 year-old regular to the Palladium cinema commented: 'In historical films I think they are modernised too much. *Example* Some of the Furniture and tapestry in houses and Mansions. Also the utensils that they use for meals' (Palladium Men, Doc. 37, p45). At the more up-market Odeon cinema the story is the same, suggesting that the attitude is in no way specific to any class or income group. One eighteen year-old urged: 'Historical films should be authentic in outline without too much divergence from the actual story' (Odeon Men, Doc. 24, p80). Another decried history and political films because they were 'usually a perversion of the truth' (Odeon Men, Doc. 105, p96).

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<sup>65</sup> See *Kine Weekly*, 26 March 1964, pp8-9, and 28 February 1970 respectively.

<sup>66</sup> See, for example, Richard Combs' review in *Monthly Film Bulletin*, vol. 39, no. 460 (May 1972), p97.

<sup>67</sup> Zanuck enunciated this principle in relation to his film *The Longest Day*, and it is cited in Lawrence H. Suid, *Guts and Glory: Great American War Movies* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1978), pp149-50.

<sup>68</sup> See Robert Birley, *The Undergrowth of History: Some Traditional Stories of English History* (London: George Phillip & Son, 1955). Thus the story of Alfred and the cakes communicates the dire straits of the monarchy in the ninth century, whilst the image of Raleigh laying down his cloak before his queen expresses the imaginative hold which she cultivated as a means of governing.

As we saw in chapter three however, most of the comments passed on the genre were favourable. And on the subject of accuracy, many may have felt like one Palladium attendee, that '[i]n Historical pictures one seems to get a better Idea of the costumes and houses than one can read in books' (Palladium Women, Doc. 9, p55). Significantly, some writers recorded with great honesty that their feelings about historical accuracy varied from one example of the genre to another, depending largely upon expectation and what they already knew about the period in question. For example, a housewife who responded to Mayer's preference survey, wrote:

Both my husband and myself like historical romances, if not too far-fetched. That is, we enjoyed *Elizabeth and Essex* and *Henry VIII* but disliked *The Black Swan*. We really enjoyed *Robin Hood* because we had not expected it to be so believable. I think that is the main difference – we hate films that are supposed to be authentic but are not intelligently presented, but enjoy films that are frankly incredible, but good entertainment (Doc. 29A, p205).

Even more baldly, a twenty-four year-old stenographer stated: 'I object to the diversion from the true facts in most Hollywood period dramas, but that is only in the cases where I know the actual facts – where I'm not aware of them, I don't really care' ('A Study in Film Preferences', Doc. 34A, p218).

In the press also the same sort of principle applies. Interestingly, where the producers of *Mary, Queen of Scots* may have escaped censure by making sound assumptions about the historical knowledge of the film's reviewers, and by covering the tracks of its distortions, *Khartoum* achieved similarly favourable appraisals of its representations of the past by adopting the opposite tactic of coming clean. Thus the attacks of any well-informed critic might be pre-empted. Amid the general emphasis noted above on research and authenticity, the campaign book confesses that the meeting of Gordon and



the Mahdi was not historical. It is claimed that this is the film's 'one major departure from historical truth', but that it is credible and 'in keeping with actual events of the time.'

Jeffrey Richards notes of the widespread praise for *Sixty Glorious Years*: 'The only dissentient voices [. . .] were highbrow and left wing journals'<sup>69</sup>; that is, perspectives outside the 'main body' of opinion and thus not legislated for by film producers. *The New Statesman* for example pleaded:

Anybody who possesses even a small acquaintance with the history and personalities of the nineteenth century must recognize that the thing is a travesty of the truth.<sup>70</sup>

In a detailed analysis, Sue Harper notes that 'highbrow' sources were generally more critical of historical films than other reviewers in the period 1930-50,<sup>71</sup> and as we saw in chapter three, *Sight and Sound* took this critical tradition past the 1950s, until the end of the period that concerns me in this chapter.<sup>72</sup>

### c. What is the Nature of the Inaccuracies of Historical Film? or The 'Past-Presentness' of the Historical Film Genre

Paradoxically, it may be that historical films appear so convincing precisely *because* of their inaccuracies. If British historical films combine signals of historicity and

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<sup>69</sup> Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace*, p268.

<sup>70</sup> *New Statesman*, 22 October 1938.

<sup>71</sup> See *Picturing The Past*, p5. Harper focusses on the Historical Association, which in the 1930s and '40s 'displayed a mistrust of historical and its picturesque pleasures', p64. Its collaboration with the equally dour and elitist British Film Institute 'gave rise to a theory of historical representation which was of unparalleled narrowness', p73.

<sup>72</sup> Differences in political opinion and the highbrow/lowbrow division help to explain how the same film could simultaneously be found to be both accurate and inaccurate. Lawrence L. Murray discusses such



historical reliability with calculated confirmation of popular historical perceptions and a reaffirmation of historical knowledge, a film's inauthenticities (that is, the errors that critics and the public are expected to overlook), are equally important in establishing its historical status, because they are designed to make the film make sense to modern eyes. To call such departures from the historical record 'errors' is thus to use a misnomer, because they are departures taken from an informed perspective and with a specific intention. In fact a film's inaccuracies, which relate to present fashions and preoccupations, are intended to reassure and orientate an audience, and they work alongside the carefully chosen accuracies and the quickly recognizable, *1066 and all that*-style details of the plot. Hence the whole thing, historical flaws and all, is determined by the filmmaker's best guess at the level of historical knowledge of the public and what is on and in the public's mind; in short, by the satisfaction of public expectations and concerns. Historical films may therefore be said to deploy a powerful and seductive rhetoric of historical truthfulness.

The area of costume is a good one in which to initially expand and embroider some of these points, showing clearly how historical films always refer to the present as well as to the past. However, in due course I will show that the principle of 'past-presentness' extends beyond surface realism.

Firstly, writers on the subject of costume emphasize that absolute accuracy in historical films is impossible. Contemporary morality, for example, might forbid exact reproductions of costume from certain periods. As Edward Maeder writes: 'Near the end of the eighteenth century in France some dress styles allowed breasts to be

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disagreements in connection with *Bonnie and Clyde* in 'Hollywood, Nihilism and the Youth Culture of

exposed. Sometimes the nipples were even rouged.’<sup>73</sup> Even the most persuasive and well-connected filmmaker might struggle to get a film authentic to such fashions past the censor in any period before the ’70s. Indeed, in the 1940s the much less *risqué* costumes for *The Wicked Lady* necessitated cuts in the film for American distribution when objections were made to Margaret Lockwood’s *décolletage*.<sup>74</sup>

The problem of obtaining appropriate materials might also handicap efforts to achieve total authenticity.<sup>75</sup> In addition, just as Maurice Carter explained how changing technology could impact heavily on set design, costume was affected by technical developments. The clothing demands of World War II inspired a revolution in the textile industry, and many new processes were perfected. These ‘improved the designer’s ability to simulate the past but also increased the potential for error arising from the use of fabrics that had no relation to the period.’<sup>76</sup> The research that provided the models for costume departments might also rely on paintings and other images in which the costumes shown are romanticized and incorrect for the period. In Italian Renaissance art for example, portraiture often cast contemporary figures in classical attire. And even ‘authentic’ pictures (which is to say, ones which are properly reflective of the clothes worn during the period in question) might be mistranslated into inauthentic film costumes, because they typically record only external features, and do not show for example how soft a fabric is, or how freely a garment might move. Pam

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the Sixties: *Bonnie and Clyde*’, in *American History/American Film*, pp246-7.

<sup>73</sup> Edward Maeder, ‘The Celluloid Image: Historical Dress in Film’, in *Hollywood and History – Costume Design in Film* ed. by Edward Maeder (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987), p13.

<sup>74</sup> See Tom Dewe Matthews, *Censored* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1994), p108.

<sup>75</sup> Maeder asserts that, for example, ‘[n]o amount of work can ever produce a perfect rendition of the garb for a Northern European lord or lady of the Middle Ages. Their cloaks were often lined with a fur called miniver, made from hundreds – sometimes thousands – of pelts from the underbellies of small squirrels. After nearly 200 years as the mainstay of this fashion, the animal became extinct’, ‘The Celluloid Image’, p15. One might furthermore note that, even if such animals were still available, the current moral climate would forbid their exploitation for the mere provision of a film prop.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p35.

Cook goes so far as to argue that costume is always ‘a heterogeneous amalgam of styles and periods,’ and concludes that ‘the quest for exactitude would appear to be a lost cause.’ But this is (at the very least) an overstatement of the case.<sup>77</sup> Finally, where few images exist to be copied, the right costume might be put on the wrong sort of character.<sup>78</sup>

If ‘re-creations’, in the strictest sense of the word, are not attainable then, the interesting thing is that the inaccuracies of costume follow a general principle, which is that costumes must be in keeping with present fashions and notions of beauty and elegance. The convention is that clothes must *seem* to be accurate whilst also making fashion sense to contemporary audiences. But this is not a contradiction, because the modernity of clothes helps audiences to relax and accept the illusion of authenticity.

Evidence for the bifurcation of historical costume can be found both on the screen and in the comments of designers and others in the film industry. For example, though great efforts were put into providing Bette Davis with authentic costumes in *The Virgin Queen*, Joan Collins’ clothes are modified to emphasize the ‘lifted and separated’ breast arrangement that was fashionable in the 1950s. Similarly, in the pressbook for *Alfred The Great*, wardrobe designer Jocelyn Rickards explains that her intention was “to create designs which would appeal to the eyes of the twentieth century while remaining true to the spirit of the ninth.” In almost every case, as Maeder argues, ‘[w]hen re-creating a period garment – be it a toga or a hoop skirt – the designer, consciously or

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<sup>77</sup> Cook, *Fashioning the Nation*, p81. The heterogeneity of a style is not in itself a reason why a style cannot be copied. Cook’s assertion is part of her attack on cosy certainties in representations of history and national identity.

<sup>78</sup> In *Dorothy Vernon of Haddon Hall* (1924) for example, ‘many of the details, such as padded pleats at the hips and wired lace collars, are authentic.’ But Mary Pickford, the star, ‘was provided with clothing



unconsciously, adapts it to contemporary fashion.’<sup>79</sup> In this process, a number of ‘rules’ are usually obeyed. For example, ‘[f]ashion devices that shaped the body in earlier centuries are rarely worn in period films. The silhouette of the figure almost always remains contemporary, with perhaps a few added extensions, such as a bustle or leg-of-mutton sleeves, to make it appear more authentic.’ Also, as *The Virgin Queen* suggests, ‘[t]he emphasis on breasts and their placement is always consistent with what is fashionable when the film is made’, while ‘[h]ats frequently correspond to contemporary fashion instead of historic style’ (p40). Similarly, Alicia Annas argues:

while period films feature sets that are routinely authentic and costumes that are occasionally authentic, hairstyles and wigs are rarely authentic, and make-up never is. Despite these historical inaccuracies audiences believed that period movies presented true pictures of the past, as film make-up artists and hair stylists masterfully blended modern star images with illusions of historical reality.<sup>80</sup>

Such a subtle blend was necessary to preserve audience identification with the star, and to ensure that the paying public would never be confused and alienated.<sup>81</sup>

The connections thus established with the audience go still further in that historical film costume often sets up a kind of circuit, a relay of present informing past informing present. This is because period costumes, designed partly according to modern tastes, were then marketed to the public on a film’s release as part of its promotion, and might exert a reciprocal influence on taste and fashion. Thus the campaign book for *Victoria*

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that was much more lavish than her character would actually have been able to afford’. See ‘The Celluloid Image’, p33.

<sup>79</sup> ‘The Celluloid Image’, p14.

<sup>80</sup> Alicia Annas, ‘The Photogenic Formula: Hairstyles and Makeup in Historical Film’, in *Hollywood and History*, p54. Annas argues that like costume, hair and makeup have followed certain rules of fashion, which she tabulates on pages 60-1. Technical reasons are again partly responsible for shifts in these rules.

<sup>81</sup> It should be noted however that costumes and make-up for male stars might come much closer to authenticity than those for women. In *Lady Hamilton*, for example, Olivier’s Nelson suffers greying hair, ageing skin, and the loss of an eye, whilst little is allowed to obscure Vivien Leigh’s famous beauty.



*the Great* announces: 'Modern Adaptations of Victorian Fashions in Extensive Coast to Coast Style Promotion', while that for *Cromwell* advertises an 'Oliver Cromwell trouser suit' and a 'Midi Dress' in the style of Queen Henrietta Maria. Tudor-style hats for women also became very popular following the success of *The Private Life of Henry VIII*.<sup>82</sup> One respondent to Mayer's 'Films and the Pattern of Life' survey recorded:

Regarding fashion, I myself have taken dozens of clothes and hair styles from films, and will continue to do so, as I believe that this is a sure way of keeping in step with the fashions (Doc. 14, p43).

By marketing these clothes as exotically historical at the same time as they are readily wearable, the sense of familiarity with and acceptance of the distant past is increased, and a film may thus come to seem more historically credible.

The same principle, what might be called the *authenticating inaccuracy*, may sometimes be seen to operate on a larger scale in the narrative and dialogue of historical films. During World War II for example, the frequent references in historical films to the present, which were often imposed on the history portrayed, may have helped to make them seem more real and convincing.

As Antonia Lant has argued: 'the war caused every fiction, no matter how apparently remote from the crisis, to be understood in its terms.'<sup>83</sup> Nigel Mace, adopting the Sorlin thesis discussed in chapter one (that historical films reorganize the present using the past as a pretext, and also contribute to ideas of and attitudes towards the past circulating in the current culture), argues that wartime historical films unanimously

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<sup>82</sup> See Margaret Farland Thorp, *America at the Movies* (London: Faber, 1946), p108.

mediated 'Churchillian' notions of politics and Britishness, disguised in historical camouflage.<sup>84</sup> Again resistant to conservative readings, Cook suggests that Mace's essay offers 'a static, fossilized view of history as a coherent set of ideas straightforwardly accessible in the films themselves.' The problem is that '[i]n his desire to extract truths about the present from representations of the past, [Mace] bypasses the very elements, so crucial to the genre, that would problematize the search for truth in itself: costume and decor, the agents of duplicity.'<sup>85</sup> It is true that Mace's readings are not very complex, but his general points stand, because they are supported by material surrounding the films in question.

For example, the pressbook for *The Young Mr Pitt* makes explicit connections between the past and the present. One poster advertized: 'The story of a generation like ours – with a job to do! Every word this man uttered – everything he did – might have happened today!' Managers were encouraged to 'Sell its Amazing Timeliness!' and to mount 'Then and Now Displays', in order to '[take] advantage of the amazing parallel between world events today and those of the Eighteenth Century depicted in "The Young Mr Pitt".' A quiz to be placed on the radio or in a local newspaper also asked: 'What two British Prime Ministers faced a parallel situation, the threatened invasion of their country?' In their study of the film, Jeffrey Richards and Anthony Aldgate note that, in the ordering of its narrative and some of its dialogue, the film clearly echoes the

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<sup>83</sup> Antonia Lant, *Blackout: Reinventing Women for Wartime British Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p35.

<sup>84</sup> See Nigel Mace, 'British Historical Epics in the Second World War', in *Britain and the Cinema in the Second World War* ed. by P. M. Taylor (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), especially p119.

<sup>85</sup> *Fashioning the Nation*, pp68-9. Cook also accuses Mace of relying on 'an unacceptably narrow range of films', an outrageous comment given that Cook (in her *book*) makes use of only four films herself. Moreover, they are highly tendentious selections. She writes: 'I've chosen, for the purposes of argument, to look at four costume dramas which feature narratives set in European locales, cross-cultural and/or cross-class romance and, most important, an identity crisis in a central protagonist' (pp89-90). In other words, four films which closely fit her requirements for a more complicated, inauthentic national

events of 1940, and the concerns and circumstances of wartime Britain in general.<sup>86</sup> Accordingly, many reviewers recognized Pitt as ‘the Churchill of the Napoleonic era.’<sup>87</sup> R. C. Sheriff, writing in his autobiography of the government’s recognition of the propaganda value of film, noted that ‘[t]he sort of pictures they had in mind would relate valiant episodes in Britain’s not too distant past that would serve to counteract enemy propaganda . . . ,’<sup>88</sup> and indeed a number of other historical films from the ’40s have similarly apparent ties to contemporary politics.<sup>89</sup>

In the later 1930s also, politically-motivated past-present connections are clearly evident in key historical films, and in this period the general absence in war films of such unambiguous calls for military preparedness as are found in *Fire Over England* seems to suggest that such sentiments could only be expressed if wrapped in a historical cloak. A sequence from the same film also resurfaces in *The Lion Has Wings* (1939), with the effect of ‘making even more explicit the parallel between past and present’, as James Chapman has recently observed.<sup>90</sup> Landy contends that in *Fire Over England*, ‘[t]he implied analogy between past and present political events is easily lost in the

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identity. She adds unconvincingly: ‘None of these elements is particularly unusual in British cinema of the period’, p90.

<sup>86</sup> ‘The Young Mr Pitt’ in *Britain Can Take It* by Richards and Aldgate, pp146, 147, 149, 150. In the same piece, *The Prime Minister* is also shown to have strong links to the current national situation.

<sup>87</sup> The phrase belongs to Caroline Lejeune, who used it in *Woman’s Magazine*, October 1942.

<sup>88</sup> R. C. Sheriff, *No Leading Lady: An Autobiography* (London: Gollancz, 1968), p321.

<sup>89</sup> We shall see in chapter six that the 1945 *Henry V* is arguably cut to function as blank verse propaganda, and it is introduced with a dedication to ‘the Commandos and Airborne troops of Great Britain, the spirit of whose ancestors it has been humbly attempted to recapture in some ensuing scenes.’ Similarly, after watching *Lady Hamilton*, Churchill himself is reported to have said to his guests: “‘Gentlemen, I thought this film would interest you, showing great events similar to those in which you have just been taking part,’” sentiments which strongly accord with Nigel Mace’s argument that wartime historical films articulated ‘Churchillian’ perspectives. Churchill’s comments were recorded in diary form by Sir Alexander Cadogan (see *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan, O.M., 1939-45* ed. by David Dilks (New York, 1972)) and are cited by K. R. M. Short in his essay ‘*That Hamilton Woman* (1941): propaganda, feminism and the production code’, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, vol. 11, no. 1 (1991), p14.

<sup>90</sup> James Chapman, *The British At War: Cinema, State and Propaganda, 1939-1945* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1998), p223.



fascination with the exotic re-creation of Elizabethan splendor ...'<sup>91</sup> But, as elsewhere in her analysis of the historical genre, Landy ignores a range of extra-textual material, which in this case clearly draws attention to the film's past-present parallels.

Frank Launder, co-writer of *The Young Mr Pitt* with Sidney Gilliat, remembered that the delivery of its allegorical lessons *demand*ed that inaccuracies be built into the script:

The battles that Sidney and I fought with Carol Reed, Robert Donat and Ted Black were in the main aimed at us showing the human imperfections of William Pitt and giving Charles James Fox a place in the sun. We lost all along the line. Pitt became a paragon of virtue, which he certainly was not, and the part of Fox, by far the most interesting character, was whittled down to give more footage to the heroic Pitt.<sup>92</sup>

Robert F. Moss rather sniffily characterizes the resultant film as a lazy, simplistic 'morality play.'<sup>93</sup> But again, the present-mindedness of the genre's 'lessons' seem merely to have reinforced the public's conviction of their value and the historical status of the films in question. Thus one respondent to Mass-Observation's Bolton Survey favoured history in the cinema 'because one must understand it to come to an understanding of how things stand today in other countries in Europe' (Crompton Men, Doc. 37, p66). The press too approvingly described the film as 'historical' in the close vicinity of comments about *The Young Mr Pitt's* propaganda value, and the same chastening and exhortatory 'messages' that produced its distortions. As *Today's Cinema* noted:

Never has any film more perfectly expressed the feeling and temper of the British people in times of stress and trouble such as we are

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<sup>91</sup> See *British Genres*, p66.

<sup>92</sup> Geoff Brown, *Launder and Gilliat* (London: BFI, 1977), p104.

<sup>93</sup> Robert F. Moss, *The Films of Carol Reed* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan Press, 1987), pp130-2.

passing through today. *The Young Mr Pitt* paints a huge canvas of political history but never obscures the human element, touches the heart with the splendour of its patriotic fervour and stimulates the mind with its fury and argument.

It was found to be 'a film of yesterday for today that will exert a tremendous influence on tomorrow.'<sup>94</sup> Outside of the urgent context of the war, as we have seen, critics were often less tolerant of historical inventions.

It is notable that even as the inauthenticities of *The Young Mr Pitt* were found to be convincingly historical, similar licence in German films of the same period earned them critical vituperation.<sup>95</sup> This may mean that newspapers were patriotically overlooking the distortions of British historical film in the war period. But perhaps their reviewers believed the British films to be true, not because, as in the case of *Mary, Queen of Scots*, they were unaware of a detail of history, but because the distortions *made sense* to them, in a way that Nazi distortions did not. At the very least, this factor may have supported the national imperatives of wartime, with the effect of making reviewers particularly intolerant of German inaccuracies.<sup>96</sup>

The failure of historians such as those writing in *Past Imperfect* to attend to such matters as costume,<sup>97</sup> or the discourses surrounding historical films and the evidence

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<sup>94</sup> *Today's Cinema*, 17 June 1942.

<sup>95</sup> Richards and Aldgate discuss German wartime historical film in 'The Young Mr Pitt,' *Britain Can Take It*, pp155-7.

<sup>96</sup> If British historical films have become more believably historical because of the immediacy and modernity of their various errors and inaccuracies, historical comedies make use of a different, much more blatant type of inaccuracy, deriving much of their humour from deliberate and obvious anachronism. For example, in *Up the Chastity Belt*, the Crusades turn out to be a mass 'love-in', at which Saladin advises visitors to 'freak out' and 'make love, not war', and Lurkalot wins a joust with recourse to a giant magnet.

<sup>97</sup> Pam Cook argues that costume has been generally underrated and too often overlooked. She gives a number of possible reasons for this, including the importance attached to the director at the expense of others who contributed to the 'look' of a film; widespread anxiety about the body; 'suspicion of fashion's

for audience response, means that the principle of past-presentness is lost on them. In fact, to attack the genre for not being 'true' is to misunderstand the way it works. Historical films may seem to invite such attacks to some extent, because they claim to be accurate and authentic in the ways noted above, and never offer themselves as interpretations.<sup>98</sup> But this should be seen only as a convention. Taken as a whole, historical films are more complex than this, as we shall see at greater length when I come to discuss the historical film as myth later in this chapter. The issue of myth will also show that there is rather more to the past-presentness of the genre than I have been able to indicate here.

Questions of the connectedness of historical films to current fashions, nostrums, ideas and ideals, lead me now to consider in more detail how history on film is made filmic.

### **3. What is Unique About History as Mediated Through Historical Film?**

I have so far examined some of the features of history when it is put on film, and have found that certain strategies are employed to reinforce the impression of historicity and historical authenticity. We have also seen that historical films are designed to be familiar to their audience, both in terms of detail and the historical subject matter presented, and in terms of their inaccuracies and departures from the historical record. However, none of these features is necessarily unique to historical film. In this section I want to extend my analysis to those areas of the genre which are specifically and exclusively filmic. These features help to adapt history to the tendencies, demands and

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contamination by consumerism and elitism'; and the female associations of the subject. See *Fashioning the Nation*, pp41, 43, 44.



capabilities of narrative film, and may set up expectations relating to the particular discourses of history that are to be found in the historical genre.

#### a. The Association of Historical Film with Film History

One way in which historical film is distinguishable from other constructions and representations of history is through its tactic of blurring the distinctions between historical film and film history. In keeping with the general practices of the studio era, when every film was made to appear a unique film-viewing experience, each new instance of the historical genre is claimed to set new standards or to scale new heights of scale, scope, expense or entertainment, and is thus imagined as ‘historic’ in a way which echoes and draws attention to the historicity of the events featured in the film’s narrative. Thus, for example, the campaign book for *Alfred the Great* promises ‘a period never before filmed’ and costumes that are ‘some of the most sumptuous ever made for the screen.’ And of the film’s battles (this being another aspect of the historical film’s past-presentness) it is claimed: ‘the preparation for those Dark Age conflicts between Alfred’s Saxon army and the invading Danes could hardly have equalled the detailed preparation for M.G.M.’s staging of this epic story . . .’ Similarly, Julian Blaustein, the producer of *Khartoum*, is said in the campaign book for that film to have ‘soon found himself committed to an enterprise and expedition which for complexity rivalled the events of the Sudan 80 years before.’

It is claimed that *Fire Over England* offers ‘a panorama of splendour and action unprecedented in the annals of film entertainment’, while *Anne of the Thousand Days*

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<sup>98</sup> Grindon, whose relative hostility to the genre was noted above, repeatedly underlines the need to

‘is a landmark in the historical feature film’ and *The Iron Duke* is ‘an epoch-making film in English film history.’ *Victoria the Great* claims for itself the title of ‘the Greatest British historical drama ever filmed’, and quotes *The Sunday Pictorial* to the following effect:

Some years ago I told you that a film called ‘The Private Life of Henry VIII’ would be a milestone in the story of British films. Now I must use that word again. ‘Victoria the Great’ is certainly a milestone in British film production.

Much advertizing capital was also generated from the fact that the film was the ‘First Film Permitted After Royal Taboo.’

#### b. The Presence of the Star

The most prominent characteristic of filmed history is the presence of ‘the star.’ As Christine Gledhill writes, the star in general is crucial to ‘the social production and circulation of meaning, linking industry and text, film and society.’<sup>99</sup> Shortly after the Second World War, a survey indicated that the star was the main factor governing the cinemagoer’s choice of film,<sup>100</sup> and magazines like *Picturegoer* and *Picture Show*, in addition to the popular press, fed the voracious popular appetite for star-information and gossip. Most of the top box-office stars were American. But as Sarah Street notes: ‘The fact that for much of the century the British film industry has been in poor economic health has not prevented British stars from being important cultural icons in

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consult a film’s sources, in order to get behind the veneer of truth and impartiality. See *Shadows on the Past*, for example p42.

<sup>99</sup> Christine Gledhill, ‘Introduction’, in *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, pxvi.

<sup>100</sup> *Kine Weekly*, 20 December 1945, p71. Mayer’s researches into ‘Films and the Pattern of Life’, conducted at roughly the same time, corroborate this finding, and offer insights into the often intense relationships fans established with their favourite performers.

particular decades – Gracie Fields in the 1930s, Anna Neagle and Margaret Lockwood in the 1940s, Kenneth More and Dirk Bogarde in the 1950s.’<sup>101</sup>

In the historical film, the star embodies and humanizes remote figures, and lends them some of his or her special status and meaning, even as the role confers extra meaning, exceptionality and value on the star. He or she also conveys much of the historical information that moves the narrative along, through his or her dialogue, and with the help of a cast of co-stars, provides a means by which the audience can distinguish between sudden floods of historical characters. The star thus mediates history to the public, and is a further and crucial element of the genre’s past-presentness and its related capacity to convince.<sup>102</sup>

The importance of the star in the mediation process means that, in addition to being bound still closer to the present, historical film is led away from abstract historical factors and is personalized, which of course further accounts for much of the suspicion and hostility of many professional historians to the genre.<sup>103</sup> It should be recognized however that a personalized approach to history is not altogether invalid when applied

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<sup>101</sup> Street, *British National Cinema*, p146. In the late ’40s, the Rank Charm School testified to the British film industry’s efforts to satisfy public demand for indigenous stars (on which see Geoffrey Macnab, *J. Arthur Rank and the British Film Industry* (London: Routledge, 1993)), and at this time British stars proliferated, particularly in association with the Gainsborough melodramas. Street points out that ‘the fragmented nature of the British film industry since the 1960s has created difficulties for actors seeking to establish an image’ (*British National Cinema*, p142). But not insuperable difficulties, as Sean Connery and Michael Caine have shown.

<sup>102</sup> Theo Furstenuau argues that interpretation and subjectivity have an important role in historical film, because mere re-creation is frigid and uninteresting. He suggests that in acting too, total imitation of an historical character is ineffective; a role must be interpreted to make sense to the present (‘The Nature of Historical Films’, *Cultures* 2, pp37-8). This is what the star does. Furstenuau has in mind the *avant-garde*, auteurist’s vision of history and the modernist performance, but his views further support the notion that even ‘frigid re-creations’ establish close ties with the present.

<sup>103</sup> We saw in chapter one that the lack of any generalizing facility in historical film is a particular *bête noir* for Michael Parenti, whilst in setting out ‘What Historians Want’ in *Sight and Sound* vol. 11, no. 41 (Summer 1942), pp23-4, p24, Rachel Reid hoped for historical films where ‘there is no pretence of showing real historical personages’, and where emphasis would rather be placed on the importance of processes and principles.



to the autocratic monarchs of medieval and early modern history. As Antonia Fraser contends: 'the innate weaknesses of King Charles I undoubtedly affected the course of the Civil War period, just as the coincidental inability of George I to speak English or understand England unarguably allowed ministerial politics to develop freely during his reign.'<sup>104</sup> Opposing the tendency of much contemporary history-writing to eschew powerful individuals, John Vincent has argued that even in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, 'classes, structures, value systems, the whole sociological apparatus, do not do certain things,' such as plan, plot, lead or take decisions. Great episodes of history can only be understood with reference to politics and force – to 'kings and their battles.'<sup>105</sup>

Equally, critics of the personalization of history in historical films seldom take account of variations in the extent to which the great historical individual is seen to function independently. Thus in the later 1930s and early '40s, as the exigencies of a war that extended to the home front produced a political rhetoric of 'The People's War',<sup>106</sup> the historical genre became far more thickly populated with 'ordinary' characters. Visually, crowds are foregrounded and collective effort is dramatized, whilst historical characters become more motivated by the interests of the man in the street. The Queen is seen to be responsive to the popular will when she is stirred into action by a mass demonstration against the Corn Laws in *Victoria the Great*, whilst in *The Young Mr Pitt* the Prime Minister doubts that he has the country's support when a gang of hired thugs attacks him, a pair of pugilists later apprising him of the actual situation. Compare, for example, *The Private Life of Henry VIII*, in which ordinary people appear

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<sup>104</sup> Antonia Fraser, 'Introduction', in *The Lives of the Kings and Queens of England* ed. by Antonia Fraser (London: Seven Dials, 1999), p8.

<sup>105</sup> John Vincent, *An Intelligent Person's Guide to History* (London: Duckworth, 1995), chapter v. The quotation is from p43.

mainly as servants, and are positioned as passive spectators to the life of the monarch. In later films such as *Becket* and *The Lion in Winter*, 'the people' are similarly unobtrusive.

Jean-Louis Comolli is one of those who has criticised the presence of historical characters in historical film, though from an unusual perspective. He argues:

If the imaginary person, even in a historical fiction, has no other body than that of the actor playing him, the historical character, filmed, has at least two bodies, that of the imagery [through which the character is familiar to us] and that of the actor who represents him for us. There are at least two bodies in contention, one body too much.<sup>107</sup>

But this discrepancy, this 'doubt as to the pertinence' of actor to character, is more true in theory than in practice. The star's part in the mediation of history, and a sense of his or her accurate embodiment of the historical figure, are achieved in the British historical film partly by establishing (through interviews and other promotional material) a particularly close relationship between star and part. The process of establishing this relationship feeds off audience familiarity with the history shown and its knowledge of the star, and his or her personal life and oeuvre. To borrow Richard Dyer's terminology, it is a process which deploys two key dichotomies: star-as-star/star-as-role, and star-as-self/star-as-role, in which the dividing lines are fluid and indistinct.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> See Angus Calder, *The People's War: Britain 1939-1945* (London: Pimlico, 1992), especially p138.

<sup>107</sup> Jean-Louis Comolli, 'Historical Fiction – A Body Too Much', *Screen* vol. 19, no. 2 (Summer, 1978), p44. Comolli suggests that it is possible for a film to turn this feature to advantage, as in *La Marseillaise*, but regrets that this film is far from being typical of the genre. See especially pp47-53.

<sup>108</sup> Dyer develops these ideas in *Stars* (London: BFI, 1979).

Thus Anna Neagle retrospectively blurs the distinctions between herself as a star and the historical role she had been assigned when she recounts the following episode, which occurred during the filming of *Sixty Glorious Years*:

Mrs Gregor, owner of the Invercauld Arms, was wonderfully kind to me during my first visit and I spent several evenings listening to her reminiscences. From her early girlhood she had visited the Castle and she had many stories to tell of the Queen's visits to Balmoral [...] We stayed with her during the filming. One evening, returning from the Castle still wearing my make-up, I met Mrs Gregor in the entrance hall. For a moment I thought she was ill. She stood, transfixed, white-faced, staring. Suddenly she whispered 'The Queen – she has risen.'<sup>109</sup>

'The Regal Neagle', as Sarah Street has called her, came to occupy through her star image a position in film analogous to Victoria's position in British politics and society at large,<sup>110</sup> and the report of Mrs Gregor's reaction reinforces this, collapsing the boundaries between star image and part played. Similarly, Michael Balcon remembered of *The Iron Duke* that its star George Arliss 'made the Duke of Wellington look and talk like George Arliss rather than the other way round.'<sup>111</sup> The fact that Robert Donat, whose chronic asthma eventuated in an early death, took the part of William Pitt, whose illness and physical decline are charted in *The Young Mr Pitt*, also seems to resonate to the star-as-self/star-as-role dichotomy and makes his performance in that film extra convincing, though I have found no evidence that this connection was made by contemporary critics or audiences.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Neagle, *There's Always Tomorrow*, p106.

<sup>110</sup> Street discusses Neagle's star persona at some length in *British National Cinema*, pp124-134. She notes that Neagle was constructed as a respectable, patriotic, modest and stoical figure, and presented as a 'national emblem', p127.

<sup>111</sup> Michael Balcon, *Michael Balcon Presents: A Lifetime of Films* (London: Hutchinson, 1968), p89.

<sup>112</sup> The course of Donat's illness, and its deleterious effect on his career and social life, emerges vividly from his private letters which can be found in the John Rylands Library Special Collection at the University of Manchester.



However, star-role correlations of both types were regularly made and circulated by the genre's pressbooks and posters, and are closely connected to the claims of accuracy and historical credibility which appear in the same sorts of places. The pressbook for *Khartoum* for example makes basic star-role associations by matching still photographs from the film with original portraits, emphasizing the stars' physical affinities for their parts. A ready-made press story for *Becket* goes further (though it is still rather vague) when Peter Glenville the director asserts:

We had our choice from a wide assortment of outstanding actors, but I cannot conceive of more ideal or perfect casting than Richard Burton and Peter O'Toole.

Similarly, a letter included in the pressbook for *Cromwell*, which is intended to be copied and sent to local educationalists, unconvincingly proclaims that 'Alec Guinness is Charles I.' But the most notable instance of star/role consanguinity in British historical cinema is that of Charles Laughton and Henry VIII.

Elsa Lanchester begins her discussion of *The Private Life of Henry VIII* by suggesting that Laughton's likeness for Henry was natural and self-evident: 'A great number of people claim the idea for *Henry VIII*, but then in a way it is a fairly obvious idea. For many years people have taken one look at Charles and said: "You know, you ought to do Henry VIII." It is rather like saying when there is a blue sky: "Isn't it a lovely blue sky?"'<sup>113</sup> Similarly, the campaign book for the film records that 'Charles Laughton required and used no make-up for his portrait of England's greatest king in "The Private Life of Henry VIII" except the growing of a beard.' When this theme is amplified elsewhere in the campaign book, an almost supernatural element is added:

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<sup>113</sup> Elsa Lanchester, *Charles Laughton and I*, p120.

Charles Laughton raised his own beard to play the role of the king in "The Private Life of Henry VIII." Curiously enough, it grew of its own accord in the design worn by England's greatest monarch, and required precisely no barbering to make Laughton resemble almost identically Holbein's famous portrait of Henry VIII.

Marcia Landy suggests that in the film Laughton appears to be 'self-consciously playing' at being a historical figure.<sup>114</sup> But in fact Laughton was aiming to achieve a much more accurate and serious representation of Henry than this implies. Indeed, as Laughton diligently sets about researching the role in Lanchester's account, his affinity develops beyond physical propinquity until star and role begin to merge:

Charles took a great deal of trouble to probe the period and character of Henry VIII before starting work . . . [He] read every possible book he could get on the subject, and saw innumerable paintings of Henry VIII. Gradually the character began to soak in. One day he would think he had got the walk, the next day he would lose it; then he would get a look in the eye and let that stew for a few days. After about a week's shooting on the picture I should say he found himself getting into the part (p131).

Thus ultimately, 'Charles had Henry VIII so in his bones that it was a foregone conclusion that he would give a good performance' (p131).

Laughton's identification with Henry VIII has been so powerful that almost all subsequent portrayals of the monarch refer to his performance in some way. We saw above how *Henry VIII and his Six Wives* seems to echo Korda's film, and its influence is also seen across the Atlantic (where *The Private Life of Henry VIII* did very well) in Montague Love's performance in *The Prince and the Pauper* (1937). Jeffrey Richards suggests that it is because of Laughton's performance that 'there is yet to be a film

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<sup>114</sup> See Landy, *British Genres*, p62.

dealing with the political events of the reign,'<sup>115</sup> but this may also have much to do with the tendency of historical film to utilize only the most 'memorable' facets of history. Lanchester ends by remarking that her husband 'suffered agonies readjusting the celluloid character that he had established, and the results may have been disappointing to fans who went to see their Henry in the flesh' at subsequent public appearances and performances in the theatre (p131). In other words, as well as conflating the star's image and his role, the film produced indeterminacy between the star's self and the role, and between the star and his acting *performance*.<sup>116</sup>

Star-role connections may be reinforced intertextually in the historical film (but are infrequently so in the biopic) by a star playing the same role on more than one occasion. This is one reason for the ongoing strength of Neagle's association with Victoria, and Laughton reprised his performance as Henry in the American production *Young Bess*, missing a hat-trick because *The Field of the Cloth of Gold*, planned by London Films in 1934, never went into production.<sup>117</sup> As Peter O'Toole suggests of his involvement in both *Becket* and *The Lion in Winter*, a later performance may be very much informed by an earlier one:

It was marvellous because they were somehow extensions of each other [...] Unless I'd played Anouilh's Henry, I couldn't have

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<sup>115</sup> Richards, 'Imperial Images: The British Empire and Monarchy on Film' in *Cultures 2*, p102.

<sup>116</sup> Star-as-star/star-as-actor is another of the dichotomies Richard Dyer argues to be inherent in stardom. The various identifications between star and part acted, if not resisted or revised, might lead to type casting. As Lanchester writes of her own career: 'Henry VIII brought me paens of praise but few offers. As Anne of Cleves I had done my best to look like hell to keep Henry VIII at arm's length, and it seemed that I had done so too realistically [. . .] Eventually I signed a contract with M.G.M., but they never quite knew what to do with the red-headed Londoner who deceived them by turning up in Hollywood instead of the blonde German gawk they had expected'. See *Charles Laughton and I*, p129.

<sup>117</sup> See *Kine Weekly*, 5 April 1934, p30, where the 'forthcoming' film is advertized. It was to 'show one of the most glorious chapters in English history', and would have co-starred Merle Oberon and Flora Robson, both of whom also had historical associations.



played Jimmy Goldman's Henry the way I did! 'Cause the sense of loss of Becket filled everything I did in the other play [sic].<sup>118</sup>

This kind of repetition may have been an audience alarm call to some of the generic features examined above. In particular, it might have functioned as a potent reinforcement of an audience's sense of authenticity, being a reassurance that the star concerned is indeed an ideal embodiment of the figure in question, and that the previous film was indeed historically valid. Additionally, if the earlier film in a pair of performances was widely understood to be a historical film, then the later film might more probably have been read in the same light.<sup>119</sup>

Certain stars have also become associated with the historical film genre, and George Custen suggests that this is a matter of product differentiation, 'be it film genre or star, in a highly competitive consumer market.'<sup>120</sup> The U.S.-based George Arliss for example played much the same character in *Disraeli* (1929), *Voltaire* (1933), *Alexander Hamilton* (1931), *Cardinal Richelieu* (1934) and *The Iron Duke* (1934).<sup>121</sup> In British cinema, Robert Morley acquired a reputation for playing 'Technicolor kings' in historical films, and Dilys Powell observed of his performances: 'Whatever historical personage he plays from Louis XVI to Charles James Fox, all end up looking and sounding uncommonly like Robert Morley himself.'<sup>122</sup> Morley's historical

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<sup>118</sup> Lewis Archibald, 'Peter O'Toole: A man who dreams impossible dreams', *Show* (January, 1973), p30.

<sup>119</sup> With a similar range of potential effects, historical films have also drawn on televisual intertexts, as in the case of Glenda Jackson's transferral of her Elizabeth I from *Elizabeth R* to *Mary, Queen of Scots*. In discussing the spate of sit-com spin-offs which appeared in British cinema in the 1970s, Sarah Street explains such borrowings with reference to 'the industry's dire financial problems and the need to attract audiences for whom television was their primary screen entertainment'; proven television successes represented 'safe bets' to wary producers. See *British National Cinema*, pp97-8.

<sup>120</sup> Custen, *Bio/Pics*, p60.

<sup>121</sup> As Custen observes, 'Arliss's great men became, except for a few wigs here, and a change of scenery there, remarkably interchangeable.' *Bio/Pics*, p61.

<sup>122</sup> See Sheridan Morley, *Robert My Father* (London: Orion, 1994), pp92, 152. Powell is quoted on p93.

undertakings might have been still more numerous, but for the fact that he and Charles Laughton tended to contest the same sort of role.<sup>123</sup>

Robert Donat and Anna Neagle also appeared in a number of different historical roles,<sup>124</sup> and again this was sometimes used as a promotional feature in a particular campaign, functioning in support of the genre's tendency to 'quote' other historical films, and its paralleling of filmed history with film history, which were discussed above. The pressbook for *Victoria the Great* for example records:

Fittingly, the big screen role fell to the actress whose work in "Nell Gwyn" and "Peg of Old Drury" marked her as the ace interpreter of historical feminine characters.

Advance publicity for *Mary, Queen of Scots* makes similar moves to capitalize on the generic associations of Vanessa Redgrave and others.<sup>125</sup> But, as I noticed in discussing the interview and the autobiography as sources for historical film in chapter three, Redgrave and a number of others who appeared in historical roles are more firmly associated with other films. These actors often tried to avoid association with cinema in general, preferring instead to be remembered for their more 'legitimate' work in the theatre.<sup>126</sup> Where the star is not so firmly established in film or the historical genre as Neagle then, there is room for ambivalence in the star's meaning and the associations

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., pp74, 149, and p97 where Morley describes Laughton as his father's 'regular nemesis.'

<sup>124</sup> Donat appeared in *The Private Life of Henry VIII* as well as *The Young Mr Pitt*, and devotees of his career might also have known that he turned down several other historical roles, including Beau Brummell, Robin Hood and Disraeli, and biographical parts such as Lawrence of Arabia, Marco Polo, Pagannini and M. Curie. Kenneth Barrow thus seems to be justified in his claim that Donat was the British counterpart to Paul Muni. See *Mr Chips*, p111. Of *Sixty Glorious Years*, Graham Greene remarked: 'Miss Neagle seems to be attempting all our great national figures . . .'. See *The Pleasure Dome* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1972), p203. Greene's original review appeared in *Spectator*, 4 November 1938.

<sup>125</sup> See for example *Kine Weekly*, 12 June 1971.

<sup>126</sup> Julian Petley criticizes the anti-film bias of performers in the '70s and '80s, and blames Britain's theatrical tradition for cinema's failure to match the dynamism and innovation of pop music in this period. See 'Reaching for the Stars', in *British Cinema Now*, p115. Sarah Street takes a longer view, but

activated. But I shall argue that theatrical connotations are not necessarily out of keeping with the genre as a whole.

Another reason for the fact that relatively few actors have achieved a significant association with the genre is that casting in it has mostly been determined on the basis of physical similarity to the historical figure in question. This factor also affects the way stardom in the genre can be 'used' critically, in that it obstructs the tracing of changing ideals and values through the notion of typicality.<sup>127</sup> This is a much easier task in a fictional genre like the American Western.<sup>128</sup> Hence, in British cinema (where, as we saw in chapter two, generic production has often been less dense and consistent than in America), most 'star-studies' have taken a pan-generic perspective.<sup>129</sup>

Though likeness has tended to be the primary consideration in casting the British historical film, the fact that actors in the genre largely have a common theatrical background is important, because we will see that it is a further way in which some of the generic distinctions made by audiences and critics can be accounted for. An acquaintance with the stage lends a performer status and gravitas, and fits him or her for the 'institutional' roles characteristic of what I will propose is a traditional and 'institutional' genre. Furthermore, as noted in chapter two, stars and their gestures, postures and types of intonation are all signs of indigenous cultural codes, and the close associations between English stage acting and Shakespeare and all that Shakespeare entails in terms of enunciation, technique and so on, lends the actors concerned an

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similarly sets British stardom in the context of 'the theatrical legacy of a suspicious attitude towards the filmic, which originates in cinema's formative years', *British National Cinema*, p145.

<sup>127</sup> On questions of types and typicality, see Dyer, *Stars*, pp53-68.

<sup>128</sup> See for example Ed Buscombe's *The BFI Companion to the Western*, on the significance for the Western of Tom Mix's supercession of William S. Hart as 'the number one Western star', pp30-1.



aspect which is not only historical but also national. This Shakespearean dimension is repeatedly underlined in a souvenir brochure for *The Lion in Winter* through the biographies of both the stars and production personnel, and is accompanied by an emphasis on *British* theatre and the Britishness of most of the cast.<sup>130</sup>

The national associations and expectations triggered by historical acting are apparent from the evidence of audience surveys. For example, a frequenter of the Odeon Cinema in Bolton opined to Mass Observation that there are 'outstanding stories such as *Fire Over England* for which only England can produce the right actors' (Women, Doc. 39, p112); while another writes:

It is [. . .] objectionable to see the part of the British monarch or a member of the aristocracy played by an American, doing all the wrong things and speaking with the wrong accent (Women, Doc. 167, p132).<sup>131</sup>

It is also the case that a theatrical performance style might be particularly suited to the historical genre. As Rex Harrison writes:

In the old films, the close-up was really all that mattered, and actors accordingly learned close-up acting [...] With the advent of the wide-screen the techniques were totally changed, and they had to come back to the theatre actors, who knew how to move and project, and how to use their voices, as in the theatre.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> A good recent example of this is Andrew Spicer's essay 'Male Stars, Masculinity and British Cinema, 1945-1960', in *The British Cinema Book*, pp144-153.

<sup>130</sup> *The Lion in Winter* Souvenir Brochure, Film and Television Ephemera Collection, BFI.

<sup>131</sup> Street observes the frequency with which British actors took parts in American films in the 1920s and '30s, and suggests that '[m]any of the stereotypes of British behaviour originated in these Hollywood roles, producing fascinating constructions of Britishness from an American point of view. It is likely that these stereotypes, for example the upper-class, laconic Englishman, influenced casting and characterisation in British films intended for the export market'. See *British National Cinema*, p121. I submit that one sphere of filmmaking in which Britain invented its own stereotypes, and indeed influenced representations in American films rather than the other way around, is that concerned with British history.

<sup>132</sup> Rex Harrison, *Rex: An Autobiography* (London: Macmillan, 1974), p191.

Performances in the historical genre may also be theatrical in the sense of being rather stiff and formal, in the way that undistinguished performances of Shakespeare can be. This is especially true of imitations of Elizabeth I, again reflecting the qualities of her image in contemporary portraits. Performance style may also be excessive and 'hammy', as in the case of Laughton's rumbustious Henry VIII, perhaps as befits the evocation of such iconic, powerful figures as the great kings and queens of England.<sup>133</sup> Laughton's excess also underlines the various close connections of actor to part.

Finally, the language of the historical film, which we have seen to be occasionally quoted directly from original sources, and very often invested with a 'period feel' by means of grandiloquence, declamation and the occasional archaism, may also seem theatrical. Or more precisely, it may again seem Shakespearean, especially of course in films set in Tudor times. Thus, for example, Elizabeth's impassioned and ringingly patriotic Tilbury address in *Fire Over England*, delivered from horseback in the midst of the English camp to great acclaim from her army, is strongly redolent of Shakespeare's *Henry V*. Graham Greene also noted of *Tudor Rose* that often 'the dialogue is written in unconscious blank verse.'<sup>134</sup> Such films as *A Man for All Seasons* are also as 'talky' as their stage versions, whilst *Anne of the Thousand Days* even gives lengthy soliloquies to its protagonists.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> I am making a general point here, of course: historical performances are not always so remote or highly mannered. In *Cromwell* for example, Alec Guinness' subtle movements, nuanced gestures and fleeting expressions convey his hesitancy and loneliness. The effect is underlined by his being filmed from a low angle in isolation as a small figure in a large room, especially after the fall of Bristol and the exile of Prince Rupert.

<sup>134</sup> Graham Greene, *The Pleasure Dome*, pp73-4 (*Spectator*, 8 May 1936).

<sup>135</sup> Some of the reluctance to recognize *Nell Gwyn* as a fully-fledged historical text, apparent in the sources considered in chapter three, may be explained with reference to the apparent associations of the genre with legitimate theatre. This is because *Nell Gwyn* seems to owe more to the traditions of music hall. Thus Nell expresses an aversion to 'serious parts', addresses some of her bawdy comments directly to the cinema audience through the camera, and sings of 'buxom lasses', whilst throughout the film a great deal of winking is in evidence. Nell's preposterously large hat also accords with the slapstick comedy of music hall, and at one point her stage act even incorporates a performing dog.

### c. The Importance of Montage (But Not Flashback)

Because the discursive conventions of academic history, like the graph or chart, are unavailable to film, it uses other, specifically filmic means, to compress complex data, and to convey, compare and comment upon key pieces of information.

One such technique is the montage sequence. In *The Young Mr Pitt* for example this is used, together with the lengthy voice-over discussed above, to condense the North-Fox years of decline and decay into a manageable few seconds of screen time.<sup>136</sup> In *Fire Over England* too, the technique summarizes the preparations made upon sighting the Armada, with slightly distorted, chiaroscuro images of messengers on horseback, and ever-shorter shots of troop movements and civilians in the street also communicating the urgency of the situation. Dilys Powell noted in 1941 how often writers and directors stumbled over the problem of 'how to indicate the passage of time.' She writes: 'Blossom fading to bare branches, calendars flipping over their own pages, newspaper headlines: the tricks which were once so smart have turned into clichès now.'<sup>137</sup> By contrast, it seems possible to argue that the montage sequence has proven a sufficiently unobtrusive means of marking ellipsis to retain its currency. The same is perhaps also true of the fade and the dissolve, which is deployed for example in *The Private Life of Henry VIII* and (unusually for cinema after the late 1940s) in *A Man for All Seasons*. In addition to its elegance, the montage sequence is also informationally rich, and it is probable that without recourse to it many films would have had to forfeit either their consumable length or their intelligibility. George Custen argues that the device is



essential to the American historical film, and provides a stimulating discussion of its other effects, including its tendency to make narratives goal-oriented and to lend story-lines a sense of fate.<sup>138</sup>

Maureen Turim argues of another uniquely filmic device: 'If flashbacks give us images of memory, the personal archives of the past, they also give us images of history, the shared and recorded past.'<sup>139</sup> But in the films identified as historical in chapter three, flashbacks almost never appear. However they are a frequent component of melodramas like *Waterloo Road* (1944) and *Black Narcissus* (1947), costume dramas like *The Man in Grey*, *Saraband For Dead Lovers* (1948) and *Blanche Fury* (1947), and British biopics such as *The Magic Box*, *The First of the Few*, *Isadora* and *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), where they show the viewer a character's particular experience or interpretation of his or her personal past, and can be confessional in nature. We will discover in chapter five that flashbacks are just as prevalent in the American biopic, and indeed can be viewed as a defining feature of it.

In genres such as those that are adjacent to the historical film, the flashback is often signalled by a voice-over provided by the individual whose memories we are witnessing, whereas, as noted above, any voice-over other than the voice-of-history type is rare in historical film. The subjectivity entailed in the flashback would generally be inconsistent with the historical genre's claims to a wider historical truth, but interestingly, American films like *Young Bess*, which would otherwise seem to fit well into the British historical mould, also make prominent use of the device.

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<sup>136</sup> Another montage sequence illustrates the recovery under Pitt, and Richards and Aldgate refer to the pair as Carol Reed's 'March of Time'. See *Britain Can Take It*, p147.

<sup>137</sup> Dilys Powell, 'Gielgud as Disraeli', *Sunday Times*, 9 March 1941, p3.

<sup>138</sup> *Bio/Pics*, pp184-5. Custen records that 80% of his sample films deployed montage sequences.

In British historical cinema, the norm of temporal continuity applies even to films like *The Young Mr Pitt* and *Mary, Queen of Scots*, which deal with a particularly confusing number of locales over a relatively long period. The narrative style exhibited is typically dignified and unhurried,<sup>140</sup> and might be characterized as episodic.<sup>141</sup> These features often lend historical films a feeling of scholarly authority, and a sense of progressing through the chapters of a weighty historical tome, qualities which are augmented overall by smooth tracking shots and the assured seamlessness of the editing. However, the often uncomplicated chains of cause-and-effect in classical narrative, and its tendency to answer all of the questions posed and to fill all the gaps in what is known, have further excited the opposition of historians.

#### d. Spectacle

The British historical genre makes frequent use of long-shots with balanced, ordered composition, which connote solemnity and grandeur. Such shots are particularly prevalent in royal court scenes, as in *Mary, Queen of Scots* and *Catherine the Great* (particularly at the moment of the Empress Elizabeth's entrance); in Parliament settings, as in *The Young Mr Pitt*; in death scenes, as in *Nell Gwyn*; and in trial sequences, such as the ones in *Cromwell* and *Henry VIII and his Six Wives*. Often these shots are allied to relatively long takes. The distance put between the viewer and the action and the neutral angle of the shot (it being usually horizontal at 90 degrees)

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<sup>139</sup> Maureen Turim, *Flashbacks in Films: Memory and History* (New York: Routledge, 1989), p2.

<sup>140</sup> That *This England*, an unusual film which was not found to be historical in chapter three, is organized through flashbacks, lends it 'the air of a glorified village pageant' (*Britain Can Take It*, p139). *The Young Mr Pitt* and *Mary, Queen of Scots* seem, by contrast, serious and stately.

suggest objectivity, while the depth of the *mise-en-scène* involved (and the deep focus in later films such as *Mary, Queen of Scots*) can afford the viewer greater opportunities to appreciate the spectacular accuracy and authenticity of the costumes, colours and furnishings.<sup>142</sup> The sustained long-shot also supports the stately tendencies of narrative in the genre, and, in that it presents incidents and relationships in the form of large-scale, long-range tableaux, can be a reminder of the theatrical origins of such films as *A Man for All Seasons* and *Becket*, offering the spectator a viewpoint analogous to that of a theatre-goer.<sup>143</sup>

At the same time as the long-shot recalls to mind the theatre, it also suggests historical art on the grand scale. This kind of evocation is much more generalized than the ‘realization’ of specific canvasses that I discussed above. One example would be the execution tableau of Anne Boleyn in *Henry VIII and his Six Wives*, which might put one in mind of Paul Delaroche’s enormous canvas ‘The Execution of Lady Jane Grey’ (1833), which is housed in the National Gallery, though there are no direct similarities between them.

The historical film’s apparent efforts to associate itself with art and (particularly) with theatre have the effect of raising its cultural status, perhaps to a level felt appropriate for the representation of something so weighty as national history, and of

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<sup>141</sup> Writing on *The Young Mr Pitt*, Dilys Powell felt its ambitious compass meant that an episodic approach as well as a rather fragmented feel were unavoidable. ‘The New Films’, *Sunday Times*, 5 July 1942, p2.

<sup>142</sup> The long take, the long shot and deep focus are of course all elements of Bazinian realism, and lend the historical genre some of the documentary associations of that philosophy.

<sup>143</sup> The campaign book for *Becket* resembles nothing so much as a theatre programme; it is stiff and glossy, and comes complete with theatre history and extensive biographies of all the performers involved. John Bryan, the director, shows a keen consciousness of the theatrical provenance of the film and the genre’s extensive use of long-shots, when he states that his artistic intention was “‘to get away [. . .] from the feeling that one is simply looking on” – as is the case with so many “spectacles” – and, instead, to give a sense of participation, of being “a privileged person, sitting in on what’s happening.””



differentiating it from other, less respectable film types. It should be noted however that British cinema as a whole has cultivated links with the stage since its inception, partly as a way of raising its standing in the face of reservations about its possibly pernicious effects.<sup>144</sup> More positively, cinema has used screen-filling spectacle as a means of advertising and celebrating the capabilities of the medium, and has found history to be a particularly good vehicle for this. Thus, Michael Wood has suggested that Hollywood's Roman histories were 'a huge, many-faceted metaphor for Hollywood itself', a peacock's tail displaying the industry's own splendour, exoticism, wealth and extravagance.<sup>145</sup> The epics of the 1950s in general, along with the musical and the Western, were also specific opportunities for cinema to both sell itself and the innovations of Technicolor and widescreen, to audiences falling increasingly under the thrall of television, as Steve Neale has argued.<sup>146</sup> Exhibitionism of this type seems to be present in the British historical film also, as indicated by the policy of using advertizing to situate examples of historical film on or beyond the frontiers of film history.

In addition to asserting the grandeur of historical film, and reinforcing its historical and cultural authenticity, spectacle is a site of pleasure in the genre. *Kine Weekly* repeatedly identified it as a significant point of appeal in relevant reviews,<sup>147</sup> and *The Lion in Winter* in particular was often discussed in terms of its visual attractions.<sup>148</sup> The pleasures of spectacle are especially clear when the evidence for audience response

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<sup>144</sup> Street argues of the 1910s: 'The drive towards narrative and increasing length was encouraged by foreign examples, but an important factor was the new medium's imperative to forge greater links with the stage, its reputation and place in popular cultural experience . . .', *British National Cinema*, p36. For an overview of film's relationship with theatre, see Geoff Brown "'Sister of the Stage": British Film and British Theatre', in *All Our Yesterdays*.

<sup>145</sup> Michael Wood, *America in the Movies*, p173.

<sup>146</sup> Neale, *Genre*, pp34-6.

<sup>147</sup> See for example the reviews of *Fire Over England* (21 January 1937, p31), and *Lady Hamilton* (12 June 1941, p18).

<sup>148</sup> See for example Brenda Davies' review, 'The Lion in Winter', in *Sight and Sound*, vol. 38, no. 1 (Winter 1968/9), p44.

turns to the issue of costume. As one young female respondent to Mayer's 'Films and the Pattern of Life' survey wrote:

I soon found out that I enjoyed the historical films best although I believe that the lovely costumes had a great deal to do with it, for I can often remember the time when I would come home and dream that I was the lovely heroine in a beautiful blue crinoline with a feather in my hair (Doc. 3, p22).

However, costume and display are more frequently appreciated in costume drama.<sup>149</sup>

Spectacle also generates historical meaning. For example, in the trial and court scenes identified above, the composition of long shots assists in establishing the relative importance and authority of principal characters. Thus Pitt's growing stature is reflected in the way he literally rises above the other members of the commons during the course of the narrative, and in the camera's gradual assumption of his point of view during the debates in the Commons. Points about relative status may be made with particular dramatic effect by slowly zooming out from an individual to take in the positions of other individuals.

British historical films also develop meaning metaphorically, through the spectacle of the countryside. Rural settings appear very frequently in the genre at key points of the narrative, and lend meetings, conversations and decisions a natural quality and a sense of validation, as well as intimations of national significance. The national associations of the rural landscape have been built up through English schools and movements in art, music and verse, and Clive Aslet recently has been moved to argue that the

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<sup>149</sup> To again quote evidence furnished by Mayer: 'I like period films of both the musical and straight types – particularly *Jane Eyre*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Barretts of Wimpole Street*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Gone With The Wind*, of the straight type. I think I like costume pictures because [. . .] the dress gives

countryside ‘both lives in the English psyche and helps to define it’, and that it is one of the ‘shared ideals’ which constitutes Britishness.<sup>150</sup>

A good example of moral and national associations of the countryside in historical film occurs in *Victoria the Great*, where a landscape shot entitled ‘a fairly typical view of England’ reveals the newly married Queen and Prince Consort under a tree, discussing duty, and resolving to devote more time and effort to the welfare of the nation. In *The Young Mr Pitt* also, the protagonist’s decision to return to office, despite his illness, is taken in his rose garden, whilst Britain’s saviour Nelson is found quietly at prayer in a country church. Moreover, the reforms and progress of Pitt’s new premiership are illustrated with pastoral scenes of peace and plentiful harvest, which are contrasted with ominous images of French scythes being sharpened for revolution and war.<sup>151</sup>

Similarly, the pivotal moment of *A Man for All Seasons* occurs in the country, when the King and More ponder the possibility of divorce; the issues are set out, and More reveals his opposition to the King. More’s associations with nature are underlined by the film’s title, and are particularly clear both when he sees the seasons change from his cell in the Tower, and in the spectacle of his execution, which takes place in leafy surroundings to the sound of birdsong. The same associations may be read as denoting More’s constancy and the justness of his actions. By contrast, Cromwell and Richard

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them, in my opinion, a “certain something” that modern dress simply cannot’ (‘A Study in Film Preferences’, Doc. 16A).

<sup>150</sup> Clive Aslet, *Anyone for England?: A Search for National Identity* (London: Little, Brown and Co, 1997), pp170-1 (on the landscape in English cultural life) and pp173, 185. Notably, the part of Nicholas Davies’ book *Elizabeth: Behind Palace Doors* (London: Mainstream Publishing Project, 2000) which is most supportive of the monarchy, and which asserts the national importance of the present queen, is also the part which casts her as ‘a country girl at heart.’ See pp257-275, where this theme is developed.

<sup>151</sup> Connections between the nation and the countryside are made also in some of the reception sources. For example, one patriotic respondent to Mass-Observation’s Bolton survey who asked: ‘Why not boost our own country?’, also argued: ‘Not enough use is made of our British scenery in English films’. See *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, Odeon Men, Doc. 46, p84. See also Odeon Women, Doc. 158, p131.



Rich inhabit sinister interiors and operate covertly; their plots and machinations are literally dark. These differences are signalled at the very start of the film, when a letter from the conniving Wolsey is conveyed from the rather squalid surroundings of his chamber, past grotesque statues and gargoyles, to the river, then over the countryside, under the gaze of birds and wildlife, to More.

Robert Murphy has suggested that rural themes and ‘the myth of an idyllic rural England’ were especially important during the war, to both political poles,<sup>152</sup> whilst James Chapman has argued that wartime historical and heritage films in particular were ‘characterised by pastoral themes and images.’<sup>153</sup> But these elements have always had a special place in the historical film. Significantly, this cannot be said of the biopic or costume drama.

However, the primary way in which the genre uses spectacle to generate historical meaning is by opposing it with drama and the close-up to provide a repertoire of causal explanations. As Grindon argues:

explicitly or implicitly, each historical film expresses notions about the causal forces operating in history. It represents those forces through dramatic elements, such as characterization and plot, and spectacle elements, such as the historical setting and the handling of mass action (p6).

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<sup>152</sup> Robert Murphy, ‘The Heart of Britain’, in *The British Cinema Book*, pp73-4, p73. Murphy goes on to discuss several wartime films with rural elements, including *This England*, *Went the Day Well?* and *A Canterbury Tale* (pp75-7). Antonia Lant includes a similar discussion in her book *Blackout*, stressing that the rural image functioned as an antidote to destruction and a symbol of regeneration and continuity (p49), and Jeffrey Richards has related the same image and the same films to the particular discourses of national identity and the national character that were dominant in wartime, and in preceding decades. See his article ‘National Identity in British Wartime Films’, in *Britain and the Cinema in the Second World War*.

<sup>153</sup> James Chapman, *The British At War*, p233.

The dramatic elements of a film show personal factors in historical change, though they may integrate the personal with the social by making characters representative of a class or nation. By contrast, the spectacular elements of historical film 'tend toward a generalized, extra-personal perspective in portraying historical cause' (p7); they show the impact of landscape and environment, of modes of travel and of the weather. Robert Donat's personal script for *The Private Life of Henry VIII* is unusual in that it compiles the type of shot expected to be used for every scene into an overview of the entire film, and this shows clearly that the film was intended to feature a bias toward the powerful individual's psychological motivation in its interpretation of history. However, long shots are still nominated for scenes in which Henry is to display his authority.<sup>154</sup> Grindon concludes that the filmmaker commands an array of options in 'explaining history', which may be put to use in extremely complex ways.<sup>155</sup> The same options also govern the way the individual is shown to relate to society, which I shall argue, when I return to these matters in due course, to be one of the genre's central concerns. Later I shall also compare the use of spectacle in the historical film with that in the biopic and the costume drama.

In this context, it is important to recognize the principle that, in historical film as well as costume drama, visual spectacle can disrupt the narrative and meaning of a film, and might overturn the authenticating and aggrandizing effects of historical details and

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<sup>154</sup> The Robert Donat Special Collection, Photocopy Scripts For Films, Item 1, *The Private Life of Henry VIII*, 1933.

<sup>155</sup> Grindon sets out some of these options in binary form in *Shadows on the Past*, p8 (plot for example being opposed to setting, individual to society, characterization to spectacle). But he stresses that they are not strict opposites; rather, they are 'variable signs and relational concepts – affinities and contrasts – that allow a film to produce meaning.' Later he examines how D. W. Griffith (pp16-7) and Sergei Eisenstein (pp19-21) differentially deploy the options to arrive at different historical perspectives. Ultimately, he argues, 'the historical film can offer a method of representation comparable with historiography itself' (p223).

performances.<sup>156</sup> We have seen for example the bifurcated nature of costume in historical film, and Jane Gaines suggests that cinema's investment in spectacle affords great influence to the costume designer, who brings to a project his or her own style, and therefore his or her own competing meaning.<sup>157</sup> However, there is little support for this kind of disruption in response surveys, though I have acknowledged that these sources are far from complete. Indeed, among the scant evidence that is available, one respondent relates how she went from admiring the clothes in historical film to an interest in the history shown, suggesting that in the historical genre, costume might function in a particularly focussed, *undisruptive*, *untransgressive* way.<sup>158</sup> It is perhaps significant then that Sue Harper develops her ideas of the independent 'costume narrative' specifically in relation to the costume drama.<sup>159</sup>

The expense of the historical film, and the fact that the industry has sometimes used the genre to flaunt its capabilities and raise its cultural status, means that the genre in Britain has not been subject to any *conscious* use of the disrupting potential of costume, nor to modernist experimentation in general. Indeed, historical films might be seen to epitomize all the bloated excesses that *avant-garde* filmmakers have opposed.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> This may also be true of music, as Landy observes: 'Like any gesture, music complicates any easy readability of images of the past', *Cinematic Uses of the Past*, p21. In the case of the films identified as historical in chapter three, music is usually tastefully unobtrusive, serving to assist the affective devices of the plot. It might be interesting to ask if specific sounds or uses of sound have an association with the historical film genre. I have found nothing so specific as the creaky door of the horror film, or the collective singing of the musical, but a dedicated examination might be revealing.

<sup>157</sup> Jane Gaines, 'Costume and Narrative: How Dress Tells the Woman's Story', in *Fabrications: Costume and the Female Body* ed. by Jane Gaines and Charlotte Herzog (London and New York: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>158</sup> Mayer, 'Films and the Pattern of Life', Doc. 28, p69.

<sup>159</sup> See Harper, 'Art Direction and Costume Design' in *BFI Dossier No 18: Gainsborough Melodrama* ed. by Aspinall and Murphy (London: BFI, 1983), and *Picturing the Past*, pp126-132. In *Picturing the Past*, Harper argues that the moralistic, misogynist and snobbish 'messages' of Gainsborough's costume scripts are 'at variance with that of the visual discourses of the films' (p126). These discourses constitute a 'costume narrative', which deploys historical inaccuracy and expressionistic design to celebrate sexuality and freedom from stifling social convention (pp130-1).

<sup>160</sup> Street suggests that experimental cinema has tended to operate outside the cinematic mainstream. See *British National Cinema*, especially p169. And one of the general characteristics of cinematic



However, in the '80s and '90s, which I shall begin to explore towards the end of chapter five, costume, music and other dimensions are sometimes mobilized to distance the viewer and to complicate and interrogate the narrative. At this point some of the perspectives and theories propounded by Rosenstone, Sobchack and others will become more appropriate.

#### **4. What Are The Key Subjects and Themes of The British Historical Film?**

##### **a. Subjects Are Drawn From Royalty and Government**

The foremost subject of the films identified as historical in chapter three is royalty. We have seen that this has been underlined in some cases by royal premieres and previews. The same effect is often attained by references in advertising to other kings and queens and royal issues. Thus for example an advertisement for *Alfred the Great* in *Kine Weekly* (25 March 1967) sets Alfred in 'royal context'. At a more general level, important phases in the production of historical film have seemingly been inspired or sustained by real-life royal activity. Thus the death of George V, the abdication crisis, the coronation of George VI and the hundredth anniversary of the beginning of Victoria's reign may be seen as fuelling the cycle that was begun by *The Private Life of Henry VIII* in the 1930s, whilst another flurry of historical films, beginning with *The First Gentleman* (1948) and running through to *Young Bess*, coincided with the

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modernism, she argues, is that it 'has posed questions about distribution and exhibition networks – indeed, criticizing capitalist structures of film-making on a factory basis which appear to subordinate art to industry' (p147). On the nature of the experimental and *avant-garde* film in British cinema, see for example Sylvia Harvey, 'The "Other Cinema" in Britain: Unfinished Business in Oppositional and Independent Film, 1929-1984', in *All Our Yesterdays*.

marriage of Princess Elizabeth, the birth of the Prince of Wales, and the beginning of a 'second Elizabethan era.'<sup>161</sup>

The prominence of royal figures in the historical genre calls to mind documentary films made in celebration and commemoration of such contemporary royal events, including *Crown and Glory*, *Our Royal Heritage* and *The King's People* (all 1937, the coronation year of George VI) and *A Queen is Crowned* (1953). These films tend to suggest that 'the march of history is intertwined with the institution of the British monarchy and the personalities of our rulers', and such films were widely understood to be 'presenting history on the screen.'<sup>162</sup> They are typically very august and full of pageantry and spectacle. Furthermore, they also lay great emphasis upon patriotism and the nation, and are intended as consensual texts, which we will see are other important features of the historical film.

Royal history has the advantage for filmmakers of being very familiar to audiences. As Antonia Fraser observes: '[m]ost people learn history early on in terms of the reigns', and as a result there is a 'perennial appetite' for a story derived from the life of a sovereign.<sup>163</sup> As noted above, the monarchs portrayed in historical films have in fact usually been the most memorable, the 'stars' of the British historical past. Their larger than life status and their tendency to dominate the films in which they appear are

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<sup>161</sup> *Young Bess* was explicitly promoted as a 'coronation attraction' (see *Kine Weekly*, 21 May 1953, p16), and indeed features an imposing coronation scene.

<sup>162</sup> 'Coronation Supplement', *Kine Weekly*, 25 March 1937, pxiv, article in anticipation of Paramount's *Crown and Glory*. Similarly, Warner's contribution to the celebrations, *The Kings People*, 'portrays main events in the reign of Queen Victoria, Edward VII, George V and Edward VIII, concluding with the proclamation of our present king' (ibid., pviii), whilst *A Queen is Crowned* is 'History served piping hot' (*Kine Weekly* review, 11 June 1953, p21).

<sup>163</sup> Antonia Fraser, 'Introduction', in *The Lives of the Kings and Queens of England*, p6. This appetite has been fed by David Williamson's *Debrett's Kings and Queens of Britain* (London: Webb and Bower, 1986); *Chronicle of the Royal Family* ed. by Derrik Merver (London: Chronicle Communications, 1991);

sometimes reflected in promotional strategies, as where a number of cinema managers reported to *Kine Weekly*'s 'Showman' that they had adorned their lobbies and facades during runs of *The Private Life of Henry VIII* with gigantic cut-outs of Laughton in character.<sup>164</sup>

Local advertising for *The Private Life of Henry VIII* also often asserted its preoccupation with the monarchy metonymically, drawing through displays of mock crowns on the fact that 'for over a thousand years the crown has been the transcendental symbol of majesty.'<sup>165</sup> Olivier's *Richard III* by contrast does the same thing within its text, opening with an image of the crown of England in an unusual shot which could be described as emblematic, and which may have helped to quickly 'plug in' the film to the historical genre and its related expectations.

However, royalty also features in other genres, making what Jeffrey Richards has called 'ikonic appearances.' In the 1930s, these appearances were 'usually at the beginning or the end, sending heroes on missions, bestowing honours, rectifying injustice, reuniting star-crossed lovers and generally acting as a *deus ex machina* . . .'<sup>166</sup> Elsewhere Richards notes that '[b]y far the most frequent monarchical icon appearances have been in swashbuckling adventure films.' But this is a type with its own distinct characters and conventions, including, as Richards enumerates them, swordplay, horse-riding, handsome heroes, the fight for Truth and Justice and a code of courage and honour.<sup>167</sup> I

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Mike Ashley's *British Monarchs* (London: Robinson, 1998); and by Fraser's own biographies: *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, *Mary, Queen of Scots*, and *King Charles II*.

<sup>164</sup> See for example *Kine Weekly*, 22 March 1934, p60.

<sup>165</sup> Brian Barker, *The Symbols of Sovereignty* (Newton Abbot: Westbridge Books, 1979), p9.

<sup>166</sup> *Age of the Dream Palace*, p269. Examples are Queen Victoria in *David Livingstone* (1936) and *Marigold* (1938), Charles II in *Colonel Blood* (1934), James II in *Lorna Doone* (1935), and George IV in *The Scarlet Pimpernel*.

<sup>167</sup> Taves, in *The Romance of Adventure*, describes films like *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, *The Black Shield of Falworth* (1954) and *Ivanhoe* (1952) as historical texts. But as noted in chapter two, he seems to be



shall argue that the same goes for biopics like *David Livingstone*, *The Story of Gilbert and Sullivan* and *The Lady With the Lamp* (1951), and accordingly, the sources examined in chapter three are never confused by the (in any case much less central) appearance of a monarch in types other than the historical film.

Very occasionally, a king or queen might have a large role in another genre. The most obvious British example of this is *The Tower of London* (1962), about the assorted malefactions of Richard III. However the sources readily assign the film to a different genre, and they seem to have a compelling case for doing so, in view of a range of features including the presence of the horror star Vincent Price; the direction by the exploitation master Roger Corman in Edgar Allen Poe mode; the full use of shadows, ghosts and gruesome murders; and the absence of the historical film's historicizing and authenticating strategies.

Royal figures are not the only focal points of historical film. Politicians like Pitt and Disraeli and imperial figures like Clive and Gordon are also prominent in the texts identified as historical. Thus, overall, the subjects which have preoccupied the genre and the characters which have peopled it could be said to derive from the fields of government and governance. The British biopic by contrast seems mainly concerned with artists and performers (witness *Whom the Gods Love* (1936), *The Great Mr Handel*, *Johan Sebastian Bach* (1961), *Mahler* (1974), *The Music Lovers*, *The Magic Bow*, the Wilde films, *Valentino*, *Isadora*, and *Rembrandt* (1936)) with sundry other figures, including the inventor, William Friese-Greene, and the nurse, Florence

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writing essentially of a highly circumscribed corps of swashbucklers, using them as the basis for some rather wild generalisations. This is a pity, because when he is not attempting to define the parameters of the genre, he makes some stimulating observations about the swashbuckler type, particularly in

Nightingale, enlivening the mix. The focus of both the historical film and the biopic on powerful and remarkable figures is consistent with the reliance of classical filmmaking on individuals as prime motivators of the narrative, and, in ways discussed above, with the need to provide vehicles for stars and opportunities for stars to act as vehicles for the genre in question.

#### b. Are Any Particular Gender or Period Tendencies Evident?

Custen notes of the American biopic that '[t]here are almost two and a half times as many male biographies as female biographies'.<sup>168</sup> Moreover, 'male and female biographies differ according to professions allocated, family attitude toward fame, and, in particular, the consequences of being a famous man as opposed to a famous woman' (p102). The female career is 'dogged by the conflict between the fulfillment of heterosexual desire through marriage or romance and professional duty', as in *Mary of Scotland* and *Queen Christina*, the heroines of which 'give up their lives and thrones, respectively, for the sake of love' (pp103-4). The male version of this career/romance conflict 'has the male star so wrapped up in his career that he is unable to give love' (p105). Thus, 'where a male famous figure is ruled by the destiny of his talent, a woman is dominated by the alleged biological demands of her gender' (p106).

The British historical film diverges radically from these perspectives on gender. It often features a woman, with Elizabeth I and Victoria being particularly prominent. But above all, women in the genre are able to enjoy both a career and romantic fulfilment, as in the case of Victoria, and they do not inevitably sacrifice power and achievement

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explaining why it was more popular in some periods than others, and in discussing recurring characters

for love, as the filmic fortunes of Elizabeth, who is very much seen to be a woman with a destiny, amply demonstrates. 'I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman' says Flora Robson, filmed from a low angle, looking commandingly over her troops at Tilbury in *Fire Over England*, 'but I have the heart and valour of a king, and a king of England too.' Furthermore, it is striking that Elizabeth's father has been repeatedly portrayed as a man for whom authority and power are insufficient, who craves domestic and sexual happiness. In *The Lion in Winter*, we find that Eleanor of Aquitaine has long been incarcerated by the King and is only 'trotted out for state occasions'. But she has a formidable presence, and 'snaps and plots' to reclaim both husband and status. It is easy to argue that amid all the bluster and vacillation around her, she alone maintains her dignity.

Turning to the periods and locales favoured by historical film, we will find in chapter five that the American biopic ignores chapters not only of world history but also of the history of the United States. In focussing on the monarchy and government, and the most 'memorable' events of the past, British historical films also ignore a great deal of other history and many other significant characters. Some of the writers who are hostile towards the historical genre have found this aspect of it particularly objectionable.<sup>169</sup> The history of other countries is largely ignored too, with *Rasputin, the Mad Monk* (1965), *Catherine the Great* and *Julius Caesar* (1953) being exceptions. However the relatively low rate of historical film production means that this imbalance is not extreme.

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and the 'heroic code.'

<sup>168</sup> Custen, *Bio/Pics*, pp65-6.



### c. The Nation

In the British historical film the notion of the nation has tended to refer to England rather than Britain. Its status as a key theme of the genre arises partly from the genre's almost exclusive predilection for English/British history, but also from the prominence of kings and queens, who can be seen as metonyms for the nation. This is due not only to the former position of the monarch at the head of the British government and nation, but also to the fact that members of the royal family have functioned in various ways as national symbols and figureheads, appearing for example as guarantors of Britain's coinage and as objects of the country's devotion in the national anthem. As David Souden and David Starkey conclude in their study of England before the twentieth century: 'King and Kingdom were one, and it was the crown that made England one.'<sup>170</sup> In the present, technology has allowed the monarch to address the entire nation, beginning with George V's radio broadcasts, and royals have travelled more extensively than ever before as Britain's ambassadors. Elizabeth II was constructed as a symbol of the age in the 1950s, and she has gone on to oversee a process by which the royal family has been marketed to the ever-more pervasive popular media as 'ordinary' and approachable, but also as a symbol of the nation at large.<sup>171</sup> In the case of those historical films which feature politicians, it is significant that statesmen too have also had greater media exposure as the century has progressed, particularly as decision-makers in times of war and national crisis.

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<sup>169</sup> For example, Michael Parenti denounces the absence of historical films addressing episodes of class struggle. See his book *Make-Believe Media: The Politics of Entertainment* (Berkshire: St Martin's Press, 1992), p58.

<sup>170</sup> David Souden and David Starkey, *This Land of England* (London: Muller, Blonde and White, 1985), p190.

It is perhaps not coincidental that with the higher public profile of King George V, signalled especially by his tours during the silver jubilee year of 1935, historical films began to be *en vogue* again. In fact, a concern with the monarch's public and symbolic 'presence' is evident in many examples of the historical genre, where the national significance of royal figures and leaders is explicitly underlined. In *Beau Brummell* for example, Sidley reminds the audience that George IV is a symbol of the nation, and Beau toasts his friend with the words: 'If no disaster befalls him, no disaster will befall any of us.' When he is criticised by his doctor, George, who is still the Prince of Wales at this point, says: 'You forget who you are addressing'; he informs the medic that he is England, and this is confirmed by his later coronation. Similarly, in a crucial scene in *Cromwell*, Charles I debates the issues of the day with the leaders of the opposition; he affirms that he must be more than a figurehead, and claims that 'an England without a king is unthinkable.' Most strikingly of all, the absence of Victoria, in grief-stricken self-exile, is seen as a matter of national concern in *Sixty Glorious Years*, and her return to public life is celebrated by relieved, flag-waving crowds and by a dramatic switch from black and white photography to Technicolor.

In *Henry VIII and his Six Wives*, the symbolic status of the King and his importance to the nation are advanced on a more stylistic level. The King is frequently placed at the centre of the type of balanced, static spectacle observed earlier, in a commanding and elevated position. This is particularly so in consultation with his parliament over issues of national import. He gazes down over his subjects, and is invested with great authority. However, one of the film's *leitmotifs* is the presence in the foreground of figures whose *sotto voce* scheming is unknown to the King. These characters verbally

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<sup>171</sup> On these points, see Richard Ormond, *The Face of the Monarchy: British Royalty Portrayed* (Oxford:

identify the King with the nation, a point which is reinforced by distancing him from the plotting; he is pristine and unsullied by politics – indeed he is naïve<sup>172</sup> – and can therefore function as a more purely symbolic entity.

In addition to the notion of the leader as a national figurehead, the historical genre often entails more overt and general discussion of the nation and its governance. The theme of the nation is sometimes established immediately in prefatory titles, as in the case of *The Prime Minister*:

1837 . . . London . . . Capital of the British Empire . . . Basking in the splendour of its wealth and tradition . . . Few realise that the nation is entering upon a new era of individualism and democracy. But among the few a foppish young novelist who has caught the fancy of the fashionable world.

The expectation of national discussion may also be engendered before the viewing experience even begins, by publicity material and posters. *The Young Mr Pitt* for example is advertised as ‘The thrilling, stirring drama of a great nation’, while *Alfred the Great* is sold with the strap-line: ‘England had hardly been born. Already it was being crucified.’<sup>173</sup> But it is in the texts of the films themselves that the discourse of nation is most obviously elaborated.

*Becket* is fundamentally concerned with the rival influence of church and state on the nation,<sup>174</sup> and *Cromwell* (as Cromwell himself puts it in the prologue scene) with the

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Phaidon, 1977), pp38, 42-3.

<sup>172</sup> Henry wants to save his friend Thomas More, but is powerless to do so, and has no sense of the chicanery behind the conviction of Anne Boleyn. He is also shocked to tears by the announcement that Catherine Howard has cuckolded him, much to the guilty embarrassment of his advisers.

<sup>173</sup> Both quotations are from posters in BFI pressbooks. The themes of nation and national history are also particularly evident in the pressbooks for *Victoria the Great* and *Mary, Queen of Scots*.

<sup>174</sup> Publicity stressed the film’s ‘all English crew’, who are said to have become more than usually involved in the theme of the film, because of its national importance.



decline of a great nation into repression and corruption, and with (according to its pressbook) 'the tumultuous events and the bloody battles which changed the face of the English nation.' Pitt conducts several state-of-the-nation conversations in *The Young Mr Pitt*, and when he is accused of being ambitious, he avers that he is ambitious only 'for the greatness and prosperity of the English nation.' Moreover, in a letter to Carol Reed, Robert Donat called for the addition of more lines of this type to make the theme of the nation still clearer.<sup>175</sup> Henry also tells his son in *The Private Life of Henry VIII*: 'one day you'll rule England, a greater England than mine.'<sup>176</sup> I would argue that Henry's on-going concern with his own progeny and the security and status of his realm in this film disproves Landy's suggestion that it 'completely neglected the public elements in Henry's life.'<sup>177</sup>

In British-style American historical films too, similar sentiments are apparent. *Lady Hamilton*'s first husband rhapsodizes on 'the glories of England', and upon his accession to the Lords, Nelson also emphasizes the 'incorruptible power' of the nation. He will not consent, he says, 'to sacrifice one jot of England's honour.'

In *Mary, Queen of Scots*, the nation and the issue of the royal figurehead have a particularly complicated presence. Questions of legitimacy are repeatedly posed in the film, with each queen being a threat to the other's status as rightful ruler and

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<sup>175</sup> The Robert Donat Special Collection, Letters, Reed, Box 9. The commentary in a radio broadcast of 1946, featuring Donat and adapting scenes from *The Young Mr Pitt*, even explicitly made the nation and national security its subject. See The Robert Donat Special Collection, Original Scripts for Radio, Box 38, Item 11, British Film Festival, excerpts from *The Young Mr Pitt*, broadcast February 1946.

<sup>176</sup> A prefabricated press story in the campaign book for the same film proffers England and the nation as a relevant interpretative frame, in what is also a further example of the genre's past-presentness: 'It is pertinent to note, in these days when the British Navy is making so much news, that it was Henry VIII who laid the foundation for that Navy, and on whose insistence England's supremacy as a sea power was founded. For England's "Bluff King Hal" as he was called was more than a much-married monarch and a clown. He was a statesman and a good one.'

<sup>177</sup> See *British Genres*, p61.

embodiment of the nation. The related issue of good government versus tyranny is also foregrounded, as both queens strive to avoid recourse to executions, and grapple with self-interested politicians. The national dimensions of all this are particularly clear during their final meeting, when Elizabeth urges Mary to be mindful of her responsibilities as a symbol and figure of national importance, and to think of her duties to her son: 'Be Queen for once!' These issues are ultimately left unresolved.

The national preoccupations of the genre are often (less subtly) enunciated by opposing England to other countries. Predictably, this is particularly true of Britain's wartime historical films. The contrasting images of bucolic England and warlike France in *The Young Mr Pitt* were noted above, and throughout the film the progress of Pitt's parliamentary career and his commitment to peace and reform are compared to Napoleon's altogether more violent rise and his will to war. The same kind of dialectic is evident also in *Fire Over England*, where Raymond Massey's glacial, narrow-eyed King Philip ('Only by fear can the people be made to do their duty') is the very antithesis of Elizabeth, who inspires adoring crowds, shows mercy to usurpers and assassins, and who is twice filmed gazing past the camera into the audience, expressing her solicitude for her suffering soldiers and sailors.<sup>178</sup> A document produced in 1947 within the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in which anxieties are expressed about the potential impact of Olivier's *Henry V* on Franco-British relations, underlines the rhetorical power of such comparisons and contrasts.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> National stereotypes and 'funny foreigners' are, of course, the stock-in-trade of the 'Carry On' series, and the theme of England and Englishness is promoted in *Don't Lose Your Head* by these means. For example, after the opening scenes of the guillotine in France, we move to England, with a voice-over that is accompanied by 'Rule Britannia', and then 'Greensleeves': 'Meanwhile, just across the Channel, far removed from the awful scene of carnage, the cosy little homes of England ring with merry carefree laughter and satisfied after-dinner belches, as the aristocracy, oblivious to the horrors facing their counterparts in France, continue with their normal and fashionable country pursuits.'

<sup>179</sup> The document argues that several scenes in the film 'risk being considered not as the representations of the faults and errors of a past age, but [...] as the permanent traits of our character.' See John W.

The nation and Englishness are also present in historical films in less obvious ways. Stars may have particular national associations, as we saw Susan Hayward suggest in chapter two. John Wayne for example may be seen to connote 'Americanness' and the fundamentals of American ideology. The stars of the British historical film, as again we have seen, have strong associations with the British stage, and beyond that, through their honours and knighthoods (*Sir* Laurence Olivier, *Dame* Anna Neagle etc.) with the monarchy and the nation. Costume also has strong national associations. As Pam Cook suggests, it 'plays an important part in asserting and reinforcing national identity.'<sup>180</sup> Cook goes on to argue that costume crosses boundaries and is inherently resistant to purity and authenticity: 'even national dress, which is supposed to represent unique cultural values, is a mixed bag of cross-cultural borrowings.'<sup>181</sup> But the preponderance of uniforms in a film like *Khartoum*, and the filmic 'quotation' of familiar costumes in the case of a symbolic national figure like Elizabeth I, all tap into audience associations to establish the genre's national orientation.

Unsatisfying and (perhaps) unrepresentative though our audience survey evidence may be, it offers plentiful evidence that the historical film was indeed understood in national terms. Just as we have seen survey respondents argue that only English actors could properly play English parts, the view was advanced that English history should be the preserve of English studios. One of Mass-Observation's Bolton respondents felt that there was 'scope for English films in historical drama, but that they lack the slickness

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Young, 'Henry V, the Quai d'Orsay, and the Well-being of the Franco-British alliance, 1947', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, vol. 7, no. 3 (1987), especially p320. In also suggesting that '[i]t is very serious furthermore that comparisons could be made in the military field with a recent event', the document is another example of the past-present qualities of historical films.

<sup>180</sup> *Fashioning the Nation*, p41.



of the Americans in modern stories . . . ' (Crompton Women, Doc. 18, p73), whilst from a later survey, it is significant that 'historical films' were amongst the few genres respondents felt to be better when British.<sup>182</sup> Historical films were also cited as examples of British filmmaking quality. As one of Mayer's respondents wrote of *Henry V*: 'never has such a film been made and I do not think it ever will be made by an American studio' ('A Study in Film Preferences', Doc. 11A, p177). Another participant in Mayer's research approved of such historical films as *Victoria the Great* because they gave him 'an excellent pride in my own country, and her achievements' ('Films and the Pattern of Life', Doc. 35, p84).<sup>183</sup> Where reasons are given for enjoying costume films, they are to do with escapism, as again we saw in chapter three.<sup>184</sup>

In the press too, the nation and themes connected with it have been prominent in discussion of historical film. For example, criticism of *The Young Mr Pitt* spoke of Pitt having 'The Nation behind him' (*What's On*, 3 July 1942), and of his endeavours to 'save England' (*Star*, 4 July 1942), whilst the *Sunday Express* (5 July 1942) described the film as the story of 'a man and his country', and as 'the finest patriotic film about Britain.' Contemporary criticism of Gainsborough films, by contrast, mainly emphasized their visual pleasures and *risqué* narratives.<sup>185</sup>

In the conclusion to my thesis, I shall locate the British historical film within the various discourses surrounding national identity. I have chosen my conclusion as the

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid., pp44-6, drawing on ideas advanced by Elizabeth Wilson in *Adorned Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (London: Virago, 1985).

<sup>182</sup> *Cinema-Going in Greater London*, pp62-3.

<sup>183</sup> The term 'historical film' is used by the respondent himself.

<sup>184</sup> See also Mayer, 'Films and the Pattern of Life', Doc. 6, pp29-31. The author writes: 'I have always liked costume films' (p30, giving examples which are not historical in the sense which has emerged from my study), and notes: 'I definitely go to the cinema to be taken out of myself . . . Carry me into the past with Laurence Olivier, Nelson Eddy, Greta Garbo and the others and I'm happy!!' (p31).

most appropriate setting for this discussion because I want to take into account a range of other issues and considerations, which will be covered in the intervening pages. However, it is perhaps worth noting here that British films which adhered to a narrowly national focus or explored specifically national themes were increasingly seen by certain commentators as 'chauvinistic' as the period which now concerns me progressed. This helps to explain why the historical genre was so often testily dismissed in the pages of *Sight and Sound*, for example.<sup>186</sup>

### **5. What Values and Ideals are Evident in the British Historical Film?**

The issues of Englishness and the symbolic power of the sovereign, which have entered my discussion in recent pages, raise questions of the ideals and tenets present in the genre. This is an altogether less tangible field of semantic traits. Indeed the values and ideals of a genre may rather be felt to be syntactic - that is, in Altman's phrasing, more in the nature of 'constitutive relationships' between characters, settings, themes and so on.<sup>187</sup> In fact this is the weakness of Altman's semantic/syntactic paradigm; the two parts interrelate so closely that grey areas are inevitable.

My solution will be to reserve the label 'syntactic' for certain features, qualities and explanatory models which I believe interweave *all* of the semantic features observed so far: the genre's strategies for seeming to be historical and for making history filmic and the type of history and historical accuracy it trades in, *in addition to* its interest in kings

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<sup>185</sup> See for example *Kine Weekly's* reviews of *Madonna of the Seven Moons* (14 December 1944, p31) and *Jassy* (14 August 1947, p25).

<sup>186</sup> See John Russell Taylor's essay 'Tomorrow the World: Some Reflections on the un-Englishness of English Film', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 43, no. 2 (Spring 1974), pp80-83, which neatly embodies such anxieties about chauvinism, and is very impatient with the notion of 'national content.'

<sup>187</sup> *The American Film Musical*, p95.

and queens and the English nation. These features and models, in keeping with my overall approach, will not be purely theoretical and will not be advanced with the aim of redefining the historical film, but rather will be supported by the discourses surrounding the genre and the evidence for its reception.

In exploring the attitudes and ideals of historical film, we will discover that themes of patriotism and self-sacrifice are of primary importance to the historical genre. I will ask how these values are articulated and how their presence can be recognized.

#### a. Patriotism

The emphasis placed on government and the nation in the British historical film is equalled by the related importance of patriotism and duty/service to the nation. The narrative of *The Prime Minister* for example is driven by Disraeli's moral awakening and the realization of his destiny to serve and save England. A conversation with Prime Minister Melbourne establishes this clearly at the beginning of the film, when Melbourne implores Disraeli to see that England needs men of ideals. Disraeli declares that he dissents from Melbourne's politics, but Melbourne assures him that the matter at hand is England, not factional allegiances. *Kine Weekly* commented avidly upon Elizabeth's 'devotion to her country's interests' in the reissued *Fire Over England* (18 June 1942, p35), and in the same film, Lord Burleigh avers in grave close-up that he, the Queen, and Leicester are 'upper servants in an old house', who spend their lives 'dusting and polishing', and who have 'learned to take a pride in the house.' Similarly, one contemporary reviewer of *The Young Mr Pitt* opined that 'the picture's greatest merit is in evoking patriotism without saying it: for it is certainly the finest patriotic



picture we have made and it shows how deeply moving love of country can be' (*Sunday Express*, 5 July 1942).<sup>188</sup>

In a film like *Cromwell* also, made and seen outside of the context of war when issues were less clear-cut, the question of patriotism is again prominent. Charles I agonizes over his duties to both his kingdom and the Church of England, and his political opponents debate the correct focus of their loyalty. In *Anne of the Thousand Days*, Henry prays: 'Show me how to save England from chaos when I'm dead.'<sup>189</sup>

In those examples of the American cinema which are most like the British historical film, service and duty are again discussed. For example, Raleigh tells *The Virgin Queen* that he loves England, and she knights him for the sentiment. At the end of the film he wins a reprieve after renewing his commitment to the nation with a fervent, visionary speech about its future. And at the beginning, in the film's 'prologue' sequence, he divulges to an acquaintance his plan to reach the court and serve the Queen. When he gets there, Leicester informs him that he must exercise devotion, patience and selflessness. Though Elizabeth loses Raleigh in the end, she is pleased to see that he flies her insignia from his ship, having earlier given it to him to keep as 'a symbol of the one you serve.'

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<sup>188</sup> See J. P. Mayer's *Sociology of Film* for similar sentiments articulated by members of the film-going public. My thesis makes greater use of Mayer's later volume *British Cinemas and their Audiences*, my methodological preference for which is explained in chapter three, subsection 3.

<sup>189</sup> It is notable that the present royal family has also presented itself in similar terms of duty and service. As Clive Aslet writes, Prince Charles appears to believe that 'it is his destiny to sacrifice himself to his

## b. Sacrifice

Where patriotism and national duty may be openly discussed in the British historical film, sacrifice and self-sacrifice in the name of the nation are usually unspoken.<sup>190</sup> Instead these are impulses which emerge syntactically, through the interrelationships of a variety of semantic elements. This is to say that though characters in the historical genre often meet with death in the final reel, death may only assume the aspect of patriotic sacrifice in conjunction with the theme of nation, the rhetoric of duty and service, the historical self-consciousness of the characters concerned, and the use of material which is congruent with the audience's pre-existent historical knowledge.

Pitt's dedication to the English nation, which was noted above and which was perhaps well known to the public, thus receives its ultimate expression in the single-minded, over-conscientious neglect of his well-being which we are assured will be fatal; Pitt knows his destiny. Many reviewers dwelt upon these elements, with the *Daily Mirror* for example characterizing Pitt as 'the valiant statesman, who sacrificed health and happiness in the service of his country.'<sup>191</sup> Charles II also dies of overwork, by his own testimony, in *Nell Gwyn*, as he strives to repair the damage done by civil war and to make England a country that is 'happy, united and free.'

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inherited role', whilst the royal family collectively 'embody the ideal of public service'. See *Anyone for England?*, pp223-4.

<sup>190</sup> *Tudor Rose* and *Anne of the Thousand Days* are two exceptions to this rule. In the former, Mary tells Lady Jane Grey and her husband, from whom she has seized power, that their deaths are honourable sacrifices to the nation and the national interest, as their survival would make them figureheads for revolt. In the latter film, Anne Boleyn's defiant prophecy - 'She shall rule a greater England than you could ever have built. Elizabeth will be Queen, and my blood will have been well spent' - echoes in the closing scene, and she comments: 'I am glad to die.'

<sup>191</sup> 'Reg Whitley At the Pictures', *Daily Mirror*, 3 July 1942.

A still more famous patriotic death is that of Nelson. Nelson's entrance in *Lady Hamilton* is heralded by a blast of *Rule Britannia* and adorned by British flags. His keen sense of responsibility is indicated most clearly by the prominence lent to his signal at the Battle of Trafalgar: 'England expects that every man will do his duty.' He dies bit-by-bit during the course of the narrative, through the loss of various bodily parts, and when he is eventually undone, with almost his terminal breath, he says: 'Thank God, I have done my duty.' Hardy reports to Emma that 'he lived to know that he had won England's greatest victory.'<sup>192</sup>

Nelson's sacrifice is also that of the heroine, as we witness in the anguished scene in which she lets him go to war – 'We both have our duty, haven't we?' – and in the grief with which she responds to news of his death. In *Sight and Sound*, Rachel Reid objected that there was 'no possible excuse' for ultimately representing Emma as destitute when she was actually very well provided for, but in fact the poverty and social ostracism she suffers in the film are further dimensions of the sacrifice she has made.<sup>193</sup>

The death of Charles I in *Cromwell* may also be interpreted as a kind of patriotic self-sacrifice.<sup>194</sup> He is keenly aware of his responsibilities to the nation, as noted above, and when he sends his wife and children away into exile, he says: 'I love this land.' In *Khartoum*, General Gordon's apparent impatience for death (several characters

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<sup>192</sup> By contrast, the Duke of Wellington, Korda's main alternative to Nelson once he had decided to make a propagandist film of the war against Napoleon, died peacefully in his bed.

<sup>193</sup> 'Lady Hamilton', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 10, no. 39 (Autumn 1941), p54. On Emma's role in *Lady Hamilton*, see K. R. M. Short, 'That Hamilton Woman (1941): propaganda, feminism and the production code', pp10-13. Short shows that the film was initially intended to make more of Emma's contribution to Nelson's success and her sacrifice, and was due to end with her collapsing on news of Nelson's death. American censorship however demanded the moral prologue/epilogue structure of the final print.



comment on his recklessness and lack of fear) is atypical of the genre, and – in the context of scenes of Christian demonstration in London, images of him producing food from the desert, repeated references to him as a deliverer and visionary, and Charlton Heston's celebrated performance as Moses in *The Ten Commandments* – his martyrdom can be read as more religious than patriotic.

In almost all of these cases (*Khartoum* again being the exception), the fateful decision to place monarch and country before life is taken in a garden setting. I have touched upon the significance of Pitt's rose garden already, but in *The Young Mr Pitt* Nelson is also found in a garden as he contemplates the demands of history and the nation. Similarly, the key debates between Charles I and Cromwell, during which Charles refuses to compromise and therefore sets the seal on his execution, occur as the King is playing with his children out-of-doors. Thus again, rural spectacle can be seen to validate and underline significant decisions and speeches, and perhaps it also draws on some of the national associations noted above to reiterate the point that the coming sacrifice will be in the country's interests.

As I will suggest in chapter five, death figures not infrequently in both the British biopic and the costume drama, but again, in the absence of the nation and national duty as themes, it has little patriotic resonance. In *The Wicked Lady*, *The Man in Grey* and *Madonna of the Seven Moons* for example, characters die for love or as the punishment for the illicit behaviour to which love has driven them.

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<sup>194</sup> In connection to Charles I, it is worth pointing out that in the historical comedy too, patriotic self-sacrifice is an ideal. When the *Cardboard Cavalier* (1949) expresses reservations about facing the mortal danger of Cromwell's wrath, Nell Gwyn reminds him: 'is not thy first duty to thy King?'

In the historical film, romance often has a different meaning, being, in addition to death, a further vehicle by which patriotic sacrifice is elaborated. This is especially true of films featuring Elizabeth I, whom we have seen never puts love or 'the alleged biological demands of her gender' before the nation.<sup>195</sup> In *The Virgin Queen* for example, Elizabeth explains to Elizabeth Throckmorton why she has no offspring: 'England is child enough for me.'<sup>196</sup> But at the end of the film, when she is rejected by Raleigh and briskly asserts the need to return to 'the business of state,' she is left alone, with her head in her hands. The shot gradually pulls away to reveal her isolation, and her imprisonment in an ornate and imposing office. This kind of portrayal again accords with (and may have contributed to) expectations connected to popular historical knowledge. Thus one of Mayer's respondents was able to ask of *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex*: 'Why make Queen Elizabeth a sloppy, emotional woman when the quality for which she was noted was that her supreme love was England and she was a Queen more than a woman' ('Films and the Pattern of Life', Doc. 28, p69). The same author notes however that though Elizabeth is 'pictured as deeply in love with Essex' in this film, she does finally sacrifice him to her greater passion.

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<sup>195</sup> Though films featuring Elizabeth I exemplify the theme of romantic sacrifice with particular clarity, it is arguable that screen incarnations of Charles II have had equally patriotic priorities. In *Nell Gwyn* for example, the King's concern for the nation, 'torn and bleeding,' as he puts it, after the civil war, is signalled early on, when he opposes his brother's suggestion that he rule by force to replenish the treasury's empty coffers. Rather he wants a country restored to 'the old good nature, the old good manners.' Despite the obvious (and historically 'memorable') pleasure he takes in sex and life in general, and in *Nell Gwyn* in particular, he works himself into an illness and dies, his final thoughts shared between government and love. Similar circumstances obtain in the American film, *The Exile* (1947).

<sup>196</sup> Jeffrey Richards quotes a similar speech by Elizabeth to Lord Dudley in a 1923 version of *The Virgin Queen*, which I have not been able to see (and which in any case falls outside of the period of this chapter): 'The kingdom of England is my husband and I already wear a coronation wedding ring. No other marriage will I ever make. England, thou hast my heart, thy greatness will be my happiness.' See 'The British Empire and Monarchy on Film', in *Cultures* 2, no. 1, p105.

*Mary, Queen of Scots* broadens out the themes of romance and national sacrifice (passion and politics being major themes of the film's publicity)<sup>197</sup> to encompass both Elizabeth and her rival. In the film's opening sequence, Mary is shown in dreamy soft-focus, to the sound of languid French music. She is thus marked as distinctly feminine and rather ethereal. Later she precipitously and fatefully declares her love for the foppish Darnley on a beach, and her subsequent affection for, marriage to and passionate correspondence with Bothwell lead directly to her banishment and death. She thus seems to sacrifice power for love, but in the end, she refuses the compromise that would reunite her with the exiled Bothwell, and she dies a martyr.

In the same film, Elizabeth indulges only in sex, and testily refuses Dudley's appeals for anything more. She proclaims of Mary: 'That monarch is first a woman. This woman is first a monarch.' And when Dudley returns from his 'mission' to Mary, Elizabeth challenges him to compare their bodies and skills, and is enraged when he seems to prefer Mary's gentler charms. At the end of the film, in the second meeting of the two queens, the differences between them are reinscribed when Mary taunts her cousin for her age, baldness and barrenness. Elizabeth replies: 'If your head had ruled your heart, I would be the one awaiting death.' After Mary's execution, Elizabeth is left tearful and alone, and an end credit bitingly relates: 'Elizabeth ruled England for another 16 years. She died as she had lived, unmarried and childless.' Romantic sacrifice for the nation thus works in a complex way in *Mary, Queen of Scots*; both queens love their country, and both make sacrifices for it. The proper object of audience sympathy thus remains ambiguous.<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> See the pressbook in the BFI's Pressbook Collection.

<sup>198</sup> A very much less complex treatment of the theme of romantic sacrifice is that in *Up the Chastity Belt*. King Richard subverts the norm by refusing to return home from the Crusades to govern his country, because he is having too good a time with Scheherazade and others and a copy of the *Karma Sutra*.



Romance (like costume, as discussed above) may also be an attraction of the genre in itself. Judging by the posters and pressbooks alluded to so far, it certainly makes the genre easier to sell, particularly wide-ranging and highly political examples of it like *The Young Mr Pitt*. As Korda remarked to Olivier in connection to another such film: ““Propaganda, Larry, can be a bitter medicine. It needs sugar coating – and Lady Hamilton is a very thick coating of sugar indeed.””<sup>199</sup> But notably, again like the pleasures of costume, romance is almost always claimed to be true to the historical record. This makes it feasible to include an entertaining romantic plot, which facilitates audience involvement in the historical narrative on offer, whilst simultaneously preserving an image of utter accuracy and historical reliability. If the affair involved is sufficiently well-known, romance can even be a further guarantee of a film’s historical status. Special efforts to establish the historical credentials and the gravity of romance in the genre were perhaps also felt to be necessary to differentiate it from the costume drama.

These tendencies in the historical film’s treatment of romance can be clearly observed in the case of *Victoria the Great*, a poster for which tells how Victoria ‘becomes history’s most devoted and royal sweetheart,’ whilst stills in the campaign book are accompanied by the caption: ‘One of the greatest love stories of the ages.’<sup>200</sup> Similarly, a poster for *Anne of the Thousand Days* explains: ‘He was King. She was barely 18.

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When Frankie Howerd eventually succeeds in reminding the King of his patriotic obligations, they are held up in Germany by a chance encounter with a buxom *hausfrau*. Thus again historical comedy/satire can be seen to partake of the conventions of the historical film genre, and again it is possible to see the rationale behind the generic distribution of the sources in chapter three.

<sup>199</sup> Olivier, *Confessions of an Actor*, p91.

<sup>200</sup> A headline in the pressbook for the sequel also proclaims ‘Historical courtship in “Sixty Glorious Years,”’ and one advertisement elaborates: ‘History – yes; but more than history – the ultimate drama of a beautiful woman’s true life romance.’

And in their 1000 days they played out the most passionate and shocking love story in history.' The same king is described as 'History's most amorous ruler' in a lobby display for *The Private Life of Henry VIII*, whilst an article on Catherine Howard avows: 'that she loved Thomas Culpepper to the exclusion of everything else is an historical fact.'<sup>201</sup> Pre-prepared press material on *The Young Mr Pitt* explains how research 'brought to light that young William Pitt fell deeply and sincerely in love', and goes on to point out that 'he sacrificed his love for the sake of the country.' Finally, note how an article in the campaign book for *Mary, Queen of Scots* establishes the connections between history, romantic sacrifice and national responsibility in the same economical and emphatic way:

Mary Stuart and Elizabeth I are amongst the most fascinating women in world history. They experienced the longings, the jealousies and the loves common to all people. But for each, their inner feelings could mean war, happiness or disaster for thousands of people.

A variant on the sacrifice of romantic love for patriotic reasons is the sacrifice of fraternal affection. The protagonist's friend may help to accentuate the sacrifices made, commenting on proceedings as a kind of chorus figure.<sup>202</sup> Thus *Beau Brummell's* batman, Mortimer, expresses concern about his friend/employer's growing debt, and suggests that they quit while they are ahead. But Beau has his duty to king and country: '[the King] needs me more than I need him', he says. As he dies, the Prince of Wales feathers appear on the screen with the motto '*Ich dein*' – 'I serve.' But while the friend may often help to explain precisely what is being sacrificed and why, he is just as frequently the actual subject of the sacrifice made.

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<sup>201</sup> See the pressbook in the BFI's Pressbook Collection.

<sup>202</sup> Providing a confidante for the protagonist may also be an opportunity to 'quote' other memorable historical figures, to confirm the impression of historical authenticity as noted above. Thus Pitt's best friend in *The Young Mr Pitt* is William Wilberforce, well-known as an anti-slavery campaigner.

George IV and Beau Brummell, for example, become close as the film develops, as is signified by George's increasingly close emulation of Beau's taste in clothing and furniture. 'You have taught me to respect myself', George says; 'Now others may respect me.' And later he honours Beau, and tells him: 'We will go a long way together.' But when Beau seemingly advises the Prince of Wales badly (against the offer of limited regency made by Pitt, whom Beau also offends) they quarrel and separate, their friendship sacrificed for the sake of good ministerial relations and sound government.<sup>203</sup> Similarly, though the focus is really on Thomas More and his sacrifices, *A Man for All Seasons* seems complex enough to suggest that sacrifice is also required of Henry, who must abjure his friend for reasons of political expediency and national security. The threat to England from Baronial dissent and the importance of the succession are emphasized, and More stands in the way of peace. During their meeting, the King praises More's honesty, gruffly articulates his sense of the value of their friendship, and tries hard to persuade More to lend his approval to the newly-made royal marriage and the breach with Rome. Later he also refuses Rich's suggestion of torture as a means of securing More's endorsement.<sup>204</sup> Finally, *Becket* broaches the reign of Henry II, and shows 'his responsibilities as king clashing with his love for and his duty to his best friend.'<sup>205</sup> As in *A Man for All Seasons*, an initially close relationship comes under terminal strain when the unroyal half is (resistently) promoted

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<sup>203</sup> In the same film, the question of George's possible romantic sacrifice is also repeatedly raised. Pitt wants George to abandon Mrs Fitzherbert and marry abroad to unite Europe against Napoleon. But George loves her, and stands firm against the slanders and political pressure directed towards him. However, the audience might have known from a 1947 film entitled *Mrs Fitzherbert*, if not from other sources, that ultimately an expedient and unhappy marriage was made, in order to secure the succession.

<sup>204</sup> In *Henry VIII and his Six Wives*, where Henry has a much busier role, his regret at losing so esteemed a friend to political considerations is more baldly put.

<sup>205</sup> Richards, 'Imperial Images: The British Empire and Monarchy on Film', in *Cultures* 2, p99.



to high office, and finds himself unable to toe the Angevin party line. 'I could not serve both God and you' Becket says, and he is executed as a result.

By showing precisely how public life and patriotic duty intrude into private lives and relationships, the historical film illuminates the magnitude of the sacrifices (both mortal and emotional) made, and makes those sacrifices intelligible in everyday terms. In *The Private Life of Henry VIII* for example, Henry sacrifices domestic happiness to the national cause. His famous remark 'The things I do for England' comes when plunged into an unappetising marital situation and charged with bringing forth an heir.<sup>206</sup> And elsewhere, as his pursuit of an heir produces ever more tragic results, he soliloquises in revealing close-up: 'Greatness? I would exchange it all to be my lowest groom who sleeps about the stable with a wife who loves him.'<sup>207</sup> As far as Alexander Korda was concerned, '[i]t is the business of kings to be lonely.'<sup>208</sup>

The campaign book for *The Private Life of Henry VIII* lays heavy emphasis on sex, but it is really emotional fulfilment that Henry is denied, as evinced by his tears on discovering Catherine Howard's infidelity, and his joy upon finding love again – 'Life has found its meaning.' In *Carry On Henry* by contrast, Henry wants only sex, and, in

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<sup>206</sup> A Mass-Observation report of June 1940 (*Mass-Observation at the Movies*, pp191-9) analyzed the results of a competition in *The Sunday Dispatch* which required readers to nominate their funniest film moments. Henry's remark came in the top 26 most remembered moments, seven years after the film was released. Len England, the author of the report, concluded that 'humour must concern events of everyday life' (p193), and noted how frequently sex and 'domestic affairs' occurred as subjects.

<sup>207</sup> Just a few years after Henry was seen to sacrifice love for duty, the real-life king of England, Edward VIII, did the opposite, abdicating to marry the American divorcee, Mrs Simpson. Wilcox's Victoria films publicly reasserted the proper order of things shortly afterwards. In *Victoria the Great* for example, Victoria even curtails her honeymoon, selflessly remarking: 'I am the Queen – business cannot stop and wait for anything.'

<sup>208</sup> Ralph Richardson, 'Sir Alexander Korda', on the occasion of Korda's death, in *Sight and Sound*, vol. 25, no. 4 (Spring 1956), p215.

keeping with the *Carry On* series in general, it is always just out of reach.<sup>209</sup> There is much end-of-the-pier comedy to be had from the King's efforts to indulge in the charms of a country maid, efforts which are thwarted by her protective father and her voluminous petticoats – 'Blimey, it's like peeling an artichoke' – and from his equally vain attempts to assess the figure of the daughter of the Earl of Bristol, who in any case is saving herself for marriage. The script is enlivened with ribald one-liners like: 'After six months of marriage the only thing I'm 'aving off is 'er 'ead.' But some incidents of this sort do have national connotations, and therefore contain aspects of patriotic self-sacrifice. Henry is moved by the frustrations occasioned by the garlic habit of his French Queen to echo the wistful sentiments of Laughton's Henry. And he is unable to divorce her because of the power of the French King. In his desperation, he resorts to an illegal marriage with Lady Bristol, but at the moment of consummation the King of France enters, with a huge army at his back. The ultimate sacrifice is reserved until last however, as Henry is forced reluctantly to 'convert' to garlic, for the sake of both satisfaction and a future heir.

The damage done by public sacrifice to private life is particularly clear in *The Young Mr Pitt*, where the protagonist neglects his financial affairs and thereby courts eviction from Downing Street, and breaks off with his sweetheart Eleanor Eden when the pressures of work become too great. His friend (functioning in the manner described above) tells him: 'You have your own happiness to consider'. Pitt replies: 'We have the future of this country to consider.' Overall, as *Today's Cinema* described it, the film is:

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<sup>209</sup> In *Carry On Henry*, a 'Sex Enjoyment Tax' is also raised to fund a bribe for the Pope, thus spreading the frustration around a little.

[a] heart-warming story of a man who placed his country before love, ambition and ease and who, in the end, gave his life as surely as a soldier on the battlefield . . .<sup>210</sup>

In *A Man for All Seasons* the theme of domestic disruption is developed still further. In this film, More's family and home life are constantly present, and they highlight the eventual cost of his principled stance. After the King's visit to his home, for instance, More's wife urges him to keep the King's favour, and when he resigns, his wife tells him he is abandoning his duty. His resignation also leads to their impoverishment, and his wife chides him: 'Well there's an end to you.' As they part for the final time in More's cell, he implores her to understand his position. She tells him that she hates him for sacrificing his family, but recognises his greatness.

More does not make sacrifices for the nation in the same direct way as Elizabeth I or Pitt are seen to do. Overtly, his primary affiliation is to law and to his own faith and integrity. But he dies lamenting the absence of these things from government and public life. At the same time, we are reminded that Henry needs to secure the succession to achieve unity against the barons, and that More's personal relationship with the King and his attitude to the King's divorce are of national importance. Cromwell in particular asserts a national context for events when he observes that More's 'silence is bellowing,' and that he is dangerously perceived in Europe as the King's political enemy. Moreover, in the moments immediately prior to his execution, More himself confirms the context of duty, patriotism and the nation for his actions when he claims still to be 'the King's true subject.'

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<sup>210</sup> *Today's Cinema*, 17 June 1942.



The interconnectedness of public and private is especially evident in *A Man for All Seasons*. It is elaborated mostly through the larger significance of the central relationship, and through the momentousness of the King's marital status and his need for an heir. The law also is conceived as a bridge between the public and the private, and household arrangements take on a public importance when the King comes to dine. However, when he departs abruptly, More and his wife are left to eat alone, diminished in a long shot, at a heavily laden table, an image which suggests that the relationship between public and private may often be strained.

In general, the public/private divide and the individual's relationship to the nation, while prominent in advertizing and promotional materials and in the characters' discussion of duty, patriotism and sacrifice, is also debated through style and spectacle. As suggested above, privileged point-of-view shots, the shot-counter-shot structure in general, and tight two-shots, deal primarily with intimate issues and personal ties.<sup>211</sup> But these types of shot are juxtaposed with wider, extra-personal shots of ceremony, crowds and the environment. Thus it is possible to posit a range of individual attitudes towards society and the nation, and to accumulate a number of social or national associations around an individual character.

*Mary, Queen of Scots* again serves as a good example of this. Here Elizabeth's associations with the nation and the rational head, and Mary's with love and the passionate heart, which we have seen to be developed at the level of dialogue, are also

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<sup>211</sup> These shots are *primarily* associated with intimate issues, but not exclusively. Grindon identifies the lovers as one of the chief archetypes of the 'historical romance', and building on the notion of characters as symbols and representatives of a class or culture, goes on to observe that '[t]he fate of the lovers points to the historical attitude of the film, happy marriage signifying the alliance of social groups or the reconciliation of conflicting forces.' By contrast '[a]n ominous union might indicate an unresolvable tension between the public and private life'. See *Shadows on the Past*, pp10-11.

present in the way each is filmed. Mary is often pictured out-of-doors in fluid tracking shots, gambolling through her garden, as in the opening sequence, riding on the beach and hunting grouse. She is thus constructed as active, free and natural, and, being primarily photographed in medium shots and close-ups, her personality and relationships seem to be intimate and romantic. Elizabeth is almost always shown indoors, in formal settings, and is frequently filmed in full-length; an authoritative figure, she is incorporated into the austere surroundings of Parliament or her throne room. In short, she is absorbed as a part of the spectacle of government and power. However, the contrasts are not established with absolute rigidity. Elizabeth meets Mary outside during their first encounter, and the distinctions which have held good until now are blurred. This is another crucial moment when government, the nation and other issues are debated in a rural/garden setting. But the second meeting, before Mary's execution, takes place inside. The earlier distinctions are reinscribed, and the fact that Elizabeth's victory is a pyrrhic one is reflected in the fact that she again appears in authoritative long-shot, but now blended into the stark, barren backdrop of Mary's cell.

### **The Syntax of the Historical Film**

In this section I ask how the features of the historical film, as identified and discussed in the preceding pages, may be said to interrelate to produce a coherent whole.

#### **1. Jeffrey Richards and the King's Two Bodies**

In *The Age of the Dream Palace*, Jeffrey Richards suggests that films which deal with

the monarchy are organised according to two separate principles.<sup>212</sup> ‘On the one hand, there is mythologization, the casting of larger-than-life stars like Laughton in larger-than-life roles like Henry, figures who often already have an independent folklore existence . . .’ (p260). The second principle can be described as ‘humanization’:

This has to be handled with care, for if the glamour is stripped away, then the monarchy loses one of its most potent weapons – the sense of being superior people to be looked up to and trusted. The cinema has dealt with this problem in a subtle way. The content of films about royalty often concentrates on their private lives [...] This personalization of royalty [...] caters for the need ordinary people apparently have to know about the private lives of the famous. Films like *The Private Life of Henry VIII* answer this need, but in doing so, they emphasise the very greatness of their subjects. For if they were not great, there would be no interest in their private lives (ibid.).

Because filmmakers have been particularly inclined towards unhappy or tragic royal love affairs, ‘[t]he implicit assumption is that being King or Queen does not make you happy and that you should leave it to the people who have been trained to do it. The “unhappiness of kings” idea both serves to discourage people from wanting power and encourages their sympathies with those whose duty it is to exercise power’ (ibid.). The rich settings of historical films are a further part of this, in that they distance the spectator from the action and underscore the fact that ‘whatever personal trauma the royal personages are undergoing, they remain above and beyond ordinary men and women’ (ibid.).

Richards suggests that this strategy is reminiscent of the medieval doctrine ‘which held that the king had two bodies – his human body, which lived and died and was subject to human frailties, and his royal body, which coexisted with it, representing his kingly

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<sup>212</sup> Richards is not dealing with the historical film genre as such; though he frequently refers to the



role, and which never died [. . .] The doctrine is extremely useful, since it can excuse bad deeds done by the monarch, attributing them to the human body, without denying the validity of monarchy, which remains sacrosanct in the royal body' (pp260-1). Thus the peccadilloes and antics of Henry VIII and Charles II do not reflect badly on the present-day royal institution.

This model is impressive, because it suggests a way in which many of the generic features I have observed cohere to produce something readily identifiable as a historical film. It accounts for the use of memorable, or 'folkloric' history, the presence of the charismatic star, the use of elaborate spectacle and distancing long-shots, and the themes of government, sacrifice and unhappiness. And it suggests that the genre's past-presentness has a political dimension, and is about more than simply making the past comprehensible to contemporary eyes and minds.<sup>213</sup>

Though Richards' analysis effectively explains much about the British historical genre, it does not sufficiently account for the emphasis placed on patriotism and the nation, and it fails to provide a ready basis for the syntactic differentiation of similar types. I will argue that an approach which conceives of genre as mythic-ritual affords more satisfying results.

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examples he uses as historical films, he also alludes to swashbucklers and horror films.

<sup>213</sup> In 'The British Empire and Monarchy on Film' in *Cultures 2*, Richards illustrates his ideas with further examples, finding for example that Flora Robson's performance as Elizabeth in *Fire Over England* 'illustrates the theory of the king's "Two Bodies" perfectly. On the one hand she is a woman, fretting about her increasing age, jealous of the youth and beauty of her ladies-in-waiting, attracted to the dashing hero Michael Ingolby (Laurence Olivier). But at the same time she is also the Queen, generous and compassionate, courageous and dedicated to her country' (p106). In the last scene, after the Armada has been defeated, '[t]he Queen, bowed down by care and age, leans against a table and stares at her reflection in a mirror. Bitterly, she declares: "The mirror is old and blemished. I shall have no more mirrors in any room of mine." Suddenly, there is a blast of trumpets. The Queen straightens up and goes out [. . .] to address her people. She has moved from her Human into her Royal role. The people kneel and give thanks to God for victory. Warmed and strengthened by their love, she is given renewed vigour to serve her country' (ibid.). Richards also argues in this article that '[t]he approach of many of the

Firstly however I want to take up Richards' suggestion that, in urging the public to revere the monarchy, the monarchical film is essentially conservative, utilizing the institution of monarchy as 'an effective metaphor for the status quo',<sup>214</sup> and functioning as a buttress to standing authority in general.

## 2. A Conservative Genre?

It is important to reiterate the principle that films and genres are not intrinsically, essentially anything. Conservatism can be undermined, for example by spectacle, costume or music, and according to the axioms of reception work, the meaning of a film is fashioned from its context and the interpretative frames, expectations, experiences, preferences and competences a viewer imports to the cinema. In *Picturing the Past*, Sue Harper also shows how historical films were given different emphases as the period progressed, and according to which personalities were involved, what production environments they were working in, and also shifts in popular taste. In chapter six, I will myself be attending more closely to the genre's shifting emphases and relations with its political and social context.

Though any assertion of the historical film's political orientation must take account of these points, Richards' contention that the genre is ideologically conservative seems not unreasonable, in that it embraces key features of dialogue,<sup>215</sup> narrative and *mise-en-*

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"humanization" films is oriented strongly towards a female audience' (p91). I will argue below that the historical film genre does not have a marked gender address.

<sup>214</sup> *The Age of the Dream Palace*, p259.

<sup>215</sup> The script of an historical film may in exceptional cases be an unambiguous indicator of its political leanings. Thus for example *Cardboard Cavalier* begins with a voice-over which refers to 'real austerity', and characterizes Cromwell as 'an inhuman monster.' Indeed he is seen impassively watching executions

*scène*. The conservatism of many historical texts may be partly related to the apparent desire of such figures as Korda and Wilcox to insinuate themselves into the British establishment.<sup>216</sup> I discuss other possible determinants of the genre's political position below, including the fact that the popular historical knowledge upon which it draws, and towards which it contributes, seems to owe a great deal to nineteenth-century historiographical discourse.

Significantly, the notion that the historical genre is ideologically conservative is supported in contemporary reviews, which indicates that some (influential) audience members at least were putting the historical genre to conservative ritual uses. As we have seen for example, only left-wing journals dissented from the general praise of *Sixty Glorious Years*, and other historical films were frequently praised for their moral and political rectitude, and attitude of loyalty to the throne. Graham Greene summarizes the tone of such films in writing of *Fire Over England* that it 'caught the very spirit of an English public-schoolmistress's vision of history.'<sup>217</sup> The opposition to these films expressed by Cook, Landy and others thus becomes rather easier to understand. In chapter five, a consideration of the costume drama, and particularly the Gainsborough costume cycle on which I have been concentrating, will reveal it to be much more radical.

The role of censorship in engendering and maintaining the apparent political outlook of the historical film is arguably central. In Richards' words, a fundamental aspiration of the censor before the 1960s was 'to maintain the status quo', and no overt criticism of

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while others avert their eyes. When Charles ultimately returns to England, he is greeted by a celebratory spectacle of love, appreciation and fun.

<sup>216</sup> On the values and political perspectives entertained by Korda and Wilcox, see Harper, *Picturing the Past*, p20 and p50 respectively.



the monarch or the government was permitted.<sup>218</sup> Accordingly, a proposal for a film dealing with the relationship between Queen Victoria and John Brown elicited condemnation from the chief censor, Colonel Hanna: 'I suggest that to revive these ugly rumours after this lapse of time would be worse than 'bad taste'. It would be a deliberate attempt to belittle the dignity of the crown.'<sup>219</sup> As Harper notes of the 1930s, 'films which grafted radicalism or atheism on to the past were dealt with severely', whilst patriotic, 'respectable' films such as *The Iron Duke* and *Tudor Rose* won praise.<sup>220</sup> A handful of texts that draw on the historical past demonstrate that the authority of the censor was far from absolute, and that the Board of Censors was occasionally even willing to disregard its own official strictures.<sup>221</sup> But in general, the power and prevalence of censorship at the time when the historical film's contours and conventions were being established seem beyond doubt, and it may be that through this formative influence, censorship continued to exert a conservative influence on the genre even after the process of liberalization had begun.

For whatever reason, it is certainly true that the apparently conservative nature of historical film has obtained even in eras such as the 1960s that were characterized by extensive change, though at such times historical films have been produced in fewer

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<sup>217</sup> Graham Greene, *The Pleasure Dome*, p135 (*Spectator*, 5 March 1937).

<sup>218</sup> See Jeffrey Richards, 'British Film Censorship', in *The British Cinema Book*, p168.

<sup>219</sup> *John Brown, Servant of the Queen*, B.B.F.C. Scenario Reports, 1937/CCC. Not until 1995 was such a project completed, though of course in the meantime a number of films alluded to the peccadilloes and indiscretions of Henry VIII, Charles II and George IV.

<sup>220</sup> See *Picturing the Past*, p13.

<sup>221</sup> For example, though Colonel Hanna ruled on *The Private Life of Henry VIII* that '[t]he language may be true to the standards of the period but it is far too outspoken and coarse for the present day,' Korda 'possessed enough courage and enough influence in political circles to be able to withstand this advice.' See Tom Dewe Matthews, *Censored*, pp67-8. The pre-production history of *Jew Suss*, which in dealing with Nazi anti-Semitism certainly violates the official ban on films 'calculated to wound the susceptibilities of foreign people', is equally instructive. It illuminates the way the B.B.F.C. was at certain junctures willing to turn a blind eye to proscribed themes, provided the infringements concerned were shrouded in the historical past. See James C. Robertson, *The Hidden Cinema*, pp61-2. Harper's discussion of the relations between the paternalist Historical Association and the censor in the 1930s also

numbers, relative to other periods of comparative buoyancy in the film industry.<sup>222</sup> The play in the historical film between variation in respect of public taste and an apparent constancy of political outlook makes the historical film a classic case of an invented tradition, in that it 'reveals the contrast between the constant change and innovation of the modern world and the attempt to secure at least some part of social life within it as unchanging and invariant.'<sup>223</sup>

### **3. The British Historical Film as Mythic-Ritual**

In the terms established in chapter two, the British historical may be said to mythicize and ritualize the individual's relationship with the nation, debating problematical aspects of this relationship, and offering solutions which may be temporary or otherwise. In addition to general questions of patriotism and national sacrifice, other, more specific issues may be raised. Examples are the competing demands of career and the nation (in *The Prime Minister*); health and the nation (*The Young Mr Pitt*); love, loyalty and the nation (*Mary, Queen of Scots*); conscience and the nation (*A Man for All Seasons*); and so on. Because these tensions are usually resolved in favour of the nation, the state and self-sacrifice, the genre may again be viewed as conservative, though from a different perspective to that proposed by Richards.

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makes the salutary point that the B.B.F.C. has by no means always adopted toward history the most conservative position enjoined upon it. See *Picturing the Past*, pp64-76.

<sup>222</sup> Whereas 21 British films commonly understood to be historical were produced in the 1930s, for example, the '60s yielded only 13. A 1963 survey of cinema-goers, quoted below, suggests that the films produced in the '60s may have been primarily consumed by older and more middle-class audiences, for whom such films could have offered a degree of comfort and reassurance amid so much disorientation.

<sup>223</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: Inventing Traditions', in *The Invention of Tradition* ed. by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p2.

As a model for explaining what the genre is and what it does, the notion of historical film as mythic-ritual unites and assigns roles to *all* its semantic features. The prominence of royalty as figureheads and the overt discussion of the nation and national issues serve to establish the mythic concerns of the genre as an important frame of reference. And the recurrent themes of patriotism and sacrifice can be seen as having a syntactic as well as semantic role, as I argued above. Audience identification with the protagonists and mythic participation in the problems they face is likely to have been reinforced by repeated assertions on the part of kings and queens in films as diverse as *Nell Gwyn* and *Anne of the Thousand Days* that they are 'only human' like everyone else, and by the fact that viewers have brought to screenings a knowledge of the stars involved and their private lives as 'ordinary' citizens. Richard Dyer's discussion of the star image as an attempt to manage contradictions in the dominant ideology, focussing and diffusing potential threats to the status quo, further elucidates the function of the star as a focus for mythic-ritual debate in the historical film,<sup>224</sup> whilst the pleasures of romance, spectacle and costume help to make the genre seductive in its mythic function, as Barthes stressed it must be. Furthermore, the use of 'memorable' history and the past-presentness of detail, dialogue and costume in the genre may also be read not only as strategies by which history is made comprehensible to modern audiences, but also as ways for making the particular problems of individual/state relations addressed by the historical film relevant to contemporary experience. Finally, the great emphasis placed on accuracy and historical authenticity may be understood as a method of lending gravity and irrefutability to the genre's solutions.

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<sup>224</sup> See Dyer's *Stars*, pp26-32.



Viewed in this way, it is not surprising that one concentration of historical films occurs in the late '30s and in the 1940s, when issues of national security, patriotism and patriotic sacrifice were of overriding moment. However, in light of Leo Baudry's suggestion that genre serves as a barometer of the social and cultural concerns of cinema-goers,<sup>225</sup> and given that significant examples of the genre steadily continued to be produced even after the 1940s, the same issues may be seen to have been of persistent concern throughout the period I have been examining.

We will see that the British historical film genre and American historical cinema have several semantic features in common, some of which are explicable in terms of their shared narrative strategies.<sup>226</sup> But we will also discover some enormous differences. For Arthur Marwick, 'the more one makes a comparative study of films, the more one becomes aware that, however exceptional within the context of its own country, every film is in fact a product of its own culture. No filmmaker, it becomes clearer and clearer, can really go beyond certain assumptions accepted within his own country.'<sup>227</sup> Though I argued at the end of chapter two that Hollywood films are an important part of British generic regimes, and though I have observed in this chapter that individual American films (like *The Virgin Queen* and *Young Bess*) approximate closely to the British pattern, Marwick's sentiments seem to be applicable to the historical film. As Levi-Strauss' contends, myths are culturally specific, and national differences in the global historical genre can be clarified with reference to the theory of genre-as-myth.

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<sup>225</sup> See 'From the World in a Frame', in *Film Theory and Criticism* ed. by G. Mast, M. Cohen and L. Baudry 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p431.

<sup>226</sup> On the British use of Hollywood modes of film-making, see chapter two, pp49-53.

<sup>227</sup> Arthur Marwick, *Class: Image and Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p22.

#### 4. Resistance to Myth and the Idea of Genre as Mythic-Ritual

A number of recent writers have been both highly critical of the presence of myth in film (especially 'historical myth'), and highly resistant to the idea that film itself might function as myth. For example, Colin McArthur sees popular Scottish cinema, with its traditions of tartanry and kailyard, as an impediment to progressive national identities, disseminating and preserving grossly distorted images of Scottish life.<sup>228</sup> The romantic, heroic and mythic past is deemed to be irrelevant, and the need for 'realism', and a more 'authentic' construction of Scottishness, to be imperative.<sup>229</sup> In general, as Pam Cook writes, this kind of critique of nostalgia and myth 'is central to much leftist discussion, particularly on the subject of national identity'. She continues:

The longing for an imaginary "golden age" is often perceived to be embedded in the regressive myths of community from which traditional group and national identities are constructed. Such longings are generally seen as culturally conservative, obstructing the way to the formation of modern, progressive identities.<sup>230</sup>

It should be noted that the left is not without its own myths of nation, with J. B. Priestly for example advancing a wartime national mythology based on 'the People', as an alternative to dominant Churchillian myths.<sup>231</sup> But in McArthur's impatient dismissal

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<sup>228</sup> Colin McArthur, 'Introduction', in *Scotch Reels* ed. by Colin McArthur (London: BFI, 1982). Tartanry and kailyard, he suggests, have had 'seriously stunting effects on the emergence of alternative discourses more adequate to the task of dealing with the reality of Scottish life', p3.

<sup>229</sup> In this connection, see McArthur's review of *Braveheart* in *Sight and Sound*, September 1995, p45; and Alan Lovell's essay 'The British Cinema: The Known Cinema?', in *The British Cinema Book*, p241, for criticisms of this review, and of McArthur's desire for 'a historically accurate account of Scottish identity'.

<sup>230</sup> Pam Cook, *Fashioning the Nation*, pp25-6.

<sup>231</sup> See John Baxandale and Christopher Pawling, *Narrating the Thirties: Decade in the Making* (Macmillan: London and Basingstoke, 1995), chapter three.

of such 'tartan epics' as *Bonnie Prince Charlie*, the demand for 'truth' in historical film is again apparent.<sup>232</sup>

I shall come to national identity in due course. Here, the crucial point is that, *contra* McArthur, myth - and the historical film understood as mythic-ritual - generate complex and dynamic connections to contemporary life, and deal directly with real social and political issues.

Jeffrey Richards is one of the few British authors to have considered the appeal and political function of myth in film. Tackling the question of Scottish national identity on film, he opines:

"Authentic" and "truthful" are words much bandied about when considering desirable characteristics in films representing national identity. But whose truth and whose authenticity? [Intellectual commentators] mean documentary authenticity. But authenticity, realism, documentary accuracy are much less important to the mass audience than myths, dreams and memories.<sup>233</sup>

Arriving at similar positions, Brian W. Dippie and Richard Slotkin have examined the pleasures and explanatory power of myth in the context of American cinema.<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>232</sup> Compare McArthur's desire for cultural 'authenticity' and the 'reality' behind conservative myths with those critics whom we saw to be hostile to the historical genre in chapter one. Interestingly, the outcome of McArthur's arguments is also the same as that of those advanced by Cook, Landy and Harper, though they approach the subject from almost the opposite angle. Where McArthur seeks the truth of the past, they examine the emotional appeal of representations of the past. But as we have seen, they conflate it with other genres and undermine and confuse its perspectives. Thus they just as surely fail to address the genre on (what have emerged in my research as) its own terms.

<sup>233</sup> Richards, *Films and British National Identity*, p176. With McArthur's review cited in note 228 above, compare Richards' appraisal of *Braveheart*: 'The massive commercial success in Scotland and worldwide of what is essentially a simplistic, Anglophobe, ahistorical farrago, demonstrates the continuing power of Hollywood myth-making and the unaltered willingness of audiences to lap up "the inauthentic" if it stirs the heart and wrenches the guts' (pp185-6). He goes on to criticize McArthur's introduction to *Scotch Reels* for failing to understand the appeal of myth, and for taking a one-dimensional, class-centred perspective on the proper subject for Scottish cinema (pp191-2).

<sup>234</sup> Brian W. Dippie, 'Popcorn and Indians: Custer on the Screen', in *Cultures* 2, pp139-168. In a Sorlin-like argument, Dippie argues that the Custer theme in American cinema reflects changing U.S. values, ideals and experiences. See especially p139. He also suggests that in order to be successful, the treatment



It is surprising to see so little attention devoted to myth and film, particularly in British studies, where the material gathered by Mayer, Mass-Observation and other researchers is replete with responses which are very much in line with the mythic-ritual model of genre film. Jim Godbold for example, interviewed as part of the E.R.S.C. Cinema Culture in 1930s Britain project, explained of his cinema-going: 'Oh, you sort of live the part don't you? [...] I can't explain it really. But you come out feelin sort of refreshed . . .'<sup>235</sup> In Mayer's compendia, where respondents are particularly expressive of their feelings, one author wrote:

Musical films of a more serious nature are my favourites and are often the cause of my decisions. At the time I saw *Phantom of the Opera*, I was very worried about a personal matter, but the music and the atmosphere rested my mind and after a long walk home I was able to give my reply without any further worry. After seeing a film of this nature I like to go for a good long walk alone and to go over my past life to review my present life ('Films and the Pattern of Life', Doc. 34, p80).<sup>236</sup>

Another suggested that a happy and well-balanced individual would have no need of film, and would not be powerfully affected by it ('Films and the Pattern of Life', Doc. 52, p121). Several respondents testified to the value of films in guiding their lives,<sup>237</sup>

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of Custer on film must be respectful of the Custer myth, his 'symbolic niche' in the American tradition. The myth cannot be comprehensibly debunked, he says; it must be adopted and reworked (pp163-4). A good example of Slotkin's work is *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992).

<sup>235</sup> Annette Kuhn, 'Memories of cinema-going in the 1930s', in *Journal of Popular British Cinema 2: Audiences and Reception in Britain* ed. by Annette Kuhn and Sarah Street, p119.

<sup>236</sup> Mayer's first survey was initiated with a far more precise series of questions than his second, and these questions, and the sociological interests which motivated them, may have unduly influenced some of the replies. He asks: 'How did films influence your play and other activities?'; 'Do you find it hard to control the emotions aroused by films?'; 'What have you imitated from films . . .?'; 'Describe fully any temptations or ambitions due to films'. See *British Cinemas and their Audiences*, p14. These questions explain the willingness of contributors to discuss their involvement in film and the intensity of their identification with various characters. But there is nothing in the questions which necessarily directs writers to use the language of mythic-ritual response (the solving of problems, release etc.), which we see below that they do.

<sup>237</sup> See for example 'Films and the Pattern of Life', Doc. 38, p94, and Doc. 60, p139: 'Films taught me all the things I should like to associate with life.'

and others to the ability of film to leave them refreshed, uplifted, satisfied and peaceful.<sup>238</sup> Such comments are very much in keeping with Levi-Strauss' notion of myth as an attempt to resolve dilemmas, and Barthes' emphasis on the power of myth to 'clarify', 'purify', and establish a sense of security.

Importantly for my purposes, all of these sentiments occur somewhere in the evidence in connection with the historical genre. Thus an Odeon regular in Mass-Observation's Bolton Survey described *Victoria the Great* as 'a film that does anybody good to see' (Odeon Men, Doc. 27, p81), whilst a woman who replied to Mayer's 'Films and the Pattern of Life' advertisement wrote:

There have been many pictures, mostly historical, such as *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, *Lives of a Bengal Lancer*, *Sixty Glorious Years* etc, which have always been kept apart from those which I could feel were making some sort of an impression on me which would probably be for worse instead of better. These films gave me an exultant pride in my own country, and her achievements (Doc 34, p84).

The absence of material of this kind for other audiences and periods is again much to be regretted.

### **5. The Appeal and Audience of the Historical Film**

In light of what I have had to say in this section about the 'syntactic structure' of the British historical film and the conservative tendencies of this structure, and prior to my discussion of the changing nature of the historical film in chapter six, I briefly return to

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<sup>238</sup> Ibid., Doc. 45 p107, where cinema is a 'valuable outlet' for the writer's feelings; and Doc. 60 pp141-2, where films are said to bring calmness and satisfaction. The common complaint in Mayer's material that after this catharsis, life seems dull and grubby (see *ibid.*, Doc. 2, p22, where the respondent says that

the problematic issue of who has watched historical films and why. It is of course true that 'patterns of movie-going have varied historically according to region, social class, income, age and ethnicity.'<sup>239</sup> Recent studies of British audiences in the 1920s/1930s and 1950s by Nicholas Hiley and by Sue Harper and Vincent Porter have revealed some of the details of this variation, forcefully illustrating the great difficulties entailed in attempting to generalize.<sup>240</sup> Nevertheless, in the case of the historical film, some interesting general patterns do emerge.

The first point to make is that the genre has seemingly not appealed more to one sex than the other. In the 1930s for example, enthusiasm for historical films was distributed fairly evenly amongst the sexes in letters to *Film Weekly*, whilst in Mass-Observation's Bolton Survey, women rated the genre more highly than men, but only very slightly.<sup>241</sup> Men and women have probably wanted and derived different pleasures from the historical film. Thus for example, in wartime and post-war letters to *Picturegoer*, men praised realism and accuracy, whilst women tended to value visual pleasure above all, and would have agreed with one woman who wrote of *The Prime Minister*: 'I want pictures first and history second for my entrance money.'<sup>242</sup> But the evidence is that overall the genre was equally able to satisfy both camps.<sup>243</sup> The fact that pressbooks

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without films she is miserable, and wonders if she is in danger of becoming addicted to them, like a drug) is also a compelling indication of the ritualistic nature of film for some viewers.

<sup>239</sup> Allen and Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice*, p156.

<sup>240</sup> See Nicholas Hiley, "'Let's go to the pictures': The British cinema audience in the 1920s and 1930s"; and Sue Harper and Vincent Porter, 'Cinema audience tastes in 1950s Britain', both in *Journal of Popular British Cinema 2: Audiences and Reception in Britain*.

<sup>241</sup> See *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, pp34-6. Women voted historical film their third favourite category, whilst men placed it fourth.

<sup>242</sup> See the *Picturegoer* issue of 26 April 1941, and Harper, *Picturing the Past*, pp144-6.

<sup>243</sup> In this connection, a Mass-Observation 'fade-out' competition report of 1940 (reproduced in *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, pp200-8) is interesting. It showed that men preferred 'patriotic' and 'uplifting' endings while women elected 'love' (p202), both of which elements are often combined in the historical film via the crucial element of tragedy (which the author of the report detects in all of the eight most popular fade-outs, p201). Perhaps because the historical film often ends unhappily in patriotic sacrifice, a high proportion of the total number of films revealed by the report to have 'memorable' endings can be seen as historical.



have recommended that a film be promoted on the basis of both fashion and authenticity angles *at the same* time also suggests that the distributors and producers of historical films felt mixed audiences to be a realistic goal. I shall return to these issues in chapter five, where I will argue that genres adjacent to the historical film are very different in terms of gender appeal and audience composition.

Though the genre is not 'gender specific', there is some evidence to suggest that it has seemed more attractive to older audiences. In *World Film News* for example, Daphne Huston wrote of her experiences of cinema in Muswell Hill in London, where film-going was particularly favoured by the retired and the elderly:

They like films about ordinary people like themselves or historically familiar characters – Britishers like Clive and Rhodes whose motives they can understand and admire. A tale with a true British flavour, though not necessarily of British production, goes down as well as anything. The most astonishing success was *Victoria the Great*. It attracted not only keen filmgoers but many for whom the appeal was a personal or patriotic one.<sup>244</sup>

In a much later period, the pressbook for *Becket* stresses its serious and 'grown-up' dimensions:

Amid the richness of kings and courts, palaces and cathedrals, this is basically an adult, intimate drama of what the director calls 'a friendship that went wrong' and a great historical-political issue. He is emphatic that nothing will be sacrificed to 'spectacle', nothing done to try to make the film more 'popular'.

Paramount also repeatedly referred to the film as 'significant',<sup>245</sup> whilst the pressbook for *The Lion in Winter* advised cinema managers to 'make it look important.' Similarly, in the opinions and recollections assembled by Mayer, historical film again emerges as

the choice of the older and more discerning filmgoer,<sup>246</sup> while the same is occasionally said of British films in general.<sup>247</sup> The Bernstein Film Questionnaire of 1937 found the over-60s keener on the historical genre than younger audiences,<sup>248</sup> whilst in a 1963 survey of London audiences, the 16-24 year-old age group rated historical film very poorly, as compared to the 35-44 year-old group, which placed it joint second in a list of preferences.<sup>249</sup>

Furthermore, there is some indication that historical films were felt at various times to be the choice of the most sophisticated and educated patrons of cinema. For example, in its review of *The Young Mr Pitt*, *Today's Cinema* noted: 'while probably making its greatest appeal to discriminating audiences, [this] is a box-office proposition no exhibitor can afford to miss.'<sup>250</sup> Similarly, a survey of 66 exhibitors in *World Film News* in 1937 said of working-class audiences: 'History is almost universally condemned.'<sup>251</sup> *Kine Weekly*, where reviewers habitually advised readers on issues of appeal and audience, warned that in *Young Bess* 'there is not even a chase or duel scene to appease the "ninepennies"', whereas '[i]ntelligent and discriminating audiences should find the polished acting [...] stimulating' (21 May 1953, p16). *Queen Victoria* is also a prospect 'particularly for good and high-class halls' (19 November 1947, p34), and *Becket* 'should have great success in all high-class situations' (26 March 1964, p9). Upon the release of *The Iron Duke*, Gaumont-British arranged for a re-print of a

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<sup>244</sup> *World Film News* 3, no. 2 (May-June 1938), p95. Huston suggests that many were attracted to *Victoria the Great* by the prospect of *reviving memories* of the Queen.

<sup>245</sup> See for example the advertisement in *Kine Weekly*, 19 December 1963, p27.

<sup>246</sup> For example, in 'Films and the Pattern of Life', Doc 28, p69, the respondent explains how she came to appreciate historical film after school had broadened her horizons and taught her that there was more to cinema than escapist entertainment. Early preferences are repeatedly identified as horror, westerns and serial films, but never historicals: see for instance 'A Study in Film Preferences', Doc. 17A, p188.

<sup>247</sup> 'Films and the Pattern of Life', Doc. 33, p78 is a good example.

<sup>248</sup> Bernstein Film Questionnaire 1937, p14.

<sup>249</sup> *Cinema-Going in Greater London*, p64.

<sup>250</sup> *Today's Cinema*, 17 June 1942.

biography of Wellington by Philip Guedalla, and commissioned Philip Lindsay to produce a novelization of the film, which, as Sue Harper suggests, indicate that 'a literate audience was being addressed.'<sup>252</sup> By referring in publicity materials to other historical films and quoting 'quality' reviews, strategies which we have seen several historical films follow, producers may have been hoping to appeal to a cine-literate elite.<sup>253</sup>

However, if the cinema audience since 1930 has really been as youthful and as working-class as various surveys of it have indicated,<sup>254</sup> it seems unlikely that so many instances of so specialist a genre would have been produced. In fact, this suspicion is supported by a range of evidence, which strongly suggests that the appeal of the historical film was actually very wide.

For example, the evidence of Mass Observation's Bolton Survey specifically suggests that both *Victoria the Great* and the historical film in general were popular across all social grades, from the Crompton Cinema to the Odeon.<sup>255</sup> And although the weekly returns of the Majestic Cinema in Macclesfield for the period 1939-46 constitute further evidence of variations within the 'national' audience, with films listed by *Kine Weekly* as hits sometimes faring badly and local comedians doing uncommonly well, still *Sixty Glorious Years* and *Lady Hamilton* were as successful here as in London and the

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<sup>251</sup> *World Film News*, Feb 1937, pp6-7.

<sup>252</sup> See *Picturing the Past*, p33.

<sup>253</sup> Grindon argues something similar of the marketing of *Reds* (1982) in *Shadows on the Past*, p188.

<sup>254</sup> See for example Kathleen Box, *The Cinema and the Public: An Enquiry into Cinema Going Habits and Expenditure Made in 1946*, especially pp1-2; and *Spotlight on the Cinema Audience* (a digest of *The Cinema Audience – A National Survey*), Screen Advertising Association, 1960, especially pp5-7, 10-11.

<sup>255</sup> See *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, pp32-41.



south.<sup>256</sup> In the Bernstein Questionnaire of 1934, Korda was voted favourite director for *Catherine the Great* and *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (the latter being voted second favourite film from a varied list of options).<sup>257</sup> *The Young Mr Pitt* and *Henry V* were adjudged by *Kine Weekly* to have been extremely profitable attractions, whilst Sue Harper also documents the great popularity of a number of further historical titles.<sup>258</sup> Furthermore, as noted above, not all historical films had the same style or type of address, those produced by Korda for example being more populist than those produced by Michael Balcon. *Kine Weekly* characterized *Fire Over England* as a film of 'universal appeal' (21 January 1937, p31), and said of *Catherine the Great*: 'Certain booking for high-class halls, and should prove popular in others' (18 January 1934, p33). *The Young Mr Pitt* (18 June 1942, p23) and *Henry V* (30 November 1944, p27) are also conceived as 'general bookings.'

It is thus not possible to characterize the genre as one for refined tastes, or for the educated few. Even the pressbook for *Becket*, which describes the film in such stern and improving tones, finds a little room to also sell the films 'castles, banquets, and daring-do', and we have seen promotional materials for other films lay frequent and heavy emphasis on sex, spectacle and romance. Moreover, in that monarchs in historical films are often presented as national figureheads, who manifest great concern for the nation as a whole, the genre may be seen as basically consensualist, aiming to appeal to the widest possible range of national audiences.

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<sup>256</sup> *The Young Mr Pitt* and *The Prime Minister* however were not well supported. See Julian Poole, 'British Cinema Attendance in Wartime: Audience Preference at the Majestic, Macclesfield, 1939-46', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1987, especially pp18-19, and pp21-2.

<sup>257</sup> See Bernstein Film Questionnaire 1934, pp12, 18. Three years later, Korda was the second most favoured director, with comments indicating that *The Private Life of Henry VIII* was still fresh in the minds of his fans. See Bernstein Film Questionnaire 1937, p22.

<sup>258</sup> See *Picturing the Past*, for example pp10-12, where Harper refers to the success achieved by *Tudor Rose* and *Nell Gwyn*, amongst others.

## Conclusion: The Historical Film and Historiography

To conclude, I will locate the profile of historical film as developed in chapters three and four in the context of the evolving discourses of academic and popular history. One aim of my work is to provide some common ground upon which film historians and others with a professional interest in history can meet, and a discussion of historical film as it relates to historiography is one good way of doing this. I shall show that the historical film has 'legitimate' historiographical roots, and will try to account for the impatience and disdain with which historians have often approached it. We will see that British historical films have operated within sharply-defined historiographical parameters, and in light of this, Sue Harper's contention that during World War Two 'a rich patina of historical interpretation was available' from which historical film-makers 'selected quite broadly', can be viewed as a product of her very loose conception of the historical genre.<sup>259</sup>

The branch of historiography to which British historical film most closely approximates is nineteenth-century historicism. Like historicism, the historical film overtly aims to *re-create* the past. Historians who aspire to re-create the past, in John Tosh's formulation, 'are striving to create in their readers the illusion of direct experience.'<sup>260</sup> Re-creation requires imagination and descriptive power akin to those of the novelist or dramatist, and it is the characteristic nineteenth-century mode of history-writing, as practised by Macaulay and Carlyle. Carlyle opined that 'the first indispensable condition' of historical work was to 'see the things transacted, picture them wholly, as

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<sup>259</sup> See *Picturing the Past*, p96.

if they stand before our eyes.'<sup>261</sup> By deploying detailed, vivid description and narrative, such writers aimed, in the words of C. V. Wedgwood (one of the few still to practise the historicist's art into the later twentieth century), to restore to the people of the past 'their immediacy of experience.'<sup>262</sup>

Most modern historians, however, are critical of pure narrative and evocation. As John Vincent suggests, the fundamental and determinative tenet of the *Annales* school of history, which has had greater influence on academic history writing in the twentieth century than any other, is an uncompromising 'rejection of political narrative.'<sup>263</sup> Historians now hold causation to be multiple and complex, and therefore believe that a correct chronology does not sufficiently explain the relationship between events.<sup>264</sup> Furthermore, narrative history is able only to sustain two or three arguments at any one time, and it tends to favour short-term over long-term factors. Because historicism is thus regarded without favour by the historical profession, naturally so too is historical film.

In aiming to re-create the past, historical film also resembles the Rankean variety of nineteenth-century historicism in the importance attached to accuracy and thoroughness of research, and in its avoidance of overt evaluation. As Tosh again writes:

The critical evaluation of the evidence itself [. . .] may require a discussion about textual authenticity and the validity of factual inference, as well as a weighing up of the pros and cons of

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<sup>260</sup> John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London and New York: Longman, 1991), p112.

<sup>261</sup> Thomas Carlyle, quoted in *The Evolution of British Historiography* ed. by J. R. Hale (London: Macmillan, 1967), p42.

<sup>262</sup> C. V. Wedgwood, *The King's Peace 1637-1641* (London: Collins, 1955), p16.

<sup>263</sup> John Vincent, *An Intelligent Person's Guide to History*, p116.

<sup>264</sup> Without proper explanation, historicism is susceptible to the *post hoc propter hoc* fallacy. On this point, see R. H. Tawney, *History and Society* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p54: 'Time, and the order of occurrences in time, is a clue, but no more; part of the historian's business is to substitute more significant connections for those of chronology.'



alternative interpretations. It has been said of Ranke that his careful evaluation of contemporary records was seldom allowed to ruffle the surface of his stately narrative: few historians would be allowed to get away with that kind of reticence today (p119).

As we saw in chapter one, the historical genre's reluctance to go into specifics over the research done on a particular film, and the suppression of historical and evidential choices from promotional material, have together been accused of masking a propensity for using the 'wrong' facts, or at least too few of them, and in a too-simplistic way. Certainly, many historical films appear in reality to have more in common with Carlyle's popular, highly-coloured and sometimes inaccurate history writing than with Ranke's strict 'factualism.' But selection and interpretation in the writing of history is inevitable, and perhaps E. H. Carr's formulation, which distinguishes the facts of history from the facts of the past, might also be extended to cover the facts of the historical film.<sup>265</sup>

Though the British historical film and nineteenth-century historicism are similar in the way in which they approach history, their biggest similarity occurs in terms of subject matter. As we have seen, the British historical film concentrates on politics, government and the nation/state, just as the nineteenth-century narrative historians did:

German historicism was closely associated with a school of political thought, best represented by Hegel, which endowed the concept of the state with a moral and spiritual force beyond the material interests of its subjects; it followed that the state was the main agent of historical change. Equally, the nationalism which inspired so much historical writing at this time led to an emphasis on the competition between the great powers and the struggles of submerged nationalities for political self-determination.<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>265</sup> See Carr, *What is History?* (London: Penguin, 1987), p120.

<sup>266</sup> Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, p74.

The trend towards political history was also reinforced by the fact that the most abundant and easily accessible primary sources for history-writing in the nineteenth century were state archives, whilst men in political power have always looked to the past for guidance, and have written their own history to be sure of being treated kindly by it (as Winston Churchill is alleged to have said). Political history has long been favoured by the public because it is dramatic and accessible (unlike, say economic history), and provides a vicarious involvement in power. Popular historians like Arthur Bryant devote a great deal of space to it, and its predominance has also been perpetuated through its centrality to school and university syllabuses.<sup>267</sup>

Within their common focus on political history, the historical film further resembles nineteenth-century historicism in that it has primarily been concerned with great men and women. Ranke himself focussed his studies on the meetings and discussions of diplomatic history, and he and his contemporaries and followers all tended to adopt an individualist approach, dealing primarily with great ministers and governors. Films follow this lead very closely, with the exception that only the most glamorous and dramatic episodes have qualified for the screen.<sup>268</sup> Carlyle effectively describes many examples of the historical film when he writes:

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<sup>267</sup> Bill Hardiman, a teacher of over 30 years experience and head of history at Manchester Grammar School, avers that until the late 1970s, school history (in both the state and private sectors) focussed overwhelmingly on British political history and its great personalities, including Henry II, Henry VIII and Elizabeth I. In the 1980s and '90s, though politics and powerful personalities have not entirely disappeared, there was a shift towards social history, a greater interest in the history of the twentieth century, and a far greater emphasis on skills and sources than on historical 'facts'. A detailed analysis of these changes can be found in Brian Simon's book, *The State and Educational Change: Essays in the History of Education and Pedagogy* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1994).

<sup>268</sup> Constitutional history as William Stubbs described it in 1880 has unsurprisingly failed to figure largely in the cinema: 'The History of Institutions cannot be mastered – can scarcely be approached – without an effort. It affords little of the romantic incident or of the picturesque grouping which constitute the charm of history in general . . .'. William Stubbs, *The Constitutional History of England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1880), vol. 1, pv.

Universal history, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here. They were the leaders of men, these great ones; the modellers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain; all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realisation and embodiment, of Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world; the soul of the whole world's history, it may justly be considered, were this history of these . . .<sup>269</sup>

I have shown that British historical films have generally been as respectful as this quote implies they might be, laying great stress on individual motivation as a way of explaining historical change and commemorating and often celebrating the admirable achievements, leadership and patriotism of historical worthies.<sup>270</sup> A poster for *The Prime Minister* seems metonymic of the genre in this respect, placing an authoritative, dominating Disraeli against a background of great national events, pointing out past the viewer, towards his destiny.<sup>271</sup>

In this connection, it is notable that a review of *The Young Mr Pitt* in the *Oxford Mail* (4 July 1942), which quotes nineteenth-century historical opinions of Pitt, also asserts that a primary pleasure and virtue of the film is the opportunity it affords to witness the actions of 'great men'. Similarly, the author of a letter to *Picturegoer* in praise of historical film argued: 'The history of this world is reflected by the great men of each country. In the main we have been given historical reminders.'<sup>272</sup> In 1944 it was announced that Two Cities would be making a film of a study on Marlborough by that modern great man, Winston Churchill. The film was to deal with English history from

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<sup>269</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (London, 1912), pp1-2.

<sup>270</sup> As Carlyle continues: 'We cannot look [. . .] upon a great man, without gaining something by him. He is the living light-fountain, which is good and pleasant to be near' (ibid.).

<sup>271</sup> See *Kine Weekly*, 13 March 1941.

<sup>272</sup> The letter can be found in Mass-Observation's collection of unpublished letters from 1941. See Mass-Observation Archive, Box 5, File A.



Charles II to Queen Anne, and like *The Young Mr Pitt*, would be a eulogistic portrait of one of England's greatest statesmen.<sup>273</sup>

Again, modern history-writing distances itself from nineteenth-century practices. Thus for example, E. H. Carr suggests that history must encompass 'the social forces which produce from the actions of individuals results often at variance with, and sometimes opposite to, the results which they themselves intended.'<sup>274</sup> In fact, almost every new development in historiography has led history away from the Great Man perspectives of Victorian historicism.<sup>275</sup> The great social and political changes of the twentieth century have also been decisive. In the aftermath of World War One and the Russian Revolution, for example, scholars were exercised more by questions relating to internationalism and the masses, than by the issues of the nation and its leaders. With new phenomena to explain and new issues to address, new types of history-writing were called into being. Economic and Marxist history and the history of social structure

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<sup>273</sup> See *Kine Weekly*, 'British Production', 13 January 1944, p174. On Churchill's involvement with Korda, see D. J. Wenden and K. R. M. Short, 'Winston S. Churchill: film fan', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 1991, which draws on Martin Gilbert's *Winston S. Churchill (Vol. 5): The Prophet of Truth, 1922-1939* (London: Heinemann, 1977), especially pp560-3, 589-90n.. Elsewhere, Short addresses Churchill's interest in another great man of English history. Watching *Lady Hamilton* and 'having been First Lord of the Admiralty during part of World War I, Churchill may have identified with the heroic Horatio Nelson. After all, they both had been recalled from "retirement" to save the nation. Furthermore Nelson/Olivier's warnings to both the House of Lords and the Admiralty of the futility of appeasing Napoleon may well have resonated with Churchill's own futile warnings against German and Italian fascism during his years in the political wilderness. Small wonder that *Lady Hamilton* has a reputation for being Churchill's wartime favourite.' See 'That Hamilton Woman (1941): propaganda, feminism and the production code', pp14-15.

<sup>274</sup> Carr, *What is History?*, p52.

<sup>275</sup> Namier's influential prosopographical approach to eighteenth-century England for example helped to turn the focus of political history away from the great issues and great statesmen and more towards the acquisition and day-to-day exercise of political power. See *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* (London: Macmillan, 1929). More recently, Foucaudian discourse theory has emphasized the extent to which language imposes conceptual limits on political expression, behaviour and experience, and has led to less certainty about what historical figures mean in their diaries and speeches. At the same time, the deconstruction of texts has afforded the historical characters who produced them much less individuality and control over interpretations of their actions. Work on the history of mentalities has also alerted historians to the dangers of psychological anachronism, of the type which occurs regularly in nineteenth-century history and which is frequently attacked in historical film. On the history of mentalities, see for example Lucien Febvre's essay 'History and Psychology', reprinted in *A New Kind of*

are both extremely abstract and wide-ranging, and have little room for individual volition and the 'Great Man.' In chapter five I will relate some of these alternative historiographical schools to the genres adjacent to historical film.

The focus in nineteenth-century historiography on men of government was inspired largely by present-day political imperatives. As Tosh writes:

During the nineteenth century national identity could be taken much more for granted, and the legitimacy of the state was less open to challenge than in many continental countries. But against the background of an expanding and increasingly literate electorate, history came to be seen as an important unifying element in the country's political culture [. . .] Alongside the imperial tradition [which encouraged pride in Britain's imperial past] an older tradition of English history as 'the story of our liberty' continued as strong as ever. According to this view, all Englishmen were beneficiaries of the centuries-long evolution of constitutional liberties, achieved for the most part by gradualist methods which respected the heritage of the past. Though usually known as the 'Whig interpretation of history', it was in fact bipartisan and effectively reinforced the legitimacy of the country's political institutions . . . (pp5-6).<sup>276</sup>

In the twentieth century, historical films have worked in a very similar way. They have celebrated episodes of national consensus and success, and leaders such as Elizabeth I and Pitt who have preserved the country's freedom. Their foreknown narrative trajectories, and the opportunities they afford for identification with the progressive, patriotic characters at the heads of national institutions, also give the viewer a similar confidence that history happens for the best.<sup>277</sup> The reign of Henry VIII was

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*History* ed. by Peter Burke (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), in which he calls for a 'historical psychology'.

<sup>276</sup> William Stubbs' *Constitutional History*, as an historical endorsement of the parliamentarianism and constitutionalism of Victorian England, belongs very much to this tradition.

<sup>277</sup> *1066 and all that*, which I suggested above predicts the future subjects of historical film with great accuracy, is able to do so because it is partly satirising nineteenth-century history. For example, humorous allusion is repeatedly made to the Whig interpretation of history with its value judgements and emphasis on progress, as where World War One is held to be a 'bad thing' because it 'was the cause of increased geography' (p122). The entire book is also structured around the struggle to accede to the

characterized, Whiggishly, as a time of 'liberty and progress' in the pressbook for *Fire Over England*, whilst it is notable that during the war the Ministry of Information specifically suggested that '[i]deals such as freedom, and institutions such as parliamentary government' as well as 'national heroes' be embraced by historical film-making.<sup>278</sup> Jeffrey Richards' syntactic model for the historical film also suggests that it cultivates a deferential attitude towards rulers and a belief both in their commitment to the job of good government and in the validity and permanence of the status quo in general. And I have argued that if the genre's syntax is understood according to mythic-ritual principles, it can be seen to encourage a respectful and patriotic position in respect to the nation.<sup>279</sup>

The last congruency between historical film and nineteenth-century historicism I want to discuss is their shared unwillingness, despite seeming to stimulate loyalty to and respect for government and the crown, to resort to openly instructive means, or to admit to political interestedness.

Historicism developed in part as a conservative response to the radical excesses of the French Revolution, during which first principles could be said to have been applied without due regard for tradition and inherited institutions. Macauley felt that the purpose of history was to supply statesmen with warnings. But Ranke denied that

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position of 'top nation'. The focus is firstly on great (i.e. 'memorable') men and events, the greatest expression of approval towards whom is to describe them as 'romantic'. See for example p66 on Elizabeth I, and p77 on Charles II. Again like nineteenth-century British historiography, the book is concerned almost exclusively with *British* history.

<sup>278</sup> PRO INF 1/867: Co-Ordinating Committee Paper No 1, 'Programme for Film Propaganda', p1 (4).

<sup>279</sup> The tactic of employing rural images to lend a sense of permanence and legitimacy to government, royalty, the nation and patriotic choice may also be inspired by nineteenth-century practice. See Richards, *Films and British National Identity*, p97: 'The rural myth, pumped out in novels, poems, paintings and advertisements from the 1880s onwards, has a direct effect on evocations of the national character. The Englishman was said to be at heart a countryman, and his character – thanks to his rural roots – to be based on the principles of balance, peacefulness, traditionalism and spirituality.'



history could or was intended to offer practical lessons, arguing in the preface to his first book that: 'History has had assigned to it the task of judging the past, of instructing the present for the benefit of the ages to come. To such lofty functions this work does not aspire. Its aim is merely to show how things actually were.'<sup>280</sup> In much the same way, historical film seems to circulate a politically conservative attitude towards history and historic institutions, but without disclosing any overtly political perspectives or intent.<sup>281</sup> Like Ranke's work, the historical films I have considered are typically 'disguised' as even-handed recreations. In so far as they may be seen as propaganda, they adhere to the M.o.I.'s wartime maxim that 'film propaganda will be most effective when least recognised as such.'<sup>282</sup>

In this connection it is significant that some of those who have attacked historical film appear resistant to the idea that historicism and the modern historical schools that owe most to it are anything less than disinterested and true. Of all modern historians, these writers might have been expected to be the ones most in sympathy with historical film. But it is often possible to detect in the remonstrances, accusations and denunciations of Carnes et al distinct echoes of Herbert Butterfield's influential argument against present-mindedness:

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<sup>280</sup> Leopold Von Ranke, *Histories of the Latin and German Nations from 1494 to 1514*, translated in G. P. Gooch, *History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century*, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, 1952), p74. See also *The Pursuit of History*, p12, in which Tosh argues that 'the modern academic discipline of history [i.e. historicism, as he goes on to explain] originated as a sharp reaction against practically inspired modes of historical inquiry.'

<sup>281</sup> We have also seen that *Fire Over England* and *The Young Mr Pitt* were asserted explicitly but extra-textually to be timely and pertinent, and were promoted partly on the basis of their value in providing 'instruction to the present.' These discourses are suggestive of pre-nineteenth century ideas of predictive history, but the films themselves appear to me closer to historicist models in submerging any political purposes in painstakingly accurate historical detail.

<sup>282</sup> Co-Ordinating Committee Paper No. 1, 'Programme for Film Propaganda', 1939.

The study of the past with one eye, so to speak, upon the present is the source of all sins and sophistries in history, starting with the simplest of them, the anachronism.<sup>283</sup>

With such comments as this in mind, it is perhaps possible to reverse the hermeneutic relationship upon which I have hitherto been relying in this conclusion, and to tentatively suggest that, given its affinities with nineteenth-century historiography, historical film might be a good way of illustrating and elucidating some of the tensions within historicist thinking.

I do not want to become immersed in the debate on the status and nature of historical film, and have merely intended to locate historical film within a historiographical context. But a by-product of this project has been to show that British filmed history has 'respectable' roots, that it adapts and re-circulates a body of conventional wisdom that is residual from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For these reasons I think that it is deserving of more constructive and appreciative attention than it has commonly received.

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<sup>283</sup> Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p30.

# THE BRITISH HISTORICAL FILM IN CONTEXT 1: ADJACENT GENRES

## CHAPTER FIVE: Biopics, Melodramas, Heritage Films and Others

### 1. Distinguishing the British Historical Film From Its Adjacent Genres, 1930-1980

This section relates closely to my two preceding chapters. It revisits the generic landscape mapped out by the filmmakers, exhibitors and critics of chapter three, and seeks to explain how the British historical film could so clearly be distinguished from adjacent genres. I will focus on the biopic (in both its British and American guises) and the costume melodrama as the two adjacent categories which have most often been confused with the historical film by academic commentators. George Custen has suggested that in America the biopic has functioned to provide a 'nearly monochromatic "Hollywood view of history"', and that 'most viewers, at least in part, see history through the lens of the film biography.'<sup>1</sup> The American biopic might thus be seen as the American equivalent of the British historical film. However, 'Hollywood' encompasses other forms which are also likely to have contributed to historical consciousness, and accordingly I shall have occasional comments to make about the adventure film and the epic.

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<sup>1</sup> Custen, *Bio/Pics*, pp2-3.



#### a. Questions of Historical Status, Authenticity and Educational Value

Whereas the British historical film makes infrequent use of titles as a signal of historical status, Custen notes that 'almost all biopics are prefaced by written or spoken declarations that assert the realities of their narratives' (p8). Title-cards are also used to locate the biopic and the viewer within the life of the famous person portrayed, usually setting up the moment at which a singular talent is uncovered (p51). In British historicals too, titles may elucidate the progress of a life or story.<sup>2</sup> Robert Morley was alluding to this practice when, on reading the script for *Cromwell* which required him to deliver such lines as 'Marston Moor, I see,' he remarked: 'I seem to have become a subtitle.'<sup>3</sup> However, when titles appear in British historical films they are generally more informative and extensive, because they extract coherent historical episodes from an often very complex context, and arguably feature 'bigger issues.'<sup>4</sup>

Historical film also diverges from the biopic in the tendency of its characters to assert the historical importance of the events and issues with which a narrative is concerned. In British biopics, from *Rembrandt* to *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* to *The Music Lovers*, the protagonist may show an awareness of the personal importance

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<sup>2</sup> Thus in *Victoria the Great*, we are informed at the appropriate moment that we have a privileged access to, for example, 'Buckingham Palace, Coronation Day, June 28<sup>th</sup> 1838'.

<sup>3</sup> See Sheridan Morley, *Robert My Father*, p205.

<sup>4</sup> If it is thus not true for British cinema, as Custen argues it is for the United States, that prefatory titles are found almost exclusively in biopics (*Bio/Pics*, p8), it is the case that titles occur more frequently and predictably during the course of the British biopic than the British historical film. For example, the protagonists' progress and peregrinations are steadily signalled by means of titles in *Scott of the Antarctic* and *Young Winston*.

of a particular event or comment on the vicissitudes of his or her life. Thus Rembrandt for example retrospectively reveals to a group of young revellers what his experiences have taught him. But this never amounts to the historical perspective of historical film, because the sense of altering the course of events in the wider, public sphere is usually absent.

Fewer differences are evident in respect of the quotation of such sources as photographs and paintings. *Young Winston* for example begins with a sequence in which the camera pans over what appears to be Churchill's private collection of photographs, and as it settles on particular images (the famous triumvirate at the Potsdam conference, for example), they are brought to life by means of newsreel footage, and then frozen again. Similarly, clear reference is often made through the *mise-en-scène* to the work of an artist in a painter biopic. Thus in *Rembrandt*, the painting and reception of *The Night Watch* becomes the focus of one extended sequence, while other scenes are lit in the dark, dramatic style of his best known pieces. Laughton also comes to take on the appearance, complete with turban, of the artist's later self-portraits.<sup>5</sup> Custen records several examples of the quotation of artistic sources in the American biopic, including *Madame Du Barry* (1934), which begins with a series of oil paintings of the figures in the film. 'Cleverly, these portraits, created by the art department of Warner's, made certain that Louis XV looked like his filmic impersonator Reginald Owen, and that other royal figures

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<sup>5</sup> *The Story of Gilbert and Sullivan* also quotes the work of its protagonists, though in a more obtrusive way, through extended and spectacular passages showcasing the 'highlights' of their operettas. Individual arias, which are often reflective of the 'tone' of a particular point of the narrative, are also quoted. An opening title thanking the 'Members of the D'Oily Carte company' enhances the authenticating effect of these features of the film.

were painted as the actors who portray them' (pp52-3). For biopics which deal with a subject whose comportment and demeanour are familiar to the audience (and need not be inferred from photographs and portraits), an actor's performance style may be a further kind of quotation. Thus at the close of *Young Winston*, the hero having finally achieved his goal, Simon Ward 'becomes' the posturing, cigar-smoking growly-jowly Churchill of the war years.

The historical genre's corporeal quotation of well-known figures may occur in the biopic, as in the case of *The Magic Box* where Arthur Sullivan makes a very brief appearance. But the narrower historical scope of the biopic, and the fact that the subject may not be an important or powerful historical character, means that there is often less room to accommodate coincidental luminaries into the background. Also, just as the pressbooks for historical films often point toward the range of sources quoted and even extend that range, *Scott of the Antarctic*'s quotation of the explorer's letters, diagrams, equipment and personal effects is supported in the pressbook for that film, particularly with diary entries from each of the polar team.<sup>6</sup> However, biopic pressbooks customarily afford limited space to these issues, concentrating instead on romantic and melodramatic elements of the plot.<sup>7</sup>

The points of convergence I have noted are supported by the fact that as much attention was sometimes devoted to the accuracy and authenticity of a biopic as in

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<sup>6</sup> The medium pressbook for *Scott* notes that 'many special props were required. Some were the originals themselves, others were specially re-created. The original horn gramophone and pianola taken on the expedition were found, and the firms concerned loaned Scott's watch, his tent, meteorological instruments, first aid box, and naval cap badges.'

<sup>7</sup> For a good example of this, see the medium pressbook on *Rembrandt*, in the BFI's Pressbook Collection.



the case of historical film. Dirk Bogarde for example has recounted the agonies he endured for *Song Without End* (1960) in learning 'eighty-five minutes of piano music accurately enough for my hands to be examined by the Giant Cinemascope camera, within five weeks,' when he 'couldn't even play a Jew's harp with any degree of confidence.'<sup>8</sup> David Lean laboured just as arduously to achieve faultlessly authentic shots in the making of *Lawrence of Arabia*, inspiring Robert Bolt to accuse him of 'pouring rivers of money into the sand.'<sup>9</sup> More important than such individual undertakings, some biopics also match the historical film's *emphasis* on the research effort invested in a film.<sup>10</sup> However, it is in line with the tendency to eschew questions of quotation that pressbooks for the British biopic in general typically lay far less emphasis on the research behind it than either its American counterpart or the British historical film. In this respect, *Scott of the Antarctic*, the pressbook for which outlines the meticulousness of its production in detail, is again atypical of the genre. The *They Flew Alone* (1942) pressbook is more representative, confirming its adherence to the facts of the true-life story, but laying greater emphasis on the appeal of its star and other pleasures. The publicity

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<sup>8</sup> See *Snakes and Ladders*, p212, and pp211-218 for the whole saga. Similarly, during the pre-production of *Scott of the Antarctic*, Michael Balcon and Charles Frend availed themselves of original polar footage in the BFI and spent time at the Scott Polar Research Institute at Cambridge in order to be 'assured of some degree of historical accuracy'. See Michael Balcon, *Michael Balcon Presents*, p171. Many reviewers felt that they had achieved this and more: indeed Dilys Powell described the film as an utterly convincing 'record of tragedy', a 'plain reconstruction' which is 'the justification of the documentary style in the commercial cinema', 'Films of the Week', *Sunday Times*, 5 December 1948, p2.

<sup>9</sup> See Kevin Brownlow, *David Lean* (London: Richard Cohen Books, 1996), pp436-8.

<sup>10</sup> Custen describes several instances of research being prominently marketed; see *Bio/Pics*, pp34-5 and p38. See also Thomas Elsaesser's 'Film History as Social History: The Dieterle/Warner Brothers Bio-Pic', *Wide Angle* 8, no. 2, pp15-31, where he suggests that '[d]istinctive about the publicity for Warner's biopics was the emphasis on historical accuracy, on the quality of the research materials, the extensive inspection of original locations and the quality of professional consultancy' (p23). Nevertheless, Custen also suggests that research for a biopic was governed by estimates of the inaccuracies and mistakes that audiences were likely to register (*Bio/Pics*, p35), which I have argued is also true for the British historical genre.

materials for *Fanny By Gaslight* and *The Man in Grey* contain no references to research at all. Unusually, the pressbook for *The Wicked Lady* introduces one Cyril Hartman, 'the leading contemporary authority on the reign of King Charles II', as a supplier of 'historical references' to the filmmakers. But again, no research enterprise is mentioned.<sup>11</sup>

A final point to make in this connection is that it often seems to have been the case that more tolerance is extended to the inauthenticities and inaccuracies of biopics than to those in British historical films. Dilys Powell for example was far more relaxed about the possibility of misrepresentation in her review of *Lady Sings the Blues* (quoted in chapter three) than in her reviews of historical films. Perhaps this is because biopics are felt to be less harmful, which in turn may have much to do with thematic and syntactic differences between the two genres, which I shall come to later.

Other types of film, which have apparent affinities with the historical genre, diverge from that category more decisively than either the biopic or costume drama in rejecting the notion of authenticity entirely. Thus, whilst contemporary reviews of *Excalibur* (1981), for example, often associated it with a spate of 'sword and sorcery' pictures in which 'ordinary notions of time and place are forgotten'

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<sup>11</sup> This is not to say that costume dramas were necessarily inaccurate in their visions of the past. Asked of Gainsborough Studios: 'Was there a lot of care devoted to costumes?', Phyllis Calvert told one interviewer: 'Tremendous, yes. Elizabeth Haffenden was the main costumier and she was very clever. She did a great deal of historical research on the costumes all the time [. . .] Don't forget, I was an antiquarian bookseller and I had a tremendous collection of costume books, which we made use of when we did *Fanny By Gaslight*'. See McFarlane, *An Autobiography of British Cinema*, p110.

(*Times*, 3 July 1981), John Boorman claimed to be 'concerned with the mythical truth, not the historical truth.'<sup>12</sup> Historical accuracy was impossible, he argued in press releases, because there is no established history to be accurate to.'<sup>13</sup> The often stylized acting and the expressionistic, oneiric strangeness of many sequences (especially 'the Search for the Grail' and 'the Death of Arthur') accord with these perspectives, whilst a title-card at the beginning of the film explicitly frames the narrative in terms of legend.

In terms of promotional activities, a number of further generic distinctions are apparent. For example, whereas the pressbook for *Anne of the Thousand Days* suggested ways of decorating cinemas which seem conducive to historical readings of the film, recommendations for the swashbuckler/costume drama *Robin Hood and His Merrie Men* (1952) included building a Maid Marion wishing well and turning the lobby into a Greenwood.<sup>14</sup> Tips for promoting *The Wicked Lady*, entailing a 'secret passage display' and a 'secret trunk', distinguish it from the historical film still more decisively. Similarly, 'The Showman' reported in *Kine Weekly* on the rather grisly and sensational techniques employed by managers in their promotion of *The Tower of London* (1939).<sup>15</sup> The pressbook for *Fire Over England* boasts that its posters are 'dignified and in keeping with the subject . . .',

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with Michael Owen, *Evening Standard*, 11 July 1980.

<sup>13</sup> Orion Publicity 1980, BFI Microfiche. See also Michael Ciment, *John Boorman*, tr. by Gilbert Adair (London: Faber, 1986), p188, where Boorman expounds on the film's setting in a mythical pre-history, when 'nature was unsullied and man was in harmony with it.'

<sup>14</sup> The advised decoration for *Lancelot and Guinevere* (1963) is similarly vague in historical terms. For an opening night party, '[t]he accent here should be on colour and ceremony, with some celebrity guests and as many costumed people as possible in the foyer to give the theatre that extra special effect. Knights in armour – possibly one or two on horseback outside your theatre – attractive girls in gay costumes of the period – a court jester – all would help to set the atmosphere.'

<sup>15</sup> See *Kine Weekly*, 16 May 1940, p30.



and indeed they lack the adventurous images and barnstorming language that characterize the publicity for *The Wicked Lady*, for example.

A central promotional tactic for the biopic entails the endorsement of family members, and here too differences with the historical genre are marked. For the American biopic, Custen adduces the example of *Edison, the Man* (1940), a programme for which describes the involvement in the making of the film of Edison's widow and daughter.<sup>16</sup> Similar circumstances obtain in the British biopic. Thus, for instance, the producers of *The Magic Box* engineered a great deal of favourable newspaper coverage by allowing relatives of Friese-Greene to visit the set,<sup>17</sup> whilst the brochure produced to commemorate the Royal Command Performance of *Scott of the Antarctic* records on its final page: 'This film could not have been made without the generous cooperation of the survivors and the relatives of late members of Scott's Last Expedition.' Indeed the film itself is dedicated to them.<sup>18</sup>

The BFI's special collection material on *Scott of the Antarctic* includes a number of letters which suggest that the publicizing of the survivors' involvement in and

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<sup>16</sup> See *Bio/Pics*, p43. In an interesting variant on this strategy, Cecil B. De Mille went so far as to claim, in a souvenir book for a premiere of the biopic *The Buccaneer* (1938), that he was descended from Jean Lafitte. See *ibid.*, p44. Custen also notes that in several films, the signatures of the actual figures appear, endorsements which attest to the truth value of the films, whilst in a very few cases, including *The Flying Irishman* (1939), the biographee even plays him- or herself (pp55-6).

<sup>17</sup> See for example the *Star* of 3 April 1951 and the *Kettering Leader*, 18 May 1951: "I felt I wanted to call Mr Donat 'Grandpa'." The moves behind such coverage can be seen in a press release in The Robert Donat Special Collection, John Rylands Library (Misc. Papers, Item 5, Press Release 17 February 1951), which details the extraordinary coincidence of Donat having previously rented a flat from one of Friese-Greene's business partners, which gave the actor valuable additional insight.

<sup>18</sup> The brochure can be found in the BFI's Special Collection on Michael and Aileen Balcon, MEB/G/82.

endorsement of the film was a matter of some urgency. Several disenchanted survivors dissented from Ealing's interpretation of events.<sup>19</sup> In addition to maintaining a patina of authenticity and accord, legal considerations thus demanded support from equally authoritative sources.<sup>20</sup> As we saw in chapter four, when the British historical film has solicited personal endorsement, it has been of a far more glamorous and exalted sort.

The issue of provenance is another which helps to account for the clear generic distinctions noted in chapter three. Whereas we saw in chapter four that the British historical film often claims to be substantially derived from original historical research, it was widely reported that *The Magic Box* was based on Ray Allister's biography,<sup>21</sup> whilst Custen shows that in his purposive sample of 100 films, 26% were derived from short stories, 13% from autobiographies, 12% from plays, and 8% from biographies.<sup>22</sup> By contrast, the Gainsborough melodramas were largely based on twentieth-century novels, which were written in the nineteenth-century tradition of the sensation novel, as Richards has recently argued.<sup>23</sup> Thus a poster for *The Wicked Lady* sharpened the appetites of picture-goers with the legend: 'From

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<sup>19</sup> See for example the Michael and Aileen Balcon Special Collection, MEB/G/85, for a very long legal assessment (by Victor Cohen, dated 10<sup>th</sup> August 1948) of the potential threat to the production posed by Apsley Cherry-Gerrard. Cherry-Gerrard was a survivor of the expedition who objected to a number of key scenes, and promised litigation over unauthorized use of his book *The Worst Journey in the World*.

<sup>20</sup> See the letter from Michael Balcon to John Woolf at the film's distributor General Film Distributions Limited (dated 6<sup>th</sup> December 1948), which stresses that the public approval of Professor Griffith Taylor, another survivor of the polar expedition, was 'of paramount importance.' Michael and Aileen Balcon Special Collection, MEB/G/80.

<sup>21</sup> See for example *To-Day's Cinema*, 13 September 1951, and *Picture Show*, 13 October 1951.

<sup>22</sup> *Bio/Pics*, pp178-8.

<sup>23</sup> *Films and British National Identity*, pp118-9. Richards argues that the films share with Victorian sensation literature their anti-realism, their plot devices, and their appeal to women, as well as the critical vituperation directed at them.

the pages of a great novel come the frenzied adventures of a highwayman who took his love where he found it . . .',<sup>24</sup>

The historiographer John Tosh has noted that 'the grosser distortions perpetrated by nineteenth-century biographers largely belong to the past.' In biographies published more recently, greater attention is paid to historical context, an individual's actions are explained with reference to psychoanalysis, preferences and motivation, and subjects other than statesmen have received attention.<sup>25</sup> Thus, it is possible to maintain that where the British historical film has retained its connections to nineteenth-century modes of history-writing, the British biopic, with its typical emphasis on the whole of a life rather than on significant episodes, and what we will see to be its wider range of subjects, has developed in line with the twentieth-century biography. It is also worth noting here that bookshops and libraries separate biographies from other books about the past, suggesting that the inter-generic distinctions noted in chapter three reflect distinctions made outside the world of film.

Finally, and predictably, films described in chapter three as adventures or as melodramas diverge from historical films in that they rarely develop any educational aspect. Despite references to the authenticity of some of its details, the pressbook for *The Wicked Lady* makes no mention of education, while that for

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<sup>24</sup> In the pressbook for the same film, an article asserts that '[c]rime and criminals have always had a fascination for avid fans of escape literature. Designed strictly with this in mind is Leslie Arliss' screenplay of [. . .] "The Wicked Lady". We are also told that "Captain Jerry Jackson" had a place in the escape literature of his day . . .'

<sup>25</sup> See Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, pp77-81. The quote is from p77.



*Robin Hood and his Merrie Men*, a film without any pretensions to accuracy at all, focusses instead on the good honest fun to be had. Less predictable is the lack of attention paid to education in the promotional material of the British biopic. In general, the human interest factor (present also in the historical film as we have seen) is featured much more prominently, and even in the case of *Scott of the Antarctic*, the research behind which I have noted, education is largely neglected as a selling angle. The American biopic again seems to have more in common with the British historical film than the British biopic, because the educational value of the films concerned is prominent here, too.<sup>26</sup>

#### b. Questions of Stardom, Narrative and Spectacle

Star-role connections of the same type as observed in chapter four are evident also in the British biopic. Ken Russell has repeatedly stressed the importance to the genre of the star's similarity to the part played, writing of Elaine Page's screen test for his abortive *Evita* project: 'The camera rolled, Miss Page sang a song about Buenos Aires beautifully, and if Eva Peron had possessed a face like a potato we would have been home and dry.'<sup>27</sup> Similarly, David Lean cursed the importance of the star system during the pre-production of *Lawrence of Arabia*, for threatening to

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<sup>26</sup> On this aspect of the American historical film, see *Bio/Pics*, p34: 'Biopics were often sold to the public as accessible versions of history.' On pp12-3 he also discusses the ways in which films help to 'create public history' and pass information to mass audiences, paying particular attention to the role of secondary materials such as study guides.

<sup>27</sup> Russell, *A British Picture*, p213. He is more sanguine about Oliver Reed's resemblance to Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Rudolph Nureyev's deeper affinity with Rudolph Valentino (p58). Incidentally, it is in connection with *Valentino* that Russell intimates at the production problems that may arise from an effective star-role approximation and the indeterminacy that can result. Reporting a conversation with a member of his team about his difficult lead, Russell remembers saying: "He

overturn what he saw as a more credible choice of actor,<sup>28</sup> whilst Simon Callow also points to the possibility of star-role intimacy on the *Henry VIII* scale when he concludes of another Laughton performance: 'His Rembrandt, I believe, is an idealised self-portrait . . .'.<sup>29</sup> John A. Walker imagines that Laughton, 'a self-loathing homosexual who felt ill at ease in a society he considered stuffy and class-ridden [...] identified with Korda's proposed interpretation of the artist as a victim of the pomposity and stupidity of the Dutch bourgeoisie.' Also significant in this connection was 'his own self-doubt as a person and as an artist: he worried about the ugliness of his fat body and his abilities as an actor. As he learnt more about the Dutchman, he became convinced that Rembrandt viewed his artistic gifts as a burden and life as a cage, and that the painter too was tortured by self-doubt and hate.'<sup>30</sup> The campaign book shows how some of these associations (without being as explicit as Walker) were turned into marketing devices,<sup>31</sup> and so may have helped to activate audience expectations as to the course of the film's narrative.<sup>32</sup>

In addition to these similarities, some of the individuals who frequented the British historical film also developed associations with the biopic. Thus, for instance, in

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seems to be having an identity crisis. Sometimes I wonder who the film is about, Valentino or Nureyev'" (p89).

<sup>28</sup> Lean wanted Jack Hawkins for the part of General Allenby, whereas his producer Sam Spiegel favoured the greater box-office appeal of Cary Grant. See Kevin Brownlow, *David Lean*, pp425-6.

<sup>29</sup> Simon Callow, *Charles Laughton: A Difficult Actor* (London: Methuen, 1987), pp107-9.

<sup>30</sup> Walker, *Art and Artists on the Screen*, p22.

<sup>31</sup> Similarly, a publicity brochure for *Scott of the Antarctic* (on the BFI microfiche for that film) asserts: 'Mills knew that this was the one role that he had to play. He was not only uncannily like Scott in looks but in characteristics and mannerisms.'

<sup>32</sup> Kenneth More describes a similarly profound identification with Douglas Bader – 'I was convinced that I was the only actor who could play this part properly [. . .] Bader's philosophy was my philosophy. His whole attitude to life was mine' – and even managed to convince Bader himself of his suitability for the role. See *More or Less*, pp167, 169. There are parallel instances of star-role identification in the American biopic. See Kirk Douglas, *The Ragman's Son: An Autobiography*

reviewing *The Lady With the Lamp*, *The Times* reminded readers that ‘Miss Neagle has often in the past taken part in the cinematic equivalent of the biographical essay, and among the characters she has portrayed are those of Nurse Edith Cavell, Nell Gwyn, and Mrs Odette Sansom.’<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, stardom is unhelpful in understanding the biopic/historical sorting process, though conversely it may help us to more fully appreciate the odd instances of generic indeterminacy that were noted above.

Several differences emerge from a comparison of stardom in the historical film and the costume drama. James Mason and Stewart Granger for example, who were seen in chapter three to have particularly strong associations with the costume genre, had few associations with the stage,<sup>34</sup> whilst the stars of costume films rarely appeared in the historical genre.<sup>35</sup> The issue of performance style is also relevant here. With the more expressive, theatrical style described above by Rex Harrison, and Anna Neagle’s performance in *Victoria the Great* which was ‘invested with a sort of regal presence and distance from the audience,’<sup>36</sup> compare Andrew Spicer’s assessment of Mason’s manner and comportment in the Gainsborough costume cycle:

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(London: Simon and Schuster, 1988), p266, where he describes the alarming experience of his personality merging with that of Van Gogh during the filming of *Lust For Life*.

<sup>33</sup> *The Times*, 23 August 1951. Note the absence of Queen Victoria from this list.

<sup>34</sup> In fact, as Richards has suggested, ‘Gainsborough created the first body of genuinely cinema-produced British film stars.’ See *Films and British National Identity*, p112.

<sup>35</sup> One exception would be Granger in *Beau Brummell*.

<sup>36</sup> Street, *British National Cinema*, p43.



Mason's haunting voice was a cinematic rather than a theatrical instrument, and his performance was astutely keyed to the greater intimacy of the film medium.<sup>37</sup>

As Spicer also recognizes, Mason's popularity was based primarily upon 'sex appeal' rather than the quality of his acting (ibid.), and Mason himself recognized that his fans queued to see him act the smouldering 'lady-basher', and were interested in little else that he had to offer.<sup>38</sup>

In attempting to understand the bases for generic differentiation, other key film personnel, such as the director, are less useful. Wilcox and Korda worked frequently in the historical genre, and knowledge of their involvement might have triggered historical expectations for some. But they also oversaw projects in the costume and biopic genres (Wilcox for example made *Spring in Park Lane* (1948), as well as the biographical *Lady With the Lamp*), and no-one has achieved such strong generic links with the historical film as Ken Russell managed with the biopic. But Russell is exceptional, and in general terms the biopic can no more be distinguished as a coherent category by means of its directors than can the historical film. Custen suggests that in America also, directors have seldom developed any consistent affiliations with historical film.<sup>39</sup>

In terms of narrative style, more consistent distinctions can be established. For example, whereas we saw in chapter four that flashbacks very rarely appear in

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<sup>37</sup> Spicer, 'Male Stars, Masculinity and British Cinema, 1945-1960', p145.

<sup>38</sup> See *Before I Forget*, pp192-4.

<sup>39</sup> See *Bio/Pics*, p66.

British historical films, they are a regular feature of biopics, where they relate information about the past from the vantage point of a particular narrator. Indeed Custen reports that four out of every five of his purposive sample used the device (p182). The flashbacks which structure *The Magic Box* are particularly interesting because they reshape the course of the protagonist's life to fit the classical mould of the biopic, relocating his greatest achievement to the end of the diegesis.

The voice-overs in films like *Young Winston* and *Scott of the Antarctic* are also of a different stamp to the ones in historical films such as *The Young Mr Pitt*, in that they are personalized and operate from a point close to the events shown, informing us of a character's individual memories. The *Young Mr Pitt* voice-over by contrast is of the impersonal, voice-of-history type. The biopic use of voice-over is thus very like and quite in keeping with its use of the flashback.<sup>40</sup>

The key differences in narrative style between the historical genre and those adjacent to it are reflected and summarized in the images and posters that advertise them. For example, whereas the episodic nature of the historical narrative finds an echo in posters which display a crowded collage of events and personalities, those for the costume melodrama are usually clearer and simpler, and often feature the

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<sup>40</sup> The association of these two features in the biopic is particularly clear in *The Magic Box*, where extended flashbacks are guided by a character's recollections in voice-over. Note particularly the account by Friese-Greene's second wife early in the film of how her marriage broke down.

heroine in large close-up, betokening the more focussed, personal and goal-driven narratives of that genre.<sup>41</sup>

Framing and shot selection are other areas of differential deployment. In place of the objective and theatrical long-shots that I have argued are characteristic of the British historical film, the British biopic makes far more extensive use of the medium shot and close-up, connoting privileged access to the individual's feelings and psychological state. There are particularly notable examples in *Rembrandt* (of Rembrandt on the death of Saskia, and in the closing image), and in *The Magic Box* (for example, of Willy at the invention of the projector, and at the end of the film, as he recalls the story of his life). *The Magic Box* also illustrates the association of such close-ups with the flashback, linked by means of a dissolve. Spectacle is far less frequently used to establish relationships, and the focus of the biopic on the individual means that it does not partake of the wider visual vocabulary of causation that I have suggested allows the historical film to contrast personal with extra-personal factors. Nor does the convention of the validating presence of nature appear with the same regularity.

In keeping with its more intimate performance style and heavy use of the emotionally revealing close-up, the costume drama is rather less grand and imposing than the historical film. As well as being less distanced and 'theatrical' than historical film in its visual perspectives, its flamboyance and *risqué* themes

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<sup>41</sup> Compare for instance the poster issued for *The Prime Minister* (*Kine Weekly*, 13 March 1941, referred to above) with those for *Jassy* and *Blanche Fury* (14 August 1947, pp26-7, and 19 February



mean that whereas the historical genre has associations with ‘legitimate’ theatre (and perhaps specifically with Shakespeare), the costume movie has links with the far less reputable Victorian stage melodrama, as Richards has argued.<sup>42</sup> Pam Cook also places particular emphasis on the studio’s alignment with European aesthetics,<sup>43</sup> and she discusses *Madonna of the Seven Moons* at some length as one example of Gainsborough’s more expressionistic and ‘inauthentic,’ more fluid and personal style (pp91-6).

### c. Subjects and Themes

In the pre-war American biopic, Custen suggests, ‘conventional elites’ predominated, with all studios prominently featuring royalty and political leaders,<sup>44</sup> in a way I have suggested is typical of the British historical genre. However, ‘[t]he second era of biopic production, from 1941 to 1960, was dominated by a new kind of elite. The entertainer rather than the political leader became the paradigmatic famous figure; a quarter of all films made during this period focussed on entertainers or artists’ (pp84-5).<sup>45</sup> As noted in chapter four, the British biopic has

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1948, pp8-9 respectively).

<sup>42</sup> *Films and British National Identity*, p118.

<sup>43</sup> Cook suggests that, like costume in film, the question of European influence has been unfairly (even sinisterly) overlooked: ‘The idea that our national cinema might consist of a heterogeneous amalgam of visual styles and formal strategies appropriated from other cultures appears to be anathema to those concerned with constructing its identity’, *Fashioning the Nation*, p8. She points to Gainsborough’s origins in European co-production, its use of European technicians in the ’20s and early ’30s, and its involvement in Film Europe (pp80-8). Even the studio logo (Gainsborough’s portrait of Sarah Siddons) ‘evoked a Europeanized artistic tradition in which formal adventurousness and experiment were combined with cultural prestige and, above all, visual pleasure’ (p83).

<sup>44</sup> See *Bio/Pics*, p84.

<sup>45</sup> However, representatives of the ‘traditional elites’ did not disappear altogether, and remained a feature of Warner’s productions, including *Mission to Moscow* (1943) and *John Paul Jones* (1959).

always preferred these kinds of subjects, though with the emphasis more on art and music than on 'entertainment' in its more popular sense. In Hollywood, the change from politics to entertainment enabled the industry to make the best use of its resources (and therefore save money), and to introduce a degree of self-justifying self-reflexivity into its output.<sup>46</sup>

Whilst women often have a powerful presence in the British historical film, we have seen that American biopics predominantly feature male subjects, and that women tend to choose domestic happiness over achievement. Women also most frequently appear as entertainers, 'paramours', and royalty, leading Custen to suggest that "'performer" is a metaphor for the image in which women have been constructed'.<sup>47</sup> There are similarly few women in the British biopic, and though there is no clear preponderance of 'performative' roles here, heroines do seem again to be subject to male expectations and approval.<sup>48</sup> However, *Isadora* and *The Lady With The Lamp* are two films in which women prioritize their careers over love and domestic stability. *Saraband For Dead Lovers*, in which the hapless heroine forfeits her share in the throne of England for the sake of love, underlines

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<sup>46</sup> Custen suggests that the change was also facilitated by disenchantment with statescraft after two world wars, by shifting cultural values whereby entertainment came to dominate other artistic forms and texts, and by the rise of the film star as independent producer. See *Bio/Pics*, pp120-1.

<sup>47</sup> *Bio/Pics*, p103. Custen also notices that even in the case of apparently 'liberated' performer heroines, the star in question was always assigned a prominent domestic aspect in publicity material (p106).

<sup>48</sup> See Sarah Street on *They Flew Alone*, in *British National Cinema*, pp130-1. A second Neagle film, *The Lady With The Lamp*, presents its heroine as compassionate, rather than talented or brilliant, which is another of the features that Custen associates with the gender biases of the American biopic. See *Bio/Pics*, p107.

the fact that the costume melodrama also diverges from the historical film with regard to the status of women.<sup>49</sup>

Gendered address is not strictly relevant to my argument here, but it is useful in further helping to explain how generic distinctions come to be made. Harper has suggested that *Lady Hamilton*, for example, addresses 'the change in wartime mores' of its female audience, 'celebrates female desire', and presents to the female audience the possibility of a 'freer mode of libidinal life.'<sup>50</sup> However, she has also argued that films such as *The Moonraker* (1958) and *Beau Brummell* were designed to appeal to male audiences, who in the post-war period represented an increasing proportion of cinema attendances.<sup>51</sup> But as noted in chapter four, a range of sources suggest that the genre was not more popular with either sex. The Gainsborough costume dramas by contrast have been confidently identified as 'women's pictures'.<sup>52</sup> Leslie Arliss, the director of several of Gainsborough's costume dramas, had a very clear sense that his audience was primarily female, and described his films as stories of 'wicked women' designed to excite both

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<sup>49</sup> Though it deals with historical events and features George I, *Kine Weekly's* review (9 September 1948, p15) is representative of the sources I have consulted in describing the film as a 'costume piece.'

<sup>50</sup> *Picturing the Past*, p93.

<sup>51</sup> See 'Bonnie Prince Charlie Revisited: British Costume Film in the 1950s', in *The British Cinema Book*, pp135, 137-9. In earlier years too, the historical films produced by Michael Balcon, including *Me and Marlborough* (1935) and *Tudor Rose*, are held to have 'privileged the male audience', on which see *Picturing the Past*, p38.

<sup>52</sup> Richards writes that Gainsborough 'deliberately designed pictures for, and geared them towards, women filmgoers'. See *Films and British National Identity*, p112. Similarly, Marcia Landy, in an article entitled 'Melodrama and Femininity in World War Two British Cinema' (in *The British Cinema Book*) argues that '[n]ot only are women at the centre of these films, but the point of view appears to be explicitly feminine', p82. In Harper's analysis of the Gainsborough costume films, which is the most comprehensive and illuminating available, they were 'uncompromisingly slanted towards women' until and including *Jassy*, and were intended to 'usher women into a realm of female pleasure.' See *Picturing the Past*, pp121-2, and chapter 9 in general. Her notion of the



admiration and disapproval from female spectators.<sup>53</sup> *Kine Weekly* characterized *Madonna of the Seven Moons* as a 'popular woman's picture' (14 December 1944, p31), and placed many other costume melodramas in the same category. Thus *Blanche Fury* was adjudged to have potent 'feminine appeal' (26 February 1948, p15), and *Esther Waters* felt to have done itself a disservice by failing to court female film-goers as ardently as it might have done (30 September 1948, p18). Similarly, Caroline Lejeune speculated that the admirers of *Fanny By Gaslight* would be 'chiefly among young women who prefer their menfolk dark and masterful.'<sup>54</sup> Other genres, including the spectacle, can also be distinguished from the historical genre on the basis of the intended audience that contemporaries inferred.<sup>55</sup>

Returning to questions of subject matter, Custen suggests that the American biopic 'helped to foster a naive, uninformed view of the rest of the world' by ignoring whole nations and races, and by resorting to crude stereotyping.<sup>56</sup> Within this predilection for American history, the biopic has also largely overlooked important periods such as the later eighteenth century (p76). The centrality of popular history to the British historical film results in a similarly circumscribed scope, but the British biopic is much more eclectic, visiting Germany (*Luther* (1976), *Whom the Gods Love*), Holland (*Rembrandt*) and America (*Valentino*). However, we will see

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'costume narrative', dealing with female sexual desire and emotional freedom, was briefly discussed above, in chapter four.

<sup>53</sup> See *Picturegoer*, 10 November 1945.

<sup>54</sup> Caroline Lejeune, *Chestnuts in her Lap, 1936-46* (London: Phoenix House, 1947), p119.

<sup>55</sup> In the 1960s for example, the European imports *Head of a Tyrant* (7 February 1963, p8), *Rebel Gladiators* (9 May 1963, p8), and *The Long Ships* (27 February 1964, p10) were all identified in *Kine Weekly* as films for the 'industrial masses.'

that it is not choice of locale but the theme of nation which most clearly sets the historical genre apart.

The epic/spectacle, as identified in chapter three, also has distinct tendencies with regard to setting. This category has been mobilized with different aesthetic emphases at different points in the histories of both Hollywood and other national cinemas,<sup>57</sup> though certain general tendencies seem to remain. Gary A. Smith observes that the events portrayed across the range of these films 'take place during the period of time from the Creation to the thirteenth century', but it is clear from a glance at the catalogue which forms the bulk of his book that they have a particularly close association with the Biblical and the ancient.<sup>58</sup> As Derek Elley suggests, in a more extended consideration of the genre, the epic 'relies on the romantic possibilities of past civilizations rather than the more identifiable settings of recent centuries.'<sup>59</sup>

Whereas we have seen that the historical film in various ways foregrounds the nation and issues of national government, the themes of nation and nationality are not prominent in the British biopic. Instead, its most typical concern is with character, ambition and achievement. *Lawrence of Arabia*, for example, is marked from a very early point as a film about something more or other than the nation. King Feisal asks Lawrence 'Are you not loyal?' when the latter advises defiance

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<sup>56</sup> *Bio/Pics*, pp96-101. The quote is from p96.

<sup>57</sup> A number of specific manifestations of the epic form are examined in Maria Wyke's book *Projecting the Past*.

<sup>58</sup> Gary A. Smith, *Epic Films: Casts, Credits and Commentary on Over 250 Historical Spectacle Movies* (Jefferson: McFarland and Co., 1991), p xv.

against the British. And Lawrence replies that he is loyal to his country, 'but also to other things.' A compatriot also insists: 'Wherever you are and whoever you're with, you're a British serving officer.' But during the film Lawrence refuses to accept this, adopting a number of roles and identities which are neither advocated nor legitimated by the nation. His enigmatic qualities are suggested in the first scene of the film, at his own memorial service, where no one can confidently assist a reporter in defining his character. Subsequent episodes unfold in apparent response to the reporter's questions, and adhere to Lawrence's assertion (delivered with O'Toole's most penetrating stare and in a tight medium close-shot which has extra intensity after the open desert spaces of his near miraculous desert rescue of Gasim) that 'Nothing is written'; Lawrence is engaged in constructing his own personal history. He continues to defy expectation, and indeed as Alain Silver and James Ursini observe: 'When he makes out a voucher for Auda's mercenary gold ("Signed in his Majesty's absence by . . . me"), there is a telling pause that suggests both a momentary uncertainty over his own name and a sudden, sobering realisation of his "majestic" accomplishments.'<sup>60</sup> However, '[w]hat Lawrence ultimately aspires to be is never clear, not even to himself'.<sup>61</sup> His achievements and arrogance appear to give rise to a Christ-complex, and indeed we see him 'resurrected' after he is shot during an attack on a train. The messianic theme repeatedly recurs, reflecting the attitude of Lawrence's followers as well as his inflated self-image, as during the train attack where the camera at one point frames him dazzlingly against the sun, and at another focusses on Lawrence's feet before

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<sup>59</sup> Derek Elley, *The Epic Film: Myth and History* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), p6.



rising to reveal his beatific face. The motif of movement in the film – Lawrence is constantly crossing spaces and dies at speed on his motorbike – reflects the preoccupation with transition and Lawrence’s changing character and outlook.

With the focus of *Lawrence of Arabia* on the character and career of its protagonist, compare *Scott of the Antarctic*. Scott’s priorities are queried in a fund-raising scene at the beginning of the film, when a sceptical businessman objects: ‘I’m not adverse to subscribing to anything that might be in the national interest, but why should this country have another expedition?’ During the course of the film frequent voice-overed diary entries suggest that the expedition is really a matter of Scott’s personal determination to achieve, and as in the case of *Lawrence of Arabia*, high-angle shots of figures dwarfed by vast expanses of empty desert focusses attention on the personal resources and motivation of the characters involved. The film’s posters support this kind of reading in that they feature Scott, alone and in tight close-ups. There is no swirling canvas of crowds and events to set him in context, as is often true in the case of historical films. And Scott looks past the viewer into the distance, suggesting nobility, single-minded ambition and the contemplation of destiny. Landy’s comment that Scott’s competitiveness with Amundsen ‘threatens to cast his motives in personal rather than national terms’ assumes that the film ought to be understood in relation to the nation, and may be seen as a symptom of her collapsing together of the historical film (with its national

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<sup>60</sup> Alain Silver and James Ursini, *David Lean and His Films* (Los Angeles: Silman-James Press, 1992), p163.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p155.

concerns) and the biopic (addressing individual talent and ambition) into a single category.<sup>62</sup>

*Young Winston*, which in the sources for its reception met with some uncertainty over its generic categorization, and which we have seen in this chapter to have much in common with the biopic, touches occasionally on matters of the nation. In a radio interview in particular, the question of national service is addressed, and the hero's maiden speech in Parliament, which is anticipated throughout the film as his ultimate goal, is about the preciousness of English blood and the danger of wasting it on foreign soil. But primarily the film is concerned with Churchill's ferocious will to succeed and his developing identity, which, as in *Lawrence of Arabia*, his numerous achievements help to shape and serve to delineate. His struggle to emerge from his father's shadow motivates the narrative, and is a recurrent strain in the voice-over. His notable army career culminates with an escape, whereupon Churchill shouts: 'I'm Winston bloody Churchill and I'm free.' Upon finally securing election to the Commons he tells his mother that he feels complete for the first time. Accordingly, this is one of the longest sequences in the film, photographed with smooth tracking shots and pans which connote assurance and calm, and which contrast with the restless, episodic nature of the preceding narrative and the often choppy editing style.

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<sup>62</sup> See *British Genres*, p88, and chapter two in general for her discussion of a range of biographical texts under the heading of 'historical film'.

Films which have been identified more confidently as British biopics attend much less closely than *Young Winston* to the national context, and are more exclusively preoccupied with ambition and achievement. The narrative of *The Story of Gilbert and Sullivan* for instance constitutes a picturesque examination of Arthur Sullivan's conflicted aspirations to both popular and critical success. It culminates with Gilbert visiting the statue erected in tribute to his partner's achievements, the camera assuming his point of view as he gazes up admiringly. He then collects his own knighthood, at which (as in the case of Sullivan earlier in the film) all his titles and achievements are enumerated. During this final sequence, the frame remains wholly occupied by the figure of Gilbert, who looks out into the audience, even as the off-screen voice of the Queen bestows his honour. At this moment the spectator is thus aligned with the Queen, and can understand him/herself as formally recognizing the lyricist's contribution to British culture. In *Reach for the Sky*, extreme close-ups convey the courage and effort that Bader invests in his success.

The costume drama also eschews the nation, and has its own key themes and preoccupations, which can be characterized as social, sexual and romantic fulfilment. Thus in *Blanche Fury* for example, the heroine announces to her elderly employer that she wants more from life and intends to take it. She makes a loveless marriage for the sake of security and status, and takes a lover for the sake of her happiness. The riding accident suffered by Blanche's daughter is visually evocative of a similar incident in *Gone With the Wind* (1939), which of course in Scarlett



O'Hara created a lasting symbol of female can-do and desire for fulfilment. Similarly, Marcia Landy characterizes *Fanny By Gaslight* as a story of Fanny's self-discovery,<sup>63</sup> whilst *The Man in Grey* explores Margaret Lockwood's protest that 'women shouldn't be put on pedestals' and thereby debarred from exploring their own needs and identities, adducing that famous case of unfulfilment and indeterminate social status, Mrs Fitzherbert.<sup>64</sup> And as noted in chapter three, such films were reviewed using a vocabulary very different to historical releases, involving emotive words like 'longing', 'tribulations', 'frustration', and 'happiness'. Later films, such as *Women in Love* (1969), explore similar terrain in a way that anticipates the 'heritage film' of the 1980s, which I shall discuss shortly.<sup>65</sup> Richards asserts that collectively the Gainsborough melodramas 'reflected the much greater importance placed on the role of women in society as a result of the war',<sup>66</sup> and this would help to explain their status as a form of the 'women's picture', as discussed above.

Strikingly, even in the work of writers who claim historical status for costume dramas, and who discuss the genre in terms of putative links to the nation and national identity, there is an implicit recognition of Gainsborough's more limited

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<sup>63</sup> Marcia Landy, 'Melodrama and Femininity in World War Two British Cinema', p82.

<sup>64</sup> That the narrative is organized around a series of diary extracts and the discovery of a box of trinkets, the meaning of which is far from obvious and only clarified by the unfolding of events, also underlines the fact that the issues at stake are private rather than national.

<sup>65</sup> See Gene Phillips, 'Ken Russell's Two Lawrence Films: The Rainbow and Women in Love', *Literature/Film Quarterly*, vol. 25, no. 1 (1997), pp68-73. Phillips contends that Lawrence's novels 'are basically about the pursuit of personal fulfillment in a love relationship, and about the sacrifices one must make in achieving that fulfillment' (p68), and goes on to identify and discuss the presence of this theme in Russell's films. Phillips also notes that the films had a number of actors and production personnel in common (pp69-70), displayed some 'fine ensemble acting' (p72), and evinced a high degree of fidelity to their literary sources (p72), features which we will see also apply to films commonly described as 'heritage texts'.

interests. This is particularly true of Pam Cook, whose argument exhibits a persistent slippage from national identity to personal and sexual identity. Of her overall project she states:

It is not my intention here to dissolve national identity altogether, nor to deny the significance of nationalist political and cultural struggle. My project is rather to explore the possibility of changing places, in both senses of the phrase, offered by the process of splitting that is characteristic of identity formation, in which *the self* is a labile amalgam of other identities rather than a fixed entity [my italics].<sup>67</sup>

National identity may be of importance to the self, of course, but significantly, it is not a feature of the crises of identity which Cook finds in the films she analyses. Rather, these crises are about *personal* fulfilment and *private* relationships. Thus for example *Madonna of the Seven Moons* is found to be in essence a 'tale of frustrated female desire' (p91). In so far as England and Italy are compared, they are done so with regard to 'sexuality and gender' (p92), and the heroine's gypsy costume is a disguise which enables her to 'try out different aspects of herself' (p94).<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> *Britain Can Take It*, p161.

<sup>67</sup> *Fashioning the Nation*, p4.

<sup>68</sup> Cook's suggestion that the Gainsborough costume cycle has an important national dimension depends partly on its recurrent interest in travel. She writes: 'As travelers, we cross boundaries and, through identification with other cultures, acquire a sense of ourselves as something more than national subjects'. See *Fashioning the Nation*, p4. However, travel in these films seems again to be presented in terms of the pursuit of personal and romantic fulfilment. The characters in *Madonna of the Seven Moons* for example show no awareness of nation, and neither do the film's publicity materials. We certainly cannot discount the possibility that *Madonna of the Seven Moons*, *Caravan* and others were read within interpretative frames connected to the nation, but there is no evidence to support this idea in our audience surveys, and as I suggested in chapter four, contemporary criticism usually confined itself to their visual flair and salacious content. It is also worth pointing out that travel is not often a feature of the Gainsborough costume drama, being absent for example in its two most famous examples, *The Wicked Lady* and *The Man in Grey*.

#### d. Values

Whereas the American biopic is argued by Custen to depend upon such impulses as the need for fame and acceptance, in the British historical film patriotism fulfils all the requirements he enumerates with regard to motivation; it is easy to identify and to identify with, relatively uncomplicated as a sentiment, and morally virtuous, being therefore deserving of the success it inevitably engenders. It is also congruent with the film industry's philosophy that 'character construction is not necessarily related to believability, but rather is connected to the function a character plays in the narrative', and with the screenwriter's belief that 'it is important to delineate the nature of the character in an economical, direct way'.<sup>69</sup>

We have seen that historical characters frequently sacrifice their lives for their patriotic beliefs. However, William Friese-Greene dies simply of old age in the biopic *The Magic Box*, his disjointed, meandering internal voice-over contrasting with the keenness and urgency of the debate around him in the meeting-hall, and suggesting that he has merely run out of steam. Similarly, the death of *Lawrence of Arabia* reflects on no wider issue or attitude, his motorcycle accident, starkly unaccompanied by any celebratory or lugubrious musical strain, merely confirming the opaque and excessive nature of his personality. Scott's death in *Scott of the Antarctic* was widely interpreted in the press not in national terms, but as a heroic

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<sup>69</sup> See *Bio/Pics*, p167.



failure to realize the ambition he had so single-mindedly pursued.<sup>70</sup> However, it is salutary to be reminded of the ever-present potential for unorthodox readings:

Ann went to see 'Scott of the Antarctic' this morning, she was in a dreadful state when she came home because the ponies were shot. It was difficult to pacify her and she said many of the other girls were crying. They didn't mind the men dying, in fact thought they deserved it for shooting the ponies: that was her only consolation.<sup>71</sup>

In other respects, sacrifice in the biopic and historical film are more similar. *Rembrandt* makes the point that, like the British historical film, the British biopic uses notions and images of comfort, domesticity and private life to articulate the sacrifices made by its characters. Rembrandt endures bankruptcy (and the confiscation of his home and possessions) as a result of his aesthetic ideals and refusal to compromise. In one scene in particular, filmed in a rather empty set, he asks 'What is success?', and decides that it is measured in terms of artistic worth rather than by money or status. As in the case of Scott's death, Rembrandt's sacrifices are thus not patriotic or national, but rather are made in pursuit of self-knowledge and achievement. Addressing himself directly to the audience, he tells us that we should learn from bitter experience and 'rejoice in our own works.'<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> See for example Elspeth Grant's review in the *Daily Graphic*, entitled 'Moving Film of a Gallant Failure', which characterizes the film as an 'unboastful account of a great though lost endeavour'. Likewise, the *Star* reported that it 'commemorat[es] an inspiring example of human courage and endeavour.' Cuttings can be found in the BFI's Michael and Aileen Balcon Special Collection, MEB/G/85.

<sup>71</sup> Unsigned letter, dated 28<sup>th</sup> February 1949, in the BFI's Michael and Aileen Balcon Special Collection, MEB/G/85.

<sup>72</sup> Similarly, the sacrifices made by *Scott of the Antarctic* and his comrades are pointed by extended scenes of farewell at the beginning of the film, which seem obtrusive in delaying the onset of the actual expedition, to which the narrative has been building in a series of increasingly brief scenes. As the expedition founders, the raging blizzards of the snowscape are also intercut with the flawless blue skies of memory and the sunny beach on which Scott's son plays. As Michael Balcon himself wrote in an (unaddressed) letter, dated 21 October 1948: 'I don't think the death of the five people concerned in the final dash to the Pole could have been so moving had we not seen Mrs. Scott, Mrs.

Landy argues that 'Rembrandt is portrayed as being undone by death of the woman who is his talisman and by his own aging'.<sup>73</sup> But his sufferings are rather related to the artistic vision he strove to realize.

Contemporary journalism almost always listed the domestic sacrifices made by William Friese-Greene (see for example the *London Evening Standard* and the *Daily Mirror*, both dated 13 September 1951). Friese-Greene's sacrifices were related to his great ambition and to 'the demands of his genius' (*Liverpool Daily Post*, 13 September 1951), whilst more general allusions were also made to 'the loneliness of inventors' (*Evening News*, 19 September 1951).

#### e. The Issue of Genre as Mythic-Ritual

Though American biopics have a common fund of strategies for signalling their status as historical narratives and for making their history accessible to audiences, Custen suggests that the range of different individual lives and types of life presented in the genre creates a potentially vast semantic field. The solution has been to mould all lives to a single pattern, rendering them mass-produceable and appealingly familiar to audiences.<sup>74</sup> We have seen that the British historical film has a far less rigid syntactic structure. Because the notion of authenticity and the

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Wilson and have known something about the lives of the others.' Michael and Aileen Balcon Special Collection, MEB/G/80.

<sup>73</sup> See Landy, *British Genres*, p75.

<sup>74</sup> On the 'fundamental template' of the biopic life, see *Bio/Pics*, particularly pp121-4. Similarly, the British *Reach for the Sky* begins with an extraordinary title, which explains: 'For dramatic purposes, it has been necessary in this film to transpose in time certain events in Douglas Bader's life and also to re-shape some of the characters involved in this story.'

deployment of 'memorable', pre-circulating historical events and narratives have been important in the historical genre, fewer re-organizational liberties have been possible.

Furthermore, where the British historical film addresses dilemmas circulating around the nation and the proper attitude to be taken towards it, the American biopic has been argued to focus on smaller issues and more mundane quandaries and frustrations. Custen suggests that 'entertainer biopics displace onto their subjects the problematic conflicts all people share' (p168). Talent invades and disrupts the everyday lives of entertainers on film, threatening the stability of 'normal' institutions. Thus the films involved 'draw our attention to an aspect most of us would like to ignore in our own lives: the often warring dissonances in the different presentations of self necessitated by the everyday roles we assume' (ibid.). However, '[b]y isolating [. . .] allegedly dishonest behaviour to a small proportion of the population – the famous, or famous entertainers – these movies allow audience members to walk away feeling intact, and perhaps a bit smug, about their own integrated personalities' (pp168-9). They are therefore strong advocates of 'normality.'<sup>75</sup>

The British biopic's concern with personal achievement and ambition, and the fact that its protagonists have often suffered despondency and loneliness for the sake of

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<sup>75</sup> Custen also notices other conservative aspects of the biopic, including the status of family and community as agents of 'salvation' when misfortune strikes (*Bio/Pics*, pp74-6); the tendency of the establishment to assimilate those who have criticized or opposed it, thereby muting the radical voice (p211); and the 'personalization' of social change into a love story or 'case of singular honour', which has the effect of draining the scenarios involved of political danger (pp189-90).



their attainments, suggests that it should be viewed in a similar light. W. S. Gilbert's warning to his ambitious and fatally over-industrious partner that 'a cobbler should stick to his last', may thus be viewed as the epigraph of the genre as a whole. However, the limited evidence available suggests that audiences might respond with a renewed enthusiasm to emulate the achievements of the great. As one participant in Mayer's 'Films and the Pattern of Life' survey wrote: 'Films of the lives of famous men always made me long to invent or discover as they did.'<sup>76</sup> Biopics like *Young Winston* and *Reach For The Sky*, certainly urge endurance, effort and constant striving as a means to achieve, and might be interpreted as inspirational and hortatory if the personal cost of glory is overlooked or deemed to be reasonable.<sup>77</sup> A prefatory title to *Reach for the Sky* in fact explicitly offers the film as an inspirational text, whilst a series of marveling characters contribute such comments as 'You won't be beaten, will you?' The concluding voice-over summarizes the film as 'the victory of a man's own spirit, creating strength and hope out of disaster.' But whether British biopics advocate normality or not, the effect is not related to questions of government and the nation, and alongside the semantic differences noted above, the mythic-ritual model of genre therefore seems capable of further elucidating the generic distinctions made by the sources considered in chapter three.

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<sup>76</sup> Doc. 45, p108. The examples cited are *The Adventures of Marco Polo* (1938) and *A Song to Remember* (1945). The sentiment seems to be a direct response to Mayer's question: 'Did films give you vocational ambitions . . . ?' (p14)

<sup>77</sup> Another response to Mayer's 'Films and the Pattern of Life' survey (Doc. 14, p43) suggests that such films as *Madame Curie*, *The Story of Louis Pasteur*, *The First of the Few* and *Nurse Edith Cavell* are inspirational, but the writer distances herself from the achievements of the protagonists, and seems instead to settle for admiration and respect: 'Although oneself may never do anything to warrant a statue, there have always been and will always be men and women whose names will be handed down in history, and films are a sure way to keep those names evergreen in the minds of the community.'

The costume drama may also be distinguished syntactically from the historical film, with reference to its ritualization of problems of personal identity, repression and fulfilment.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, where the mythic discussion of the biopic is arguably as conservative as the historical film, the costume drama has more subversive tendencies.<sup>79</sup> Thus, though the virtuous girl triumphs in *The Wicked Lady*, *The Man in Grey* and *They Were Sisters*, the bad girl is more flamboyant, dynamic and interesting, and is the focus of the narrative. Landy argues that Gainsborough's films, made in a context of growing female mobility, were 'daring in their willingness to explore constraints on women.'<sup>80</sup> Moreover, the Lockwood heroines, and the heroine played by Calvert in *Fanny By Gaslight*, were from impoverished backgrounds, and made cogent arguments for social change. The flashback structure of *The Man in Grey* also implies that class divisions and the barriers they present to romantic fulfilment are becoming a thing of the past. More recently, Cook has successfully shown how the use of costume and art design in *Madonna of*

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<sup>78</sup> Both Alison Light ('"Young Bess": Historical Novels and Growing Up', *Feminist Review* 33 (Autumn 1989)), and Sue Harper ('The Representation of Women in British Feature Films, 1939-1945', in *Britain and the Cinema in the Second World War*) suggest that the past in such films functions in a cathartic way, enabling the solution of present-day dilemmas and difficulties, particularly (as Harper suggests) sexual ones. The prominence of the sexual element in costume drama, and particularly in the Gainsborough costume film, leads Richards to suggest that they are the British equivalent of *film noir*, which also examines issues of female liberation and male anxiety. See *Films and British National Identity*, p122.

<sup>79</sup> In connection with the biopic, the fact that two relatively candid films have been made about the life of Oscar Wilde is important, suggesting that the British genre may be more progressive than its American counterpart. Compare the radical reorganizations required to make acceptable the life of Cole Porter in *Night and Day* (1946), as described by Custen in *Bio/Pics*, pp121-4. It is true however that production of *Oscar Wilde* was obstructed by censorship for many years (see Sheridan Morley, *Robert My Father*, p180), whilst the censor John Trevelyan suggested that the certification of the two films had much to do with the fact that 'details relating to homosexuality appeared very largely in the clinical atmosphere of the court' (quoted in James C. Robertson, *The Hidden Cinema*, p122).

<sup>80</sup> 'Melodrama and Femininity in World War Two British Cinema', in *The British Cinema Book*, p82.

*the Seven Moons* and *Caravan* problematizes sexual identities and makes 'the Other' seductive.<sup>81</sup>

Finally, the genre-as-mythic-ritual model helps to account for some of the inconsistencies in generic categorization that I have detected. In particular, it explains how a film such as *The Four Feathers* (1939) - which does not foreground historical or royal figures, or even draw upon 'memorable' history, but rather features elements of the 'swashbuckler'<sup>82</sup> - might be read as part of the historical genre. This is because its narrative is fundamentally about self-sacrifice and bravery, within a context of Empire and the government of Imperial provinces, and therefore could be seen to participate in the historical film's syntactic discussion of the individual's proper relationship to the nation. Jeffrey Richards points out that imperial adventure films, such as the Korda trilogy of *Sanders of the River* (1935), *The Four Feathers* and *The Drum* (1938), propagated the same values and outlook as films based on real-life Imperial heroes, such as *Khartoum*.<sup>83</sup> He also suggests that the Empire in general was central to images of the British nation and British national identity up until the 1950s, and was a vehicle for the expression of national priorities and virtues.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Cook, *Fashioning the Nation*, pp95, 97-103.

<sup>82</sup> The swashbuckling elements of *The Four Feathers* include the motifs of disguise and redemption through bravery; its gallant and charming hero; and the prospect of female love and respect which is held out as a reward for successful completion of a task. These features of the film are illuminatingly discussed by Brian Taves in his book *The Romance of Adventure*. See especially pp125 149-151, 177, and pp16-25 for his general definition of the swashbuckler.

<sup>83</sup> *British National Identity*, p40. The key unifying element, Richards argues, was national character, which comes down to a matter of honour, duty, patriotism and sacrifice. See *ibid.*, pp31-3. The biographies of real imperial heroes might be 'massaged' to accommodate these characteristics, as in the case of *Clive of India* (1934), p42.



## 2. New Generic Developments of the 1980s

In this section I address some of the changes undergone by the British generic regime in the 1980s. I do so with a view to the case-studies that I shall arrive at in chapter six, where my aim will be to achieve an understanding of the history of the British historical genre in that decade. During the course of these case-studies, I shall want to know the consequences of applying the historical genre, the biopic or the costume melodrama, with all their cumulative meanings and associations, as reading frames to key films of the decade. I aim to explore and reveal something of the real-life inter-connectedness of genres that deal with the past, and of the links between genres and their social, political and industrial contexts. A clear sense of the new generic features of the 1980s that are related to historical film will be of help in this investigation, bridging the gap between the largely synchronic, systematic analysis of the preceding pages and the diachronic analysis to come.

It is important to emphasize here that the British order of films set in the past was not entirely upset in the '80s. Older frames such as the biopic retained their coherence, and indeed biopics were now produced in heavy numbers. Examples are *The Elephant Man*, *Dance With A Stranger* (1985), *Sid And Nancy* (1986), *Prick Up Your Ears* (1987), *Scandal* (1988), *My Left Foot* (1989) and *The Krays* (1990),

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., pp31-3.

and the trend continues into the '90s, with *Backbeat* (1993) and *Tom and Viv* (1994).<sup>85</sup> This profusion may have much to do with the genre's still strong mythic-ritual propensity for examining (the difficulties associated with) talent and ambition, which, as we shall see in chapter six, were cornerstones of the Thatcherite ethos.<sup>86</sup>

*My Left Foot* (1989) is very much the story of Christy Brown's determination to rise to fortune and status.<sup>87</sup> The earlier scenes of the young Christy are shot from his perspective, lying prone and near-helpless on the floor. As his abilities emerge, his point-of-view is invested with more authority and respect. These developments are seen in episodic flashbacks from a gathering in honour of Christy, motivated by

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<sup>85</sup> Film and television guides also maintained the currency of older films, and therefore awareness of the British biopic's long history. To use the example of the *Virgin Film Guide* No. 1 (London: Virgin Books, 1992), *Lust for Life* (p505), *Madame Curie* (p510), *The Magic Box* (p512), *Moulin Rouge* (p588), *Lawrence of Arabia* (p458) and *Young Winston* (p1093) are all described as either biographical films, or as a biographical compound (*Young Winston* for example being characterized as a Biography/Adventure/Political film).

<sup>86</sup> It is not obvious that *Gandhi* belongs to this wider trend. Most reviewers described the film as a biopic (see for example Andrew Robinson in *Sight and Sound*, vol. 52, no. 1 (Winter 1982/3), pp64-5), and Attenborough himself repeatedly reiterated that the narrative was intentionally 'centered always on Gandhiji himself' and his achievements (*In Search of Gandhi* (London: Bodley Head, 1982), p202). Indeed, David Robinson has interpreted the biopic as a cornerstone of Attenborough's directing career. See *Richard Attenborough* (London: NFT/BFI, 1992). However, the film tackles questions of government, and debates between Gandhi and rival politicians revolve around the proper attitude to take towards the nation. That these features, which I have argued are typical of the historical film, should appear in what was widely felt to be a biopic is partly explained by the particular proclivities of the film's director. For example where British biopics usually focus on art or science, Attenborough told Jonathan Hacker and David Price: 'I love biography with a background of politics and social circumstances' (*Take 10 – Contemporary Filmmakers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p76). See also Andy Dougan's *The Actor's Director: Richard Attenborough Behind the Camera* (London and Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 1994), p31, where Attenborough talks about his interest in history's bigger events and personalities. In chapter six, I shall examine other texts which also seem to unite elements usually found in separate genres.

<sup>87</sup> In the introduction to the film's screenplay, Jim Sheridan suggests that *My Left Foot* be seen as commemorative of Brown's life and achievement. See *My Left Foot* by Shane Connaughton and Jim Sheridan (London: Faber and Faber, 1989). In that its hero surmounts a series of dire physical limitations to exercise his abilities and realize his ambitions, it has much in common with *Reach for The Sky*.

a nurse's perusal of that *sine qua non* of achievement, the printed biography.<sup>88</sup> And throughout, other evidence of Christy's giftedness is also 'quoted', particularly the paintings that made his name. In one crucial scene, an argument seems to be made for the dependence of identity on achievement when Christy, who has previously been regarded by his father with bitter disappointment, chalks the word 'mother' on the floor. His father roars 'He's a Brown', and immediately takes him to the pub, where he says again: 'This is Christy Brown.'<sup>89</sup> As Christy grows increasingly distant from his mother, loneliness and unhappiness are again associated with achievement, though the celebratory last scene and a final title-card suggest a degree of contentment. So despite or perhaps because of the neo-Darwinist social context, 'normality' may again be seen to be the preferable state of being. Other biopics of the period, such as *Prick Up Your Ears*, *Buster* (1988) and *The Krays*, have similar features, and may be seen as disquisitions on the nature of success.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> *Prick Up Your Ears* also foregrounds its origins in biography, and develops a fragmented, *Citizen Kane*-like flashback structure around the researching of the book, which joins the dots of aspiration and achievement and which lends the hero's demise a sense of tragic inevitability. The actual work concerned is John Lahr's study *Prick Up Your Ears: The Biography of Joe Orton* (London: Allen Lane, 1978). Mark Finch felt the film 'so taken up with the difficulties of becoming a biographer that it never really gets to grips with Orton's life and its content'. For Finch's review, see *Monthly Film Bulletin*, no. 640, vol. 54, May 1987, p136.

<sup>89</sup> Reviewers often supported this argument by characterizing Brown as 'a remarkable man' (*Variety*, 27 August 1989, p31), defined by his outstanding accomplishments (see especially *Films and Filming*, no. 4 (5 August 1989), pp40-1).

<sup>90</sup> *Personal Services* (1987) is interesting in this connection. Though the names have been changed, discourses surrounding the film made it clear, as the pressbook puts it, that '[t]he character of Christine Painter was inspired by the life of Cynthia Payne' (p1). The same source includes a two-page biography of Payne, and credits at the end of the film cite her as a consultant. The film's director, David Leland, states: 'The story is true to Cynthia's spirit, but not necessarily to the facts. It isn't a biopic.' But in several ways it seems similar to the biopic as I have discussed, and to the particular manifestations of the genre on the 1980s. Above all, it presents Christine Painter as a self-made woman, whose rise is based on innate ability and application, like Christy Brown and Joe Orton. Julie Walters suggests in the campaign book that '[i]t's about a transition into something else; suddenly becoming a person who knows what she wants and is going to get it.' The biography in the pressbook also places much emphasis on Cynthia's achievements, the wealth she generated,



As in Britain, the biopic was ubiquitous in America in the 1980s and '90s, with high-profile releases such as *Reds* (1981), *Amadeus* (1984), *Raging Bull* (1988), *JFK*, *The Doors* (1991), and *Malcolm X* (1993).<sup>91</sup> The success of these films in Britain (*JFK* for example was the eleventh most profitable film of 1991, grossing £7.6 million) and the relative boom in the British biopic at this time, are arguably a dimension of the 'Americanization' of British culture under Thatcher.<sup>92</sup>

Though the conventional biopic continued unabated, a number of new departures on the British generic scene do seem apparent at this time. These relate to more established types and categories in some interesting ways.

#### a. Retro-Drama

Films like *Prick Up Your Ears* and *The Krays* have been grouped together by recent critics into a category called 'the retro-drama'.<sup>93</sup> Unlike the historical film and the biopic, this is not an industrial category, and has not appeared until very recently in journalistic circles. But in contemporary reviews of such films as

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and the status she eventually gained, while in the film, romance is again sacrificed in committed pursuit of career goals.

<sup>91</sup> These films undermine Custen's suggestion that the American biopic came to the end of its cinematic life in the '60s, and migrated to television (see *Bio/Pics*, p29). On the smaller screen, he suggests, its form changed, and it propagated different myths of fame, including new elements such as fate, currency, novelty, unexceptionality, and the absence of any lesson (pp214 ff.). As in the case of Britain since the 1950s, television has had an undoubted impact on Hollywood, but the magnitude of that impact should not be overstated.

<sup>92</sup> On the 'Americanization' of Britain, see for example Leonard Quart, 'The Religion of the Market: Thatcherite Politics and the British Film of the 1980s', in *British Cinema and Thatcherism*, p21. The success of American biopics is likely also to have been facilitated by the importance of American multiplex chains in Britain in the '80s. The prevalence of American history, and the biopic as an American-style historical film (as Custen argues it to be), may be the obverse of the coin whose reverse side is what we will see to be the relative paucity now of British historical films.

*Buster*, *Dance With A Stranger* and *Let Him Have It* (1991), there does seem to be a certain amount of groping for an adequate term to describe what appeared to be a new direction in the generally renascent film world, though phrases like 'life of' and 'story of' still located such films within the biopic sphere. James Park wrote in *Film Year Book* for example:

British Film-makers took rather more interest in their recent past than hitherto. Ruth Ellis, the peroxide blonde with upper-class aspirations that turned murderous, was revived in *Dance With A Stranger*. Also set in the fifties were Roeg's *Insignificance* and Temple's *Absolute Beginners*. Michael Palin went back a decade with his Lady Macbeth Maggie Smith to explore the more basic sides of life in *A Private Function*.<sup>94</sup>

Richards sees the retro-film as more radical than the average biopic or historical film.<sup>95</sup> It is perhaps also possible to make a finer distinction between the retro film and the biopic genre, by returning to the issue of mythic-ritual orientation and the status of individual talent. *Dance With A Stranger* and *Let Him Have It*, though re-evaluative, take a much less celebratory view of their subjects' endeavours than *My Left Foot*, for example, and imagine achievement more in terms of crime and notoriety. In these circumstances, eventual unhappiness and a reinstigation of 'normality' have a greater air of certainty about them. This is particularly true of *Dance With A Stranger*, which in deploying a range of *noirish* techniques such as

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<sup>93</sup> See for example Claire Monk and Amy Sargeant, 'Introduction', in *The Past in British Cinema*, the forthcoming book edited by Claire Monk and Amy Sargeant for Routledge.

<sup>94</sup> 'The UK Year', *Film Yearbook*, vol. 4, p85. In a later volume of the *Yearbook*, *Wish You Were Here* is described in a similar way ('The Films', vol. 7, p125), whilst *The Krays* was described as 'a return to the currently fashionable British movie turf of the seamy side of the 1950s and 1960s' ('The Films', vol. 9, p91).

<sup>95</sup> Such films are subversively engaged in 're-writing the history of the post-war decades so that figures formally regarded as socially or culturally deviant and condemned by the legal system are revalued, revealed as hapless victims of an oppressive system or heroic rebels against repressive and outdated bourgeois values'. See *Films and British National Identity*, p169.

claustrophobic *mise-en-scène* and the recurrence of shadows and distorting angles, generates a sense of fatalism.<sup>96</sup> However, it seems to me that the term ‘retro’ is designed to be understood in relation to the term ‘heritage film’, to which I now turn.

### b. The Heritage Film

The heritage concept is an important one, which has been criticized and refined in a large corpus of scholarly comment. John Corner and Sylvia Harvey contrast ‘heritage’, denoting continuity and historical stability, with ‘enterprise’, which has associations of change and progress. But crucially the two are closely related: ‘what has come to be called “the heritage industry” is itself a major component of economic redevelopments, an “enterprise”, both in terms of large scale civic programmes and the proliferation of private commercial activity around “the past” in one commodified form or another.’<sup>97</sup> For Robert Hewison and others, the vision of the national past which heritage represents is ‘profoundly conservative.’<sup>98</sup>

In this section, I intend to conduct a brief examination of critical thinking on the heritage film, which is held to be an aspect of broader developments in the heritage

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<sup>96</sup> See John Hill, *British Cinema in the 1980s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p127. Hill includes a brief overview of the ‘retro’ terrain under the title ‘Remembering the 1950s’, pp124-6.

<sup>97</sup> John Corner and Sylvia Harvey, ‘Mediating Tradition and Modernity: The Heritage/Enterprise Couplet’, in *Enterprise and Heritage: Crosscurrents of National Culture* ed. by Corner and Harvey (London: Routledge, 1991), pp45-75, p46. In the same vein, Patrick Wright argues that the National Heritage Acts of 1980 and 1983 recast the past in the ahistorical, commercial mould of commodification and display. Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (London: Verso, 1985), pp42 ff.

<sup>98</sup> Robert Hewison, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* (London: Methuen, 1987), p47.



field. I shall argue that heritage films do not somehow displace historical pictures in the 1980s, and did not evolve out of them, as Sarah Street suggests.<sup>99</sup> Though they are not unmarked by the heritage moment, in fact the discourses supporting *A Room With A View* (1986), *A Handful of Dust* (1987) and other alleged avatars of the heritage trend, in combination with their textual features, indicate a much closer generic affinity with the costume drama, and seem to suggest a whole other set of interpretative practices to those proposed by heritage critics.

#### b.i. Defining the Heritage Film

In an article of 1993, Andrew Higson discusses in detail the heritage films of the 1980s. *A Room With A View*, *Another Country* (1984), and *Maurice* (1987) are included in the type, and are held to have a number of specific stylistic and thematic features in common, including the repeated use of the same troop of actors (Helena Bonham-Carter, Anthony Hopkins and others); the prominence of E. M. Forster amongst the authors used; the promotion of character above drama and the goals of classical narratives; a pictorialist camera style; and the general emphasis on authorship, quality and cultural significance.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Street refers to the heritage 'genre' as a series of 'quality historical films' (*British National Cinema*, p103), and, reviewing the generic landscape from the '70s to the '90s, argues: 'The historical film re-emerged in the 1970s with Ken Russell's gothic biopics and then developed into the heritage genre with its sumptuous production values and highly visual pleasures' (p112). *Lady Jane*, *Henry V* and *Gandhi*, and in the '70s, such films as *Alfred the Great* and *Anne of the Thousand Days*, are all largely ignored in her analysis.

<sup>100</sup> 'Re-presenting the National Past: Nostalgia and Pastiche in the Heritage Film', in *British Cinema and Thatcherism*. See especially pp110, 114-8.

More recently, Higson has recognized that heritage is a critical rather than an industrial category, which cannot be defined with absolute exactitude.<sup>101</sup> Combining his earlier work into a single perspective,<sup>102</sup> he demonstrates the historical antecedents of the heritage films of the 1980s, arguing that heritage has been used to delineate a national cinema since the beginning of cinema itself.<sup>103</sup> There have been other kinds of heritage, he says, and not all are so refined or 'elitist' as the ones which inform the modern heritage film (p247).<sup>104</sup> But for Higson, there is an 'official' kind of heritage, and it is above all this that the films concerned participated in and helped to promote (p248).

#### b.ii. Heritage-Bashing

Defining the heritage film in much the same way as Higson, Cairns Craig connects its success to the specific climate of the 1980s, and argues it to be 'film as conspicuous consumption'. All semblance of historical movement, of change, negotiation and insecurity is discarded, and the past becomes a 'theme-park', wherein to partake of the refreshing certainties of a 'traditional' Englishness.<sup>105</sup> Higson argues that the heritage film responds to contemporary divisions, instabilities and anxieties by 'turning its back on the industrialized, chaotic present'

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<sup>101</sup> See 'The Heritage Film and British Cinema', in *Dissolving Views*, pp234-5.

<sup>102</sup> See *Waving the Flag*, pp26-7, for his definition of 'the essentials' of the heritage film.

<sup>103</sup> 'The Heritage Film and British Cinema', pp236-7.

<sup>104</sup> James Chapman implicitly supports this line of reasoning by analyzing *Words for Battle* (1941), *A Canterbury Tale* (1944) and *This Happy Breed* (1944) as heritage films in his study of the Second World War, *The British at War*, pp239-244. Charles Barr has also written of a wartime cycle of heritage films (see 'Introduction: Amnesia and Schizophrenia', in *All Our Yesterdays*, p12), but Chapman diverges from Barr's perspective in arguing that *This England* and *The Young Mr Pitt* are not heritage films but historical narratives, on the basis that they portray real events and personages.

<sup>105</sup> Cairns Craig, 'Rooms Without A View', *Sight and Sound*, June 1991, pp10-13.

to offer ‘apparently more settled and visually more splendid manifestations of an essentially pastoral national identity and authentic culture – “Englishness” as an ancient and natural inheritance. *Great Britain, the United Kingdom*.’<sup>106</sup>

Tana Wollen has perceived that ‘in screen fiction between 1981 and 1985 there would seem to be a set of ambivalent impulses driving the search for connection with the past. On the one hand, there is respite in the burrow: the straining present can blow itself to bits while we snuggle back. On the other hand the present needs explaining, or at least to be placed in context, so that we can make better sense of what is going on.’<sup>107</sup> But she argues that this tension is resolved by a shiny and seductive gloss, entailing the visual pleasures of a very traditional, and very English respectability: ‘The old’s allure gets buffed by its screen appearance. Not only is it laid out before us, without our having to discover it, but we are also relieved of having to experience the past “the way it really was”’ (p192). Higson too suggests that the heritage past works primarily as ‘an image, a spectacle, something to be gazed at’, a depthless surface in which ‘a fascination with style displaces the material dimensions of historical context.’<sup>108</sup> Heritage history is seen as separate, achieved (p113), ‘refusing the possibility of dialogue or confrontation with the present’ (p119). All ironies, conflicts and rival identities are swamped by the preoccupation with period authenticity and heritage conservatism, which ‘represent precisely the desire for perfection, for the past as unimpaired paradigm, for a packaging of the past that is designed to please, not to disturb’ (p122).

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<sup>106</sup> Higson, ‘Re-presenting the National Past’, p110.



### b.iii. The Heritage Film as Costume Melodrama

Higson declares his interest in heritage films to be 'the way in which they represent the national past . . .'.<sup>109</sup> But in fact they are strikingly similar to the costume films discussed in chapter three, if rather more careful about the accuracy and authenticity of their settings.<sup>110</sup> Their mythic-ritual pertinence seems to be at the personal, romantic and familial level,<sup>111</sup> at which uncertainty, controversy and negotiation are in fact prominent.

*A Room With A View*, for example, is very much concerned with the intricacies of manners, propriety and social attitude. In the sequence which begins the film, and which gives the film its title, the indelicacy of the Emersons in offering to exchange rooms causes grave offence and much concerned whispering amongst the Miss Allens ('Mr Emerson is so tactless'). Mr Emerson's anti-conventionalist response is: 'these niceties go against common sense.' The camera's tendency to dwell upon narratively surplus elements of the *mise-en-scène* and apparent concern to thus 'display' its heritage properties may be read in this light as a visual assertion of the superficiality of many of the relationships the film examines.

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<sup>107</sup> Tana Wollen, 'Nostalgic Screen Fictions', in *Enterprise and Heritage: Cross-currents of National Culture*, p180.

<sup>108</sup> Higson, 'Re-presenting the National Past', p112.

<sup>109</sup> 'Re-presenting the National Past', p109.

<sup>110</sup> As Sue Harper has shown in *Picturing the Past*, detail and accuracy were at times also concerns for costume drama in the 1930s and '40s.

<sup>111</sup> Higson acknowledges that heritage films 'are in almost every case organized around a romance, an imagined romance, or a romantic triangle' ('Re-presenting the National Past', p118), but fails to carry through the possible implications of this for meaning and audience interpretation.

The major theme of the film however is personal (that is, sexual and romantic) fulfilment. In an early scene, Lucy is filmed lying provocatively on her bed as a tempest rages outside, and soon afterwards, pursuant to her spirited performance at the piano, Rev. Beebe observes: 'If Lucy Honeychurch ever takes to living as she plays, it will be very exciting – for us and for her.' The extravagant Miss Lavish urges her to be open to 'physical sensation', and in the Piazza Signoria, the eroticism of the statues, shot in dizzying close-up, and the confused, fast-edited passion of the street brawl, temporarily overwhelm her. The transition from *ingénue* to sexual cognoscente, from repression to passionate fulfilment, is signalled in the next sequence, as she and George watch the smooth-flowing Arno become a torrent as it passes over a weir. On the subsequent picnic, Cousin Charlotte and Miss Lavish discuss a story of sex and romance with barely suppressed relish. Miss Lavish says that Italy elicits the romantic in everyone, and as another storm brews, amid the heightened colour of a poppy field, George and Lucy indulge in a sultry clinch.

Back in England, Cecil Vise is the very embodiment of stuffiness, stiffness and emotional atrophy, and is usually framed in static, formal compositions. Lucy tells him: 'when I think of you it is always in a room'. George by contrast is relaxed and youthful; he climbs a tree in Florence to shout out his creed - 'Joy! Truth! Beauty! - and tells Lucy that Cecil wants her only for a possession, not for love. This last

sentiment in particular, in the context of the entire narrative, seems to me to specifically contradict the belief that the film is simply a matter of the display and ownership of objects.

The goal of personal happiness is finally achieved when Lucy breaks with Cecil. 'I want to be myself', she says. The lovers are then reunited at the prompting of Mr Emerson, who is very much the presiding spirit of the film, and who urges that they must get back the 'light' of their own identities and follow their own destinies. This rather intimate trajectory of romantic awakening and growing independence is underlined in the film's use of flashbacks, as Lucy recalls, with increasing conviction, the kiss in the Florentine hills.

In other heritage films too, the same themes of fulfilment and self-awareness, in defiance of convention and expectation, are again prominent. Indeed, D. L. LeMahieu has suggested that 'the struggles of Edwardian women for greater autonomy and social respect' lie at the heart of their appeal.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> D. L. LeMahieu, 'Imagined Contemporaries: Cinematic and Televisual Dramas About the Edwardians in Great Britain and the United States, 1967-1985', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, vol. 10, no. 3 (1990), p253. Thus in *A Passage to India* for example, Adela sets out for India in the very first scene in pursuit of 'new horizons'. When she arrives, she studies herself in the mirror, and it is clear that she was talking personally and spiritually as well as geographically (which makes her consistent with a number of Lean's other heroines, including Rosy Ryan, Madeline Smith and Laura Jesson, who are also seeking fulfilment and happiness). As in the case of Lucy Honeychurch, we see Adela (more than once) lying awake and preoccupied in bed, and at the Malabar Caves, Adela's 'episode' is strongly suggested, by means of the womb/vagina-like cave and the imagery of running, seeping water, to be sexual in nature. The subsequent trial is told very much from her perspective, being shot from her point-of-view, and featuring the unravelling of her recollections as flashbacks to the caves. At the end of it, she rejects her future husband, and seems to have reached some sort of realization of her lack of fulfilment and of the need for it in the future. John Hill has noted that 'the film is more clearly structured around female desire than in the novel',



It would be wrong to claim that the nation is irrelevant to these films. In terms of such aesthetic features as its episodic narrative and leisurely pace, which deviate from the Hollywood norm, and in its cultural reference points, the heritage film may be seen to be advancing itself as a distinctively British product, though Richard Dyer and Ginette Vincendeau point out that the heritage genre is a general feature of *European* filmmaking in the 1980s.<sup>113</sup> Narratively also the nation is present. The simmering blood of the Italians for example is contrasted with the *sang-froid* and repression of the English in *A Room With A View*. After the sojourn in Italy, a title card declares that we are 'Home', in rural England.

In *A Passage to India*, Englishness is more stridently asserted. Flags are waved, 'God Save the King' is sung, a species of quiet racism is evident – 'East is East, Mrs Moore' – and Indian poverty is rhetorically counterposed to the luxury of the English. But in each of these films, national identity forms details of the backdrop, and seems firmly subordinated to the problems and pleasures of sex, identity and fulfilment, which dominate the narrative's images and dialogue. And though heritage films are set at a definite historical moment – signalled by the faithfully-reproduced fashions, the general change of carriage to car, the embryonic movement for independence in *Passage*, and the telegrams and urban redevelopment of *Howard's End*, for example – none utilizes any of the familiar

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and has outlined the importance of women and female sexuality in the 'Raj' heritage film in general. See *British Cinema in the 1980s*, p112 and pp109-117.

<sup>113</sup> See Martin A. Hipsky, 'Anglophil(m)ia: Why Does America Watch Merchant-Ivory Movies?', *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, vol. 22, no. 3 (Fall 1994); and Richard Dyer and Ginette Vincendeau, *Popular European Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1992), p6.

conventions of the historical film. Nor do such texts overtly discuss the great events and personalities of the age.

Other critics have also argued against Higson et al, similarly asserting that these are films of passion and feeling. Higson suggests that 'the emphasis on spectacle rather than narrative draws attention to the surface of things, producing a typically post-modern loss of emotional effect; emotional engagement in a drama is sacrificed for loving recreations of the past, or rather, beautifully conserved and respectfully observed spectacles of pastness [. . .] The excitements of the love story lie submerged by the trappings of the period piece'.<sup>114</sup> But Richard Dyer for example sees that heritage films have great emotional depth and can be very moving, and associates them with romantic fiction and the women's picture.<sup>115</sup>

In fact then, it seems easy to argue that in the heritage film 'the possibility of a dialogue or confrontation with the present' is realized in emotional terms every time. And significantly, the heritage films of the 1980s often lend the themes of love, sex and personal fulfilment a particularly modern and politically relevant aspect. The impression is thus one of difficult debate licensed by cultural respectability and temporal remove. As Alison Light suggests: '[w]hat the films

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<sup>114</sup> 'Re-presenting the National Past', p118.

<sup>115</sup> Richard Dyer, 'Feeling English', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 4, no. 3 (March 1994), pp17-9. Similarly, Claire Monk suggests that the *mise-en-scène* of such films is not purely a matter of display, but rather is expressive of emotional intensity and what Forster calls 'The Inner Life'. See *Sex, Politics and the Past: Merchant-Ivory, the Heritage Film and its Critics in 1980s and 1990s Britain* (unpublished MA Thesis, BFI/Birkbeck College, 1994). And Robert Emmet Long, in a study of Merchant-Ivory's output, sees *A Room With A View* very much in terms of passion, sensuality and basic human needs, and not at all in terms of consumption, national identity, denial or historicity. See his book *The Films of Merchant-Ivory* (London: Viking, 1992), pp139-40.

have picked up on is the romantic longing within liberalism for making unions despite differences of nationality, sexuality, social class.<sup>116</sup> All three of the hostile critics discussed in section b.ii of this chapter agree heritage films to be comfortably 'nostalgic.' But the examples given show that heritage films are perhaps more radical than comfortable or timorous. In Richards' words, they may be seen to be profoundly subversive, 'for together they provide a continuing and comprehensive critique of the ethic of restraint, repression and the stiff upper lip, of the surrender of personal happiness to higher notions of duty and self-sacrifice, hitherto key elements of the national character.'<sup>117</sup> Whilst it is arguable that the emphasis in the heritage film on visual spectacle and display 'undermines plots characterized by liberal or "progressive" sentiments' by celebrating the milieu against which the protagonist is in revolt,<sup>118</sup> this is a perspective which assumes that visual texture has a determining effect on popular interpretation, and which seems to morally disapprove of ambivalence in respect of the past.

In several ways then, the heritage film seems to be very like the costume melodrama, as discussed earlier in this chapter. Like the costume film, it deals with sex and romance, recognizing and helping to negotiate contemporary anxieties with regard to these subjects, and, like the Gainsborough films of the '40s, may be

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<sup>116</sup> Alison Light, 'Englishness', *Sight and Sound* (July 1991), p63. Hence the class-crossing of *A Room With A View* and *Howard's End*, the inter-ethnic relationships of *A Passage to India*, and the homosexuality of *Maurice*. The rigid distinctions drawn between *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) and *Maurice*, *Life is Sweet* (1990) and *Howard's End* (1991) (see Higson, 'Re-presenting the National Past', p110, who says that the present-set films are braver, more challenging and more discursive) also become much less clear. All debate issues of love, fulfilment and personal identity with a more or less obvious eye to contemporary society.

<sup>117</sup> Restraint, duty, and self-sacrifice are also key elements of the historical genre, as discussed in this chapter and in chapter four. See Richards, *Films and British National Identity*, p169.

<sup>118</sup> John Hill, *British Cinema in the 1980s*, p86.



radical in the ways this is done. Indeed the similarities between *Howard's End* and *Blanche Fury* are striking, each featuring a progressive heroine negotiating a tale of sexual impropriety and romantic longing, and a property that finally returns to its legitimate owners through the birth of an 'illegitimate' child.<sup>119</sup>

It seems to me that while the highly-polished heritage films of the 1980s may evince certain socio-economic national trends, they need not necessarily be seen as aspiring to debate those trends, and that therefore it is unfair and unrealistic to criticise them for failing to effectively do so. Their particular settings in 'cricket and tea-party' England, or in colonial India, represent the context for melodramatic discussion, and are not an (ostrich-headed, reactionary) argument in themselves.

We will see that the historical films of the '80s by contrast are quick to tackle matters of the nation and national identity. They show not a past 'treated as though it existed in isolation from all that went before or after it', but a past which is constructed after the principle of past-presentness, and which is intimately

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<sup>119</sup> Higson specifically distinguishes between the heritage film and *The Wicked Lady* and others of that ilk, which are held to be much less prestigious and conservative than heritage cinema, and which 'are less concerned to play out overtly nationalistic concerns and display heritage attractions'. See 'The Heritage Film and British Cinema', p239. But in fact Michael Winner's 1983 remake of the famous Lockwood shocker underlines the similarities between the heritage film and the costume drama. Winner's film is indeed inauthentic (*Films and Filming* found that Faye Dunaway was 'as a rule dressed and made up grossly out of period', no. 345 (June 1983), pp38-9) and characteristically unrestrained. But the themes of repression, boredom and personal and sexual gratification are again much in evidence, as are the attractions of romance. John Walker in *The Film Year Book*, vol. 2 ed. by Al Clark ('Turkeys of the Year', p110) for example found the film to be like the 1945 version, but with more sex and romance, and *Films and Filming* welcomed it, for all its faults, as sustenance to a 'world starved of romance'. Again, history and the nation are not prominent concerns. The really significant thing however, is that some of the characteristics which are supposedly exclusive to the heritage film, and which are argued to differentiate it from costume drama, were also identified by the film's reviewers. *Variety* for example noted that it was permissive, and yet, 'very moral in an old-fashioned way' (27 April 1983, p32) and *Monthly Film Bulletin* observed 'a

connected to contemporary events and modern historical challenges, changes and concerns. Nor, given the research that I will show went into *Lady Jane* and others and the historical discourses around them, can they be said to be avoiding history ‘as it really was’. The tensions perceived by Higson and Wollen arise from their attempt to make the square peg of the heritage film fit the round hole of the historical film’s generic identity.

#### b.iv. The Question of Reception

The fact that I disagree with Higson, Wollen and Craig is not simply a matter of personal perspective. In his most recent article, Higson argues that his interpretation of the heritage film is a representative one, because it is supported by the discourses surrounding the film. But this simply is not so for films made before the very end of the 1980s, at which point the notion of heritage and all it entails begin to catch on in the language of film culture.

*A Room With A View* for example is characterized in reviews, journalistic comment, and in the utterances of the makers themselves, by romance and passion.<sup>120</sup> A location report in the *Sunday Times* emphasized the smouldering passions of the film and the context of propriety, and James Ivory is quoted describing it as ‘a

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lovingly reverential treatment of English property – those familiar “props” of home and garden, costume and furniture’ (May 1983, vol. 50, no. 592, p143).

<sup>120</sup> I choose this film for the sake of consistency, having commented upon it above; more instances are not hard to find (see the footnotes below for a brief discussion of the reception of *A Handful of Dust* (1987)). The film also has the advantage of being specifically mentioned by all the heritage critics, and by Higson in particular, as representative of the heritage genre/trend.

delightful love story.’<sup>121</sup> In *Midweek*, the reviewer again harped on passion and Lucy’s awakening, and felt that the message of the film was that ‘only the passionate shall find the key to paradise.’<sup>122</sup> Ishmail Merchant explained in the *Daily Express* that ‘the appeal is in a romantic story with a happy ending’,<sup>123</sup> whilst the *Sunday Express* called it a ‘heart stirrer’ and a ‘comedy of manners.’<sup>124</sup> Nowhere, with the single exception of the *Spectator*, is there any suggestion that this is a stunted historical film, or that it is an over-blown advertisement for antiques.<sup>125</sup> And though there is mention of ‘the English abroad’ in some of the reviews, there is also no sense that the film is a ‘national narrative’<sup>126</sup> or a reactionary disquisition on national identity. Together with frequent comment on the attractions of the clothes worn, all of this locates the film within the category of costume romance or melodrama.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> *Sunday Times*, 2 June 1985, p39.

<sup>122</sup> *Midweek*, 10 April 1986, p13.

<sup>123</sup> *Daily Express*, 14 July 1986, p7.

<sup>124</sup> *Sunday Express*, 13 April 1986, p22. Similarly, the *Sunday Times* reported how humour ‘elevates this understated love story into an enticing social comedy’ (*Sunday Times*, 13 April 1986, p45). Alexander Walker wrote that the film is ‘about the liberating impact of sensual Italy on the repressed passions of the Edwardian English’ (*London Standard*, 10 April 1986, p25), and the synopsis of the film in an Enterprise Films release, which is designed to sell posters to cinemas, interprets the film in terms of love, the transmutation of dissatisfaction into fulfilment and the recognition of ‘true feelings.’

<sup>125</sup> Peter Ackroyd (*Spectator*, 19 April 1986, p38) felt the film to be ‘museum-like’, and bourgeois, but still noticed the primacy of passion. Significantly, when John Hill, following a similar line of reasoning to Higson, refers to contemporary responses to the heritage film in support of his argument, his range does not extend far beyond *New Society* and the *Observer*. See *British Cinema in the 1980s*, chps. 4 and 5.

<sup>126</sup> The term is used of heritage cinema in ‘The Heritage Film and British Cinema’, p244.

<sup>127</sup> *A Handful of Dust* was presented and received in similar ways. A press release from L.W.T. (BFI Microfilm) described the film as ‘a tale of marriage and infidelity among the aristocracy of the 1930s’, while the film’s pressbook discussed happiness and fulfilment, boredom and sex, and established links in regard to these qualities with *A Room With A View* and *Maurice*. In *Today* (17 June 1988, p26), Sue Heal thought the film very much one of ‘Evelyn Waugh’s “sex over the stirrup cups” sagas’ like *Brideshead Revisited*, entailing a triangle of problematic relationships, selfishness and guilt. David Robinson suggested that the adaptors ‘simply chose to emphasize the [. . .] romantic element rather than the satire’, and saw no problem in this (*Times*, 9 June 1988, p20), and notably even *Homes and Gardens* (Leigh Chapman’s review, July 1988), which surely could be relied upon to pick up any conservative, rural, nostalgic, or consumerist tendencies, said only that ‘it



In setting out his position on reception, Higson recognizes the multivalency of images,<sup>128</sup> but contends that his interpretation of the films concerned ‘does have a certain cultural status’ (p247), as it accords with the dominant popular view of them as ‘paeans to a particular vision of England’ (ibid.).<sup>129</sup> He shows how his readings of *The Remains of the Day* (1993), *Howard’s End* and *Shadowlands* (1993) are supported by the discourses circulating about them (pp242-3). But he ignores earlier films, such as *A Room With A View*, which do nothing to further his argument. Higson’s examples are all from the ’90s, and mostly from the years after 1994, by which time Higson himself, read by hundreds of film students and journalists, had pushed the notion of the heritage film into wider circulation.<sup>130</sup> So, as in the case of costume drama and the suggestion of Landy, Harper and Cook that it is coterminous with historical film, attention to reception and interpretative context again tends to confirm the separateness of the genres involved. A reception

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tells the story of an apparently happily married couple, whose marriage is wrecked.’ So, personal choice, morality, sex and fulfilment again dominate the film’s secondary discourses, with dissent again coming from only left-wing journals. Thus the *Spectator* (Hilary Mantel, 25 June 1988, pp48-9) adopted a distinctly Higson/Craig-esque line of critique, commenting: ‘we sometimes have the feeling that it is the costumes and the furniture that are cast in the most prominent roles. It is the old Merchant-Ivory problem: taste substitutes for content.’

<sup>128</sup> See ‘The Heritage Film and British Cinema’, p240.

<sup>129</sup> ‘We need to make sense of the heritage film of the 1980s and 1990s in the light of prevailing heritage discourses which dominated in public discussion of these films’, he says. See ibid., p242. These discourses constitute a ‘powerful cultural overdetermination’ to read it in terms of patriotism, nostalgia and consumerism rather than as melodrama’ (p244).

<sup>130</sup> Even in this later period, it is far from true that all reviews of *Howard’s End* ‘acknowledge the proximity of the film to the so-called heritage industry’ (‘The Heritage Film and British Cinema’, p243). For example, *Empire*, which is the preeminent magazine amongst the film-going public, reviewed *Remains of the Day* (1993), *Carrington* (1995) and *Howard’s End* in familiar costume drama terms, emphasizing romance, passion, and personal relationships, and entirely overlooking heritage, history and the nation. Thus for example *Carrington* is described as ‘a slick combination of period drama and rampant sexual adventure’. See the review by Caroline Westbrook, October 1995, p38.

studies approach is also largely supportive of distinctions based on myth and ritual, and can help repudiate the attacks of left-wing critics.<sup>131</sup>

### c. The *Avant-Garde* Historical Film

We will see in chapter six that, though its emphases were perhaps changing, the label 'historical film' continued to be used coherently and confidently. The changes undergone by the genre do not add up to the end of history, as Landy suggests.<sup>132</sup> However, if 'traditional' British historical films were still being produced, it is also true that British history was now being taken in new directions, which often accord with the (less extreme) perceptions and predictions of Landy, Rosenstone and Sobchack.<sup>133</sup> The films concerned often represent a critique of the Hollywood style and defy easy identification with existing generic groupings. The important thing about them for me is that these apparently hybrid and experimental texts were for the first time coming to be widely discussed with reference to history and the historical film genre.

However, these new directions and reformulations in historical film did not register immediately in the press and other media. *The Ploughman's Lunch* (1983) for

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<sup>131</sup> Higson's political perspectives are obvious in some of the quotations above, where heritage films are criticized as timid and bourgeois. But see also Cook's *Fashioning the Nation* (pp27-8, p69), where she accuses Higson of longing for a purer and 'truer' socialist past, uncontaminated by commodification, and more meaningful to the present. It seems to me that the collapsing together of heritage and history resembles, and is motivated by the same sort of impulses as, Cook's conflation of history and costume. The difference between the two is that where Higson uses notions of good and bad history to criticize heritage, Cook uses costume to criticize, problematize and deconsensualize history.

<sup>132</sup> Landy, *Cinematic Uses of the Past*, p2.

example, although not at all like the staple conventional British historical film, is, as Sheila Johnston writes, 'out to explore the appropriation and manipulation of history.'<sup>134</sup> The (anti-) hero's book on Suez revises events into line with the government's notion of the Falklands conflict.<sup>135</sup> And in a scene which deals with the making of a commercial, we see a ready-mix, fantasy past made up for public consumption, seemingly exposing it as nostalgic and de-historicized along the lines of the heritage critiques considered above. At a dinner party, the eastern European historian Jacek discusses alternative, more oppositional historical forms.

But contemporary critics of *The Ploughman's Lunch* mostly described it as fictional. Other films of the period (by Jarman, Davies and Greenaway), which are equally interested in history and national identity, were received in similar terms.<sup>136</sup> Thus it is notable that John Hill's analysis of the 'state-of-the-nation film', which he takes to include *The Ploughman's Lunch* and Jarman's *Last of England* (1987), and to entail comment on the national present and its past, relies almost exclusively

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<sup>133</sup> It is thus in relation to these new films that the work of Rosenstone et al seems useful, in helping to explain intriguing developments.

<sup>134</sup> 'Charioteers and Ploughmen', in *British Cinema Now*, p105.

<sup>135</sup> As Alexander Walker notes, the film's writers engaged in a constant revision of the screen-play during filming so as to take advantage of the unfolding story of the Falkland's war, which 'cynically illuminated the very thesis of the film – how so-called "history" is constantly in a state of "re-writing" according to how the establishment wishes to interpret the past so as to justify the present.' See *National Heroes: British Cinema in the Seventies and Eighties* (London: Harrap, 1985), p263.

<sup>136</sup> On the historical inclinations of modernism in the '80s, see Street, *British National Cinema*, pp177-8 (on Greenaway), p183 (Jarman), p184 (Davies) and p192 (Gay cinema). There have always been British films which have tackled history and historical themes in a non-mainstream way. A *Canterbury Tale* for example examined the connectedness of past and present, and questions of causality, constancy and change. See Richards, 'Why We Fight: A *Canterbury Tale*', in *Best of British: Cinema and Society 1930-1970* ed. by Jeffrey Richards and Anthony Aldgate (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983). Indeed, as Sue Harper suggests, many Powell and Pressburger films 'contained a strong historical element', *Picturing the Past*, p106. However, more examples of the type were produced in the '80s than ever before, mainly in response to Thatcherism and its consensualist historical project (again see Street, *British National Cinema*, p174), but perhaps stimulated also by the greater opportunities now for small scale, independent film-making.



on the rather vague textual notion of allegory. Indeed it begins by rejecting one contemporary response to these films as somehow erroneous.<sup>137</sup> In fact it is films as innovative as *The Ploughman's Lunch*, but with a more obvious connection to the traditional British historical film, such as Sally Potter's *Orlando* (1993), that first begin to challenge and extend the conception of the genre in popular discourses.<sup>138</sup> To borrow the terminology propounded by H. R. Jauss, films of this kind are careful to respect generic norms enough to avoid confusing their viewers, creating an 'aesthetic distance' in response to which an audience might alter its 'horizon of expectations.'<sup>139</sup>

*Orlando* was discussed both in terms of property, detail and craftsmanship,<sup>140</sup> and in terms of the private issues of sex, personal fulfilment and identity that are typical of costume melodrama (and most heritage films, as I have argued).<sup>141</sup> But its use of history and its status as an historical film were also on the critical agenda. Sally Potter crystallizes the themes of the film in her production notes as 'gender, death

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<sup>137</sup> See *British Cinema in the 1980s*, chp. 7, especially pp136-7.

<sup>138</sup> *Orlando*'s place in the innovative, independent tradition of Jarman and Greenaway is underlined by the involvement of Sandy Powell (Jarman's costumer), and Ben Van Os and Jan Roelfs (Greenaway's habitual designers). Geoff Brown (in *The Times*, 11 March 1993, p35) argued that *Orlando* was very much up to the Jarman and Greenaway standard, and Sheridan Morley in the *Sunday Express* (14 July 1993, p43) likened it to a product of their two sensibilities fused together.

<sup>139</sup> These terms are advanced in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* tr. by Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

<sup>140</sup> See for example the review in the *Independent* (12 March 1993, p22) where comparison is drawn with *Howard's End* and *Brideshead Revisited*, and the film's production notes (on BFI Microfiche), where the importance of the houses in the film is emphasized. A great many reviewers also contrasted the film to Virginia Woolf's novel, and characterized it as a tasteful adaptation. And in *The Times* (11 March 1993, p305), Geoff Brown opined: 'thoughts about sexual politics and British history tend to get dwarfed by visual pleasures.'

<sup>141</sup> The *Morning Star* (13 March 1993, p7) felt the film to be 'a metaphor for class and sexual oppression', and Hugo Davenport in the *Daily Telegraph* (12 March 1993, p18) commented upon its examination of passion, identity and the 'constraints of gender'. Derek Malcolm (*Guardian*, 11 March 1993, p4) described it as 'first and foremost about someone who lives through a difficult inheritance and comes out better and more complete than when he/she started out.'

and history', and a prospectus issued to encourage funding for the film during pre-production states: '*Orlando* is a story of the quest for love. It is also a dance through history'; it 'stands History – and Sex – on its head.'<sup>142</sup> The *Sunday Times Magazine* followed this lead in identifying the 'themes of history and gender,'<sup>143</sup> and *Gay News* set the film in the context of other historical productions: 'Flora Robson, Bette Davis and Glenda Jackson were all cheap historical madams compared to Quentin.'<sup>144</sup>

Furthermore, the discourses around the film also touch upon the quintessential historical preoccupations of patriotism and the nation. The *Telegraph* noted the film's 'English values' and place in the 'British tradition', and in the *Independent*, Sheila Johnson suggested that *Orlando*'s 'key-note themes' were 'national pride and self-delusion.'<sup>145</sup> Sally Potter herself has linked together the film's interest in questions of history, identity and one's relationship to the nation, stating that 'the whole narrative is about coming out of the past into the present and how we arrive in the present out of our personal histories and our national histories . . .'.<sup>146</sup> She agrees the film to be 'intensely English.'<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> *Orlando* Special Collection, BFL.

<sup>143</sup> *Sunday Times Magazine*, 28 February 1993, p42.

<sup>144</sup> *Gay News*, March 1993, p62. Similarly, Angie Errigo in *Empire* observed that the film offered 'snapshots of 400 years of social history' (*Empire*, December 1993, p142), and Derek Malcolm that it 'progresses through history like a pageant that is also a bit of a pantomime', making points about each period in turn (*Guardian*, 11 March 1993, p4). *The Evening Standard* also usefully underscores the fact that the film's historical proclivities extended beyond heritage-style detail to the re-enactment of actual 'historical events' (11 March 1993, p32). In this review, particular emphasis was placed on Potter's intelligent use of history.

<sup>145</sup> *Independent*, 12 March 1993, p22.

<sup>146</sup> McFarlane, *An Autobiography of British Cinema*, p460.

<sup>147</sup> 'There is no such thing as an "international film"; I mean, film is an international medium, but the film has to tell its own story in its own way and, if that is about one house on one block in one

Andrew Higson is inspired by *Orlando*'s literary provenance, its elegance and sumptuousness, and its interest in Englishness, to count it as an example of the heritage genre.<sup>148</sup> But with its political modernism, its anti-realist tendencies and Tilda Swinton's somnolent, glacial performance, and moreover in Potter's intention to avoid 'pedantic accuracy' in favour of an exaggerated 'essence',<sup>149</sup> *Orlando* seems alien to Higson's other examples, and the commonly agreed-upon heritage territory of Merchant-Ivory, Forster and Waugh. Sheila Johnson in the *Independent* thought that the film playfully and wittily distanced itself from the heritage concept,<sup>150</sup> whilst more recently, Charlotte Brunsdon has argued that it 'interrogates' the heritage cycle, and 'renders it strange.'<sup>151</sup> In fact, most of the commentators quoted above explicitly or implicitly argue it to be something new and distinctive on the horizon of the historical film.<sup>152</sup>

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city in one country, then that is what it is. You can't start peppering it up with apparently international references, or you end up with nothing'. See *ibid.*, pp460-1.

<sup>148</sup> 'The Heritage Film and British Cinema', p232.

<sup>149</sup> Production Notes (BFI Microfiche).

<sup>150</sup> *Independent*, 12 March 1993, p22. Johnson feels the film to be more sceptical about England and tradition than the average heritage film.

<sup>151</sup> See Charlotte Brunsdon, 'Not Having It all: Women and Film in the 1990s', in *British Cinema of the 90s*, pp167-8. In the same volume (in an essay entitled 'Fewer Weddings and More Funerals: Changes in the Heritage Film'), Pamela Church Gibson identifies trends towards greater experimentalism and subversion in the 1990s heritage genre at large.

<sup>152</sup> The qualities that make *Orlando* distinctive – its historical oddness, use of 'historical fantasy' and deliberate anachronisms – are present also in Derek Jarman's *Caravaggio* (1986), which stands in the same relation to the biopic as *Orlando* to the historical film. An introduction to *Caravaggio*'s published screenplay locates the film squarely within the biographical tradition, describing it simply as 'a film on the life of a painter.' See *Derek Jarman's Caravaggio* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986), p6. However, in a proposal for the film (Derek Jarman Special Collection, BFI), Jarman states an intention to challenge and rework the genre's romantic conventions (p4), an intention which many reviewers felt was realized in the finished film. The same director's postmodern *Edward II* (1991) was promoted with reference to history – in the film's press notes, Jarman describes the film as 'reclaiming history', in that it reasserts the homosexual relationship between the King and Gaveston – whilst Jarman alluded to the 'demands of kingship' and the sacrifices required of leaders in his screenplay (*Queer Edward II* (London: BFI, 1991), p22). Michael O'Pray has even argued since that Jarman has done more than any other to explore British history. See *Dreams of England* (London: BFI, 1996), p104. See also Roy Grudman's article 'History and the Gay Viewfinder: An



*Orlando*'s anachronisms and its century-hopping<sup>153</sup> also align it with an entirely different (and largely American) development in filmed history – the 'time-warp movie'. As far back as 1944, the Tommy Handley vehicle *Time Flies* was making play with the idea of historical time-travel.<sup>154</sup> But, heralded by *The Spaceman and King Arthur* in 1979, it was only in the '80s that the concept was widely explored outside of 'children's' cinema. Though usually classified as sci-fi films or comedies, examples of this trend, such as *Time Bandits* (1981) and *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* (1989), do work up new perspectives on history, forging new connections between the past (often represented by actual events and historical characters) and the present, and drawing upon *Orlando*-style post-modernism.<sup>155</sup>

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Interview with Derek Jarman', in *Cineaste*, vol. XVIII, no. 4 (1991), especially p26, where Jarman responds to the suggestion that he has 'reclaimed a whole history for gay people'. *Edward II* was rarely related to history or the historical genre in the press, but its uncommon commercial success may have introduced new audiences to the concept of historical postmodernism, and therefore helped to prepare the way for *Orlando*.

<sup>153</sup> Iain Johnstone in the *Sunday Times* referred to *Orlando* as a 'gender-bending Dr Who' (14 March 1993, Section 4, p20), and Alexander Walker in the *Evening Standard* (11 March 1993, p32) as a 'gender-tipping time traveller.'

<sup>154</sup> See *Kine Weekly*, 17 February 1944, for a review and synopsis. Handley and co. visit Elizabethan London, see the sights, and consort with the period's most memorable characters.

<sup>155</sup> The vogue in science-fiction for time-travel with a historical flavour is evident in *The Philadelphia Experiment* (1984), the *Back to the Future* trilogy (1985, 1989, 1990) and the two *Terminator* films (1984, 1991). The *noirish* voice-over in *T2* emphasizes the point, referring to 'future history' and 'the history of things to come.' Other time-travel films are more obviously historical. The chief example is *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* (1989), in which the two protagonists venture back into history to kidnap outstanding figures, who help them complete a school history project which will have an enormous impact on the future. From initially confusing George Washington with Captain Ahab, the pair thus learn about the past. Significantly, within its sci-fi-teen-comedy format, many of the tropes of historical film are present, including the emphasis on great men (Napoleon, Genghis Khan, Socrates), the use of familiar history and easily-recognizable images (like Lincoln in his 'memorable' stove-pipe hat), and the moral relevance and 'past-presentness' of history (the project being about how historical figures might have viewed the present).

## CHAPTER SIX: Case-Studying the British Historical Film in the 1980s

This chapter is conceived as the culmination to my thesis. It is intended to draw together the various strands of my analysis from chapters three to five, clarifying and amplifying some key points. I shall be addressing the history of the genre in the 1980s, and will attempt to answer a number of questions. What was happening in the 1980s to the inter-generic distinctions that existed in the period 1930-1980? What did it mean to apply the British historical film genre as a reading frame within the context of the 1980s? And was the genre undergoing any changes during this period?

Examining three important texts, and attending closely to the contexts in which they were produced and consumed,<sup>1</sup> I aim to demonstrate how apparently rival interpretative frames can be applied to a single film, and will tease out some of the possibilities and implications entailed in the various options. I will also try to arrange the spread of possible readings and meanings into a hierarchy of probability. There is little direct information on audiences and preference in this period, and certainly nothing so rewarding as the material in the Mayer, Bernstein and Mass-Observation surveys, or in the fan magazines of the '30s and '40s.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In this regard I shall be heeding the warnings issued by Allen and Gomery that '[t]he historically specific conditions under which a given work is produced and consumed are only partially objectifiable to the historian . . .', and that '[i]ndividual differences in decoding among audience members are inaccessible to the historian, but the more general horizons which all members of an audience group have at their disposal are not.' See *Film History: Theory and Practice*, p80.

<sup>2</sup> As Bruce Austin wrote in 1983: 'there has been little in the way of systematic, reliable and theoretically-grounded research [. . .] focussed on the recipients or consumers of theatrically exhibited pictures.' See *The Film Audience: An International Bibliography of Research* (London: Scarecrow Press, 1983), pxvii.

Therefore, an additional question to be addressed in this chapter is ‘how do we know (or guess at) what audiences were thinking about historical film in the 1980s?’

I have chosen the 1980s (rather than a decade of the 1930-1980 period) for special attention firstly because the genre at this time has received scant coverage. Richards, Harper and other commentators prefer the richer pickings of the ’30s and ’40s, whilst those who have written on the 1980s have generally focussed on other types and categories.<sup>3</sup> However, use of the past is prominent in the revival of British cinema in this period. My case-studies will examine *Lady Jane* (1986), *Chariots of Fire* (1981), and *Henry V* (1989).

### **Case-Study 1: *Lady Jane* and the British Historical Film in the 1980s**

#### **a. Continuities in the British Historical Film Genre**

I begin my case-studies of the 1980s by looking at some of the ways in which the historical techniques, preferences, perspectives and values of historical film as outlined in chapter four persisted into the 1980s. I will be focussing on *Lady Jane*, which reviews and other material identify concertedly as a historical film.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For example, the space devoted in *British Cinema and Thatcherism* to the historical genre, and to individual examples of it, is minimal. Similarly, John Hill’s recent survey of *British Cinema in the 1980s* does not refer to *Henry V* or *Lady Jane* at all.

<sup>4</sup> *Films and Filming* (issue 380 (May 1986), p33) suggested: ‘If [. . .] it’s history you want, this film gives it to you . . .’, whilst *Variety* (27 January 1986, p18) found the film to be ‘a tragic historical romance’. *City Limits* (no. 243 (29 May 1986), p23) describes the same as ‘a fully fledged historical



In *Lady Jane* the conventions and genre indicators which were discussed in chapter four are all in place. For example, the historical themes of royalty, government and the nation are again evident.<sup>5</sup> The scheming machiavellianism of politicians and advisers to the crown is reflected in political metaphors such as the playing of chess, and the marionettes with which Edward and Jane entertain each-other. Jane's evolving relationship to the nation, which results in her self-immolation, is also debated in the conventional terms of duty and patriotism. Soon after her first acquaintance with Edward, they discuss questions of duty and the burdens of high position. Later Edward reluctantly tells Jane that it is her duty to marry Guildford, and the King himself is manoeuvred into amending his father's will by similar arguments and by Dudley's assurance that he is thereby putting his country first. The execution of Jane is also presented as a sacrifice to England's good government and peace, as it is in the 1936 film *Tudor Rose*.<sup>6</sup> It is mandated by Phillip II of Spain, fiancé of Queen Mary, who fears that Jane may become a figurehead for revolt. The issue of the proper stance to adopt vis-à-vis the nation is

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costume drama', and *Sight and Sound* (vol. 54, no. 2 (Spring 1985), pp81-2) looked forward to a 'historical love story', which promised also to be an 'historical epic'.

<sup>5</sup> Thus a promotional handbook produced by Paramount (which can be found in the BFI's Pressbook Collection) sets the film in context with an introductory list of English kings and queens, and informs us that the film was conceived by Peter Snell as he researched the lives of the British monarchs for a television series (p1).

<sup>6</sup> The familiar concern with sacrifice is pointed early in the film when Jane discusses Plato's account of Socrates' trial and death with Dr Feckenham, concluding that one must be prepared to die for one's commitments. When asked what she herself would die for, she replies: 'A peaceful land that is free from bigotry'. Significantly, it is the socialist measures she instigates as queen which alienate her council and guarantee her downfall. In *Tudor Rose*, as we saw in chapter four, Jane is persuaded that it is her duty to take the crown in order to avoid civil war. Richards discusses the film's themes of legitimacy, the 'magical powers' of the throne, and the crown as 'a symbol of national unity and order', and determines it to be a powerfully conservative text. See *Age of the Dream Palace*, pp262-3. *Tudor Rose* is mentioned (disapprovingly) in connection with *Lady Jane* in *Sight and Sound*'s

thus once again prominent, whilst in Jeffrey Richards' terms, all monarchs in the film are seen to be unhappy, unlucky, or both.<sup>7</sup>

Jane and her husband ponder the inadequacies of the existing regime at length, and their conduct during the brief golden age of their reign is mindful of the nation as a whole.<sup>8</sup> They emerge as progressive rulers, in the tradition of *Catherine the Great* and *Fire Over England*, making wishes for the poor, and in particular for an end to 'the happiness of the few at the expense of the many'. When in power, they repeal the branding laws, redistribute land, release prisoners, and give away clothes, in a sequence of ever-quicker editing which creates a sense of giddiness and exhilaration. As two young people whose consciences are aroused by a spectacle of suffering, they recall the caring royal couple of *Victoria the Great* and *Sixty Glorious Years*. *Monthly Film Bulletin's* review alluded to the dividedness of England at the time, and noted that the unity of the royal couple was achieved through their devotion to the nation,<sup>9</sup> while an advertisement placed by Pinewood in *Screen International* observed that Jane's rule was 'good for England.'<sup>10</sup>

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critique (vol. 54, no. 2 (Spring 1985), p81), and appears also in *Variety's* review of 27 June 1986 (p18).

<sup>7</sup> Queen Mary is unfortunate also, in being forced to sacrifice Jane (something which did not escape the attention of reviewers; see *Screen International*, no. 552 (14-21 June 1986), p15), just as Elizabeth sacrificed another Mary in *Mary, Queen of Scots*. We see Mary I reduced to tears by her decision, but she recalls her duty, and stoically departs to meet her new husband and attend to matters of state.

<sup>8</sup> The notion of their reign as a 'golden age' is made literal in a series of images. After their first night together we see them bathed in golden sunlight in their bed; their reunion in the tower is marked by an embrace in front of a golden sun; and their last night together is passed in the gilding glow of an open fire. Offered the possibility of freedom if they would renounce their religion, they refuse, promising to keep the gold of their reign untarnished.

<sup>9</sup> *Monthly Film Bulletin*, vol. 53, no. 629 (June 1986), p173.

<sup>10</sup> *Screen International*, no. 537 (1-8 March 1986), p5.

The production is also highly 'theatrical' (in the sense discussed in chapter four), with well-balanced long-shots a prominent feature. *Variety* found it to be visually a very 'traditional' film, realized with little flair and offering the audience a range of 'old fashioned' pleasures.<sup>11</sup> The director, Trevor Nunn, was at the time joint-artistic director of the R.S.C., and the presence of a large contingent of R.S.C. stalwarts is emphasized both in reviews and in the promotional handbook issued by Paramount.

The film again develops its historical arguments through the interplay of close-up with long-shots, suggesting at differing times the relative importance of environment and personality. Jane is initially often seen in open, empty spaces, and is filmed slightly from above, to underscore her loneliness. When she is forced to marry Guildford, she struggles and disrupts the ordered space of her parents' reception room, before her parents' will is re-imposed in a symmetrical long-shot, while at her coronation she is dwarfed by her environment, betokening her status as a powerless pawn. The power others have over her is also visualized in terms of point-of-view. Her mother watches her initial meeting with Guildford from a window above, and later observes the wedding feast from a balcony as she plots with Dudley. The exception to these rules is Jane's nine-day reign, when she is seen in empowering close-up, and when she dominates court spectacle, looking down from her throne and later over her Parliament as she issues her demands. By the end of the film however, Mary is raised above her, and looks with pity upon her deposed cousin.

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<sup>11</sup> *Variety*, 27 January 1986, p18.



Also in line with the tendencies of the genre at large is *Lady Jane*'s use of the interior/garden relationship. Dudley is mostly seen indoors and often in a murky, forbidding light. By contrast, Jane is associated with the outdoors. Her fateful first encounter with Guildford takes place in a garden, and as their relationship ripens (in a house set away from the court and the city, in the heart of the country), it is validated by an extended pastoral sequence. This sequence emphasizes their purity and goodness,<sup>12</sup> and ends with a cut back to the dastardly Dudley, in a low-lit interior.

Other semantic features of the historical genre to be embodied in the film include the propensity of promotional material to assert the film's place in cinema history,<sup>13</sup> and to foreground the historicity of the events shown.<sup>14</sup> The absolute suitability of the film's stars is also argued, as well as other uncanny links of past and present. Thus the pressbook says that Helena Bonham-Carter 'like Lady Jane [...] was absorbed in her books at a hideaway address when the call came'. The pressbook also cites the fact that Bonham-Carter is a great grand-daughter of the British Prime Minister Lord Asquith, and news stories and lobby displays which used this information may have served to draw attention to the film's themes of government and nation.

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<sup>12</sup> When the *Time Out* reviewer describes the scene of the 'young lovers running through rural England' as one of the predictable traps into which the film falls, he fails to appreciate its status as a generic convention. See the issue dated 28 May 1986, p27.

<sup>13</sup> The pressbook asserts that *Lady Jane* is 'the largest location picture to be mounted in the country for many years'.

<sup>14</sup> In addition to questions of the Reformation, Jane's mother, for example, is argued in the campaign book to be 'one of the most single-minded women in history'.

The film draws attention to its sources, displaying at its beginning pictures of Henry and Edward with contextualizing titles next to them, while later, Mary points out a portrait of Philip and informs Jane that it is 'by Signor Titian'. Elizabeth I is also 'quoted' as an unnamed ginger-haired girl in the background (as at the end of *Anne of the Thousand Days*). And when Jane looks longingly from her cell in the Tower to the birds in the sky (another association with nature), a similar scene from Zinneman's *A Man for All Seasons* may be called to mind.<sup>15</sup> Finally, royal support is again enlisted in promoting the film, once more reinforcing its royal and national concerns. In the brochure for the film's royal charity premiere, Prince Charles expressed his pleasure that the film was British.<sup>16</sup> This was a very patriotic occasion, at which the national anthem was played.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Reference to another historical film is also made in the film's publicity. An advertisement in *Screen International* (no. 539 (1-8 March 1986)) refers to *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex*, which it claims was a similar sort of 'big historical romance'.

<sup>16</sup> Royal charity performance brochure, Leicester Square, 29 May 1986, Lady Jane Special Collection, BFI. The event was in aid of the Prince's Trust and the Newspaper Press Fund.

<sup>17</sup> In the same way that *Lady Jane* thus continues many of the characteristics of the historical film before 1980, so the production in America of a new version of *A Man for All Seasons* in 1988 demonstrates that the U.S. was still capable of providing material, like *The Virgin Queen*, which supports the British historical genre. Charlton Heston's film is very similar to Fred Zinneman's 1966 version, centering on questions of loyalty, patriotism and sacrifice, and making use of garden and domestic settings. It utilizes 'historical' stars in Heston and Vanessa Redgrave, and a great many long-shots, and is also talkily theatrical. The striking difference, which arises from its reliance on the full Bolt text, is its greater emphasis on history and the historicity of events. Roy Kinnear, as the film's chorus figure, reads from history books and thereby sketches in the historical context and sets up expectations in the same way as titles and voice-overs. He also introduces the film by nominating its subject as the story of 'great men', which is significant in view of the historiographical allegiances of the genre discussed in chapter four. The longer text also affords greater space to questions of duty and sacrifice. More discusses his loyalty in greater depth, and in an extra scene in which he resigns, his wife accuses him of a dereliction of duty. There is also more comment on statecraft, government and the health of the nation, which is particularly evident where Cromwell and Rich debate the nature of service to the King, and the rival claims of duty and pragmatism. The mythic-ritual function of historical film is made particularly clear in that Kinnear announces himself as 'the common man', and reappears in different guises, watching events, and expounding on the proper attitudes to adopt.

That *Lady Jane* may be seen as a 'remake' of an earlier film, and the real and apparent references to other historical films in both its text and promotional literature, raises the matter of the prominence and meaning of the historical genre in the 1980s. Would audiences have been likely to follow these references and to read *Lady Jane* in the context of the historical film genre as established in chapter four?

In fact older historical films were constantly circulating in the '80s. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, in a contemporary state-of-cinema anthology, described a situation where 'more viewing takes place in front of TV screens than ever took place in cinemas, even in the peak post-war years', and where gaps in the schedules were filled by old British films as well as more recent fare.<sup>18</sup> In these circumstances, television showed more historical films now than ever.<sup>19</sup> The 1980s was also the 'decade of video,' during which the best known examples of the genre began to be made available for home rental.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, 'But do we need it?', in *British Cinema Now*, p151. Similarly, the extensive research into cinema audiences of the 1980s by David Docherty, David Morrison and Michael Tracy led them to conclude that '[w]atching an entertainment film and gaining pleasure from it is primarily a home-based experience'. See *The Last Picture Show? Britain's Changing Film Audiences* (London: BFI, 1987), p37. Audiences are shown to *prefer* watching films on television, above all for reasons of freedom of choice, pp37-8. I shall return to this survey later in the present chapter.

<sup>19</sup> Thus *The Young Mr Pitt*, *The Lion in Winter*, *Young Winston*, *Sixty Glorious Years* and *Victoria the Great* were all transmitted around this time. Respectively, they were shown on BBC2 (September 1978); BBC (December 1978); Thames TV (March 1983); BBC (October 1984); and Channel 4 (December 1983). This information was obtained from the BFI SIFT Database.

<sup>20</sup> See Nick Roddick, 'If the United States spoke Spanish, we would have a film industry . . .', in *British Cinema Now*, p17. A further dimension of the recirculation of older texts through these means is the boom in film and video guides at this time. These guides invariably offer a generic categorization for each film discussed and typically apply the term 'historical' (or a variant) to the type of film and to the specific examples that were discussed in chapters three and four. Together with television guides in the daily press, they may have helped to keep a strong image of the historical genre alive in the absence of many new historical films. *Virgin Film Guide* no. 1, for example, a big selling and therefore influential example of film-guide publishing, applies the generic label 'historical' to *Becket* (p58) and *The Lion in Winter* (p477), *Victoria the Great* (Biography/Historical p1027), *Anne of the Thousand Days* (p29), and *Khartoum* (p418). Links are



Other interpretative frames from the period in question may have encouraged readings of *Lady Jane* along the lines I have proposed. The British film industry of the 1980s is usually characterized as anti-Thatcherite. But the British historical film genre in several ways seems to be congruent with key Thatcherite themes and developments. For example, the fact that the government's rhetoric of 'national unity' was 'directed much more towards England, and towards certain regions of England, the old metropolitan heartlands of the Empire'<sup>21</sup> is in keeping with what we saw in chapter four to be the anglo-centrism of the genre and its approach to questions of the nation. And just as the historical film often develops its national perspectives through a schematic contrast of Britain and 'abroad', so the government set itself to defend national sovereignty and identity against erosion in the European Community. Moreover, the 'creation and re-creation' of history during the Falklands War of 1982 proceeded along consensualist lines,<sup>22</sup> emphasizing the legitimacy of the state and national unity, and drawing upon traditions of English liberty and the British empire.<sup>23</sup> As I argued in chapter four, these elements are central to both nineteenth-century British historiography and the British historical film, which has so much in common with it.

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often made between one historical film and another (*Anne of the Thousand Days* for example being associated with *Becket*, *A Man for All Seasons*, and *The Lion in Winter*).

<sup>21</sup> Andrew Gamble, *The Free Economy and the Strong State: The Politics of Thatcherism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), p214.

<sup>22</sup> This phrase is used by Lester Friedman in 'The Empire Strikes Out: An American Perspective on the British Film Industry', in *British Cinema and Thatcherism*, pp10-1. This article exemplifies the tendency to cast British film-making of the 1980s in an oppositional light.

<sup>23</sup> See Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, pp5-6.

Audiences may have been further encouraged to make mythic-ritual readings of historical films by certain *tensions* in Thatcherite ideology. Though Thatcher's Methodism and 'bourgeois values' placed great store by duty, service and patriotism, her economic policies sponsored aggressive self-interest, and as Hugo Young contended in 1989, it was now more fashionable 'to consume rather than care'.<sup>24</sup> These policies helped to create a 'divided nation' and a more efficient, competitive and *Americanized* society, while the ideals and institutions (the B.B.C., the universities, the church) of public service were eroded.<sup>25</sup> Jeffrey Richards rightly observes that '[s]uch massive, wide-ranging, social and cultural changes and value shifts cannot but affect the national character and the national identity.'<sup>26</sup> In these circumstances, the historical genre's negotiation of the difficulties and proprieties of the individual's relationship to the nation and its representatives may have seemed particularly evident and relevant.

In the pages that follow, I shall examine the impact of some of these political and social developments on the historical film genre, and on real and potential readings of historical film.

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<sup>24</sup> Hugo Young, *The Iron Lady* (New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1989), p537.

<sup>25</sup> On these developments, see Peter Riddell, *The Thatcher Era and its Legacy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991); and Shirley Letwin, *The Anatomy of Thatcherism* (London: Fontana, 1992).

<sup>26</sup> See *Films and British National Identity*, pp24-5.

## b. New Emphases and Change in the British Historical Film

As in earlier decades, the fundamental instability of the British film industry in the 1980s means that patterns can be hard to identify with certainty.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, a number of tendencies are apparent. We have seen that the historical film in general, and *Lady Jane* in particular, seem to embody some of the values and priorities of the 1980s quite neatly. But closer examination reveals subtle generic changes in emphasis and departures from the norms established in chapter four, which appear to reflect some of the changes occasioned by Thatcherism.<sup>28</sup>

### b.i. Changes in Style and Content

Jane's eventual self-sacrifice in *Lady Jane* is less willing than in previous films, and is presented less in terms of national imperatives. Though she has earlier discussed matters of patriotism and duty, at the moment of her death she does not deliver a patriotic speech (as Charles I in *Cromwell* and Thomas More in *A Man for All Seasons* for example do), but rather whispers 'Guildford', the name of her

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<sup>27</sup> Street argues that '[t]he vicissitudes of film production continue to ensure that British cinema maintains an eclectic base. Repetition and difference have always been key features of film genres, but this dynamic process has been slowed down, particularly in recent years when most films are one-off productions without the security of a major studio's support. Companies come and go, and with them ideas and styles which, in a more stable economic environment, might have been developed in subsequent films'. See *British National Cinema*, pp112-3.

<sup>28</sup> Thus the category obeys one of Rick Altman's recently formulated rules of genre, that categories and groups are always subject to change (see *Film/Genre*, chp. 4, especially pp64-5), though the shifts involved do not constitute an instance of generic transformation or 'regenrification'.



lover. Her faith also leads Jane to believe that her reward for death will be in the next life, rather than the gratitude of the nation in the present one. Philip II's concern that she not become a figurehead for revolt still puts her passing in a national context, but her actual death assumes a more tragic, less noble aspect than in *Tudor Rose*, for example.

If then Jane does not die embracing the greater good of the nation and the national ideal, but is ultimately the victim of the greedy self-interest of politicians, the enlightened, progressive nature of her brief tenure of the crown may be interpreted as a critique of the established order. This contrasts with the emphatic validation of the establishment in similar scenes of just and progressive governance in *Victoria the Great* and many of the other films mentioned above. A number of the film's criticisms appear in fact to be directed at the Tory government. For example, Guildford opposes the contempt in which the rich hold the poor.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, where the jingoism of such films as *The Young Mr Pitt* and the insularity of *Mary, Queen of Scots* accords with Thatcher's suspicion of and hostility toward Europe,<sup>30</sup> Spain is viewed in neutral terms. And where Thatcher attacked the universities and

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<sup>29</sup> Richards remembers Thatcher regretting her opponents' 'drooling and snivelling' about the plight of the homeless. See *Films and British National Identity*, p23. The fact that Jane and Guildford oppose the inordinate power of bishops and politicians over the bodies and lives of commoners also resonates with criticisms of Thatcher's authoritarian style and her government's erosions of civil freedoms. In *The State We're In* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), Will Hutton characterizes Thatcher as a virtual dictator, and the enemy of British democratic government.

<sup>30</sup> On this subject, see especially Margaret Thatcher, *Britain and Europe: Text* (1989), in which Thatcher set out her vision of 'willing and active cooperation between independent sovereign states', each maintaining 'its own traditions, culture and identity'. British identity was cast in terms of the battle for liberty, and the country's greatness as an 'island fortress'. See also *British Foreign Policy Under Thatcher* ed. by Peter Byrd (Oxford: Philip Allan, 1988).

seemed hostile toward the teaching profession,<sup>31</sup> Jane is presented as a scholar, and is chided by her (pragmatic and wealthy) father for being so bookish. These anti-Thatcherite features were noted in reviews of the film, without much enthusiasm.<sup>32</sup>

Thus it seems that the British historical genre evolved slightly in the 1980s to accommodate the possibility of a rather less conservative and more critical outlook than had previously been the case. This is not to say that before this time historical films were never read as oppositional texts, but merely that they are seldom described as such in our sources for both popular and more intellectual responses to them. Nevertheless, we have seen that in the characters and actions of Jane and Guildford the overall emphasis on patriotism and duty, and on the goodness of the institution of monarchy, remains in place. Similarly, the ultimate return to the succession willed by Henry can be read as an argument in favour of legitimacy. It is also important to reiterate that Mary's sacrifice seems to be unambiguously for the national good. Thus John Hill is right to recognize that though 'it is much easier to identify an anti-Thatcher cinema than a pro-Thatcherite one', 'not all British films of the period [. . .] can be seen as straightforwardly critical of the Thatcher regime.'<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Thatcher cut university budgets and eliminated 3000 higher education posts in 1980, while a 1988 Government Green Paper *Higher Education into the 1990s*, called upon universities 'to serve the national economy more effectively'. See Hugo Young, *One of Us: A Biography of Margaret Thatcher* (London: Pan Books, 1990), p414. Elsewhere, Young records an observation made in 1988 by Peter Hall, that 'well over 90 per cent of the people in the performing arts, education and the creative world' were opposed to Thatcherism, p411.

<sup>32</sup> *Screen International* (no. 552 (14-21 June 1986), p15) bemoaned the 'anachronistic and unconvincing concern for the poor and needy', which it termed 'vote-catching'. *Monthly Film Bulletin* (vol. 53, no. 629 (June 1986), p173) was unimpressed by the film's 'socialist monarchs' and its 'political message-mongering'.

<sup>33</sup> *British Cinema in the 1980s*, p29.

Despite the apparent correlation between *Lady Jane* and the Thatcher revolution, it would be a mistake to attach too much significance to social and political context in analyzing changes in the historical film. *Lady Jane* is in fact also a good example of the possible impact on the historical film of changing notions of good history.

The prevailing conception of Lady Jane Grey in nineteenth-century historiography and its tradition was extremely romantic and 'novelistic'. She was imagined to be the passive victim of the deeds and intrigues of 'great men', and the exigencies of crown and nation. Violet Brooke-Hunt for instance writes of Jane: 'it is like turning away from the glare of artificial light into the sunshine and spring air, to leave all these schemers and read of Lady Jane Grey.'<sup>34</sup> Unsurprisingly, given this framework, and Brooke-Hunt's dramatic style of writing, the measures instituted by Jane during her reign are overlooked.<sup>35</sup>

Compare Hester W. Chapman's 1962 biography *Lady Jane Grey*. Here Jane is portrayed with less poignance as a determined and formidable character, and the nature and significance of her reign are fully explored. Distancing herself from previous representations of Jane, Chapman writes: 'her nine-days reign, recorded in

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<sup>34</sup> Violet Brooke-Hunt, *Prisoners of the Tower of London: Being An Account of Some Which at Divers Times Lay Captive Within its Walls* (London: J. M. Dent and Co., 1901), p130.

<sup>35</sup> See also Richard Davey, *The Nine Days Queen: Lady Jane and Her Times* (London: Methuen, 1909). In his introductory note he writes: 'My object in writing this book has been to interest the reader in the tragic story of Lady Jane Grey rather from the personal than the political point of view', pvii. He alludes to 'the extraordinary men and women who surrounded Lady Jane', and again finds her to be a 'tool for their ambitious ends' (ibid.). Great respect is once more paid to the institution of monarchy (it is a 'towering position') and events are related in a colourful and



detail by contemporary historians, is treated as an unimportant interlude between the death of Edward VI and the accession of Mary I. Seldom criticized, always pitied and never censured, she has become the prototype of the persecuted heroine, the supreme example of a political pawn . . .'<sup>36</sup> In place of the usual hymn of praise, Chapman reveals a woman of authority and keen political acumen, and sets her in context, underscoring the importance of abstract social and economic forces as well as the inclinations and actions of great men.<sup>37</sup>

*Lady Jane* retains many of the characteristics of nineteenth-century historiography, being in large part a romantic re-creation, respectful of the institution of monarchy and shy of admitting its status as an interpretation. But nevertheless it also mirrors the revisionism conducted by Chapman and others, both generally in its unusually critical tone, and specifically in Jane's spunky defiance of her council and in the representation of her ascendancy as a political golden age. Indeed it is to Hester Chapman that the pressbook refers when setting out the film's perspectives.<sup>38</sup>

It may be then that developing notions of feminist history, as well as currents in economic and political history, were catching up with the genre by the 1980s. Certainly, key British historical films of the 1970s are more aware than ever before

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dramatic narrative (the aim being to 'paint as visual a picture as possible' of Jane and the period, pviii).

<sup>36</sup> Hester W. Chapman, *Lady Jane Grey, Oct 1537 – Feb 1554* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1962), p11.

<sup>37</sup> Not all recent work on Jane Grey has been in this mould. David Matthews' *Lady Jane Grey – the Setting of the Reign* (London: Methuen, 1972) reasserts the old orthodoxy that Jane suffered from 'a certain passivity' (p11) and was a 'victim of power politics'. He also asserts that character has a prime importance in historical explanation. See for example p14 for comments on Somerset's greed; and p15 where the 'charm' of Cranmer is discussed.

<sup>38</sup> Pressbook, p11.

of the importance of impersonal, economic factors. Thus Charles I ponders their significance in *Cromwell*, just as Jane is preoccupied by the value of coinage in *Lady Jane*. The structural limitations on the autonomy of the monarch and other great figures are also more evident, and it is notable how similar are the dark interiors and power-broking of *Lady Jane* to those of *Henry VIII and his Six Wives*.<sup>39</sup>

Because few films other than *Lady Jane* were recognized as historical in Britain in the 1980s, further changes in the historical genre are difficult to isolate. I shall examine and try to account for the dearth of historical films in this period shortly. But first I want to briefly widen my scope beyond the 1980s to incorporate the first part of the 1990s, in order to underline two interesting developments. These again seem to have their origins in the policies and transformations of Thatcherism. The first trend relates more to the changing style than to the content of British historical films, and its essence is that they have become rather less spectacular and ornate.

From the 1970s onwards, the audience for film became progressively younger, whilst the revival in film attendances in the 1980s was largely inspired by the building of multiplex cinemas, which catered to this market in mainly American fare.<sup>40</sup> The potential audience for a British historical film, and its potential returns, were thus diminished, and a production on the scale of *Becket*, for example, might

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<sup>39</sup> As I suggested in chapter four, *Henry VIII and his Six Wives* also attends far more closely to the political, social and religious circumstances of Henry's reign, and rather less closely to the king's character, than earlier films such as *The Private Life of Henry VIII*.

now have seemed prohibitively expensive. *Anne of the Thousand Days* and others of that ilk were in any case partly funded with American money which was no longer forthcoming. At the same time, the British film industry was badly weakened by the Thatcher Government.<sup>41</sup> Under these circumstances, *The Madness of King George* (1995) and *Mrs Brown* (1997) set greater store by the private and domestic elements of the historical genre than has often been the case.

The issues of nation, patriotism and sacrifice remain in this pair of films, as do the genre's past-presentness<sup>42</sup> and its means of signifying its historicity and authenticity.<sup>43</sup> But where spectacle, pageantry and the long-shot are prominent in

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<sup>40</sup> See Allen Eyles, 'Exhibition and the Cinema-going Experience', in *The British Cinema Book*, pp224-5.

<sup>41</sup> The editors begin the discussion in *British Cinema Now* with reference to 1985's 'almost entirely negative Films Bill' (Martin Auty and Nick Roddick, 'Introduction', p1), and characterize the British film industry of the time as 'simultaneously renascent and in crisis' (ibid., p2). In the same volume Nick Roddick sees the state as 'indifferent, if not hostile' ('If the United States spoke Spanish we would have a film industry...', p18), while Geoffrey Nowell-Smith argues that 'if there is no change in Government attitudes the general future is bleak . . .' ('But Do We Need It?', p155). James Parks' analyses of the British film industry in two important publications of the '80s, *Learning To Dream: The New British Cinema* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984) and *British Cinema: The Lights That Failed* (London: B T Batsford, 1990), are equally dispirited.

<sup>42</sup> The modern parallels in *Mrs Brown* were particularly startling on its release. Its images of press intrusion and grubby speculation, and its arguments about the importance of the Queen to national life (it is Disraeli's mission to lure her from mourning back into the public realm) summarized many of the issues surrounding the death of the Princess of Wales, which occurred on the very week the film hit the cinemas. The 'Nation in Mourning' demanded that its monarch show herself in public. The publicity for *Mrs Brown* was already asserting the centrality of the themes of patriotism and the nation, and the Queen as figurehead and symbol of consensus. Jeremy Brock discusses the Queen's devotion to duty and sense of office in the film's published screenplay (*Mrs Brown: A Screenplay* (London: Methuen, 1997), pv), whilst, according to the pressbook, the film tells how 'a love-lorn sacrifice changed a nation'. But the Diana connection inspired many reviewers and commentators to elaborate on these matters, and perhaps may have prompted audiences to think in similar terms. Review and news coverage were especially similar in the case of the *Independent* (issue dated 4 September 1997; the review is in the *Tabloid* supplement, p6), the front cover of which queried 'Where is the Queen?', and compared Tony Blair to Disraeli. The more sympathetic *Daily Mail* review found the film to be 'all too appropriate' (5 September 1997, p44). The Queen's status as a figurehead is also emphasized. In other columns, calls were made for national unity and for recognition of the Queen's good service, and the Royal Family was linked to British history and the nation's continuing good name.

<sup>43</sup> *Mrs Brown* for example begins with historicizing titles, and quotes Victoria's *Highland Dairies* as a source, as did *Victoria the Great* and *Sixty Glorious Years* in a previous era. The pressbook also



such films as *Fire Over England* and *Alfred the Great*, forming a historical dialectic with medium shots and close-ups, in *The Madness of King George* and *Mrs Brown* the more intimate style predominates, and an unusual proportion of the action takes place indoors, out of the public eye.<sup>44</sup> For Alan Bennett, the loss of scenes of court life and spectacular shots of the public's reaction to the King's bizarre behaviour in *The Madness of King George* 'was a sacrifice but they were cut with resignation and general agreement, the telling of the King's story always taking priority...'<sup>45</sup> The beginnings of this trend are perhaps visible in *Lady Jane*. Though the long-shot is still much in evidence, there are few scenes featuring public pageantry and the majesty of monarchy, as Jane moves from her parents' home, to her own matrimonial home, to her lodgings in the tower, with only the rural romance sequence and her execution taking place outside.

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emphasizes the uncanny suitability of the actors chosen. Thus for John Madden, the film's director: "In the presence of Antony Sher you had the feeling that Disraeli had come to life all over again" (p14). The research effort is proudly delineated (p10), the costumes are said to be authentic (p15), and producer Sarah Curtis asserted the originality (though in fact the Queen's self-exile from public life was also the subject of *The Mudlark*) and historical importance of the subject matter (p16).

<sup>44</sup> At the end of *The Madness of King George*, the King underlines the domestic themes of the film when he says: 'We must try to be more of a family. There are model farms now, model villages, even model factories. Well, we must be a model family for the nation to look to.' (But note that family problems are seen to have some relevance outside of the family, unlike the situations in the costume melodramas discussed in chapter five, being of *national* significance). Throughout the film, from its very first scenes onward, a marked contrast between the King's private life and public stature is carefully established, through the formality of costumes, manners, colours and settings. As Alan Bennett writes of the King: 'His behaviour, previously geared to the public and state rooms, gradually becomes inappropriate for such settings' (*The Madness of King George* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), pv), and much of the drama unfolds in more intimate and less opulent spaces. Similarly, *Mrs Brown* rejects almost all the most notable events of Victoria's reign (which are very much the substance of *Sixty Glorious Years*) in favour of an altogether smaller and more personal narrative. Again the *mise-en-scène* distinguishes between private and public, moving from interiors in cramped, ordered composition, to a 'looser camera' and less controlled exteriors (the use of landscape and nature again conforming to generic practice) as Victoria rediscovers love and her devotion to duty.

<sup>45</sup> *The Madness of King George*, pvii.

These developments seem largely to be a question of insufficient financial backing to indulge in elaborate tableaux and set-pieces,<sup>46</sup> and are perhaps reflective of the fact that much of the funding for these films came from television.<sup>47</sup> That the screens hosting all but the most blockbusting films have become smaller since the '60s is another possible factor.<sup>48</sup> However, the particular domestic style of historical films in the '80s and '90s may also be further evidence of the belated impact on the genre of post-nineteenth century developments in historical thinking and practice. For example, it is in line with twentieth-century work on the exercise and maintenance of power that monarchy in *The Madness of King George* is conceived as a performance, as is revealed in the sharp contrast between the King's chaotic private life and more ordered moments of public duty.<sup>49</sup>

The second new tendency I have observed in historical films of the 1990s is the rise in Scottish nationalism in British historical films about Scotland. In the 1930-1980 period, British films dealing with Scottish history displayed very similar concerns, values and political attitudes to films about English history. In *Bonnie Prince*

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<sup>46</sup> *The Madness of King George* was made on a budget of £5m, provided by the Samuel Goldwyn Company and Channel 4 (see 'The Monarchy's in a Mess', *Empire*, no. 70 (April 1995), pp70, 72). *Mrs Brown* was made for £1m, provided by BBC Scotland (see Robert Murphy, 'A Path Through the Moral Maze', in *British Cinema in the 90s*, p6, and Geoffrey Macnab, 'Unseen British Cinema', in id., p136).

<sup>47</sup> I shall tackle some of the possible effects of television on historical film in more detail shortly.

<sup>48</sup> On this point, see Allen Eyles, 'Exhibition and the Cinema-going Experience', p221.

<sup>49</sup> As Tosh writes: 'In Britain especially, reaction against the traditional forms of political history has turned on the contention that none of them confronts what ought to be a central issue in any study of politics, namely the acquisition and exercise of power and the day-to-day management of political systems', p81. Bennett discusses the notion of power entertained by *The Madness of King George* in his screenplay, where he writes: 'part of the King's illness consists in his growing inability to sustain that performance', pxxi. When Chancellor Thurlow observes that the King is becoming his old self again, the King replies: 'I have always been myself . . . Only now I seem myself . . . I have remembered how to seem', whereupon he is spirited off to Parliament to be displayed to his detractors, who believe him to be mad and unfit to govern.

*Charlie* for example, it is striking that the Pretender is every inch a dutiful and good-natured Englishman, David Niven's perky, disguise-wise fugitive calling to mind a similar performance as the Sir Percy in *The Elusive Pimpernel* (1950). Compare King George and the Prince of Wales, who have thick German accents and are full of what the British often characterize as 'continental arrogance.' Indeed the mad-eyed Prince of Wales stomps and rants like nothing so much as A Nazi villain from a film of the war period. Charlie is repeatedly identified in the dialogue as the figurehead to which all 'true Britons' should rally, and his promise that 'this little country of ours' will in the future be respected 'and, at the right time, feared', seems a clear reference to Britain's role in World War Two. Despite the picturesque highland backdrops and scenes of sword-dancing, the Jacobite cause seems not so much Scottish as *British*, and it is thus easy to interpret *Bonnie Prince Charlie* as the same sort of appeal to patriotism, service and national unity as *Fire Over England*, for example. In chapter four I argued that *Mary, Queen of Scots* is an ambiguous and even-handed film, and it is one which attends much more closely to the sacrifices and tensions of government and monarchy than to questions of national autonomy.

However, in the 1990s, after a decade which highlighted the lack of Scottish political autonomy,<sup>50</sup> and perhaps finally prompted by the Thatcher government's use of Scotland as a guinea-pig for the poll-tax, two films were produced in

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<sup>50</sup> Fewer than 10% of all Conservative MPs were returned from Scottish and Welsh constituencies in 1979 and 1983, whilst in 1987 Scotland produced only ten Conservative members out of a total of 358. See David McCrone, *Understanding Scotland: The Sociology of a Stateless Nation* (London: Routledge, 1992), chp. 6.



Scotland that were highly critical of English attitudes and the presence of English government north of the border.<sup>51</sup> *Chasing the Deer* (1995) and (especially) *The Bruce* (1996) seem to be nationalistic texts, and were certainly surrounded by a range of very assertive, nationalistic discourses.<sup>52</sup> In the press, Bob Carruthers, producer of both films, told of his wish for a Scottish film industry that would put Scottish history on the screen in a 'more truthful' way than had previously been the case.<sup>53</sup> In a personal interview, Carruthers elaborated on these sentiments. He told me that both films were intended to be understood as part of the British historical film genre, with reference to the types of codes and conventions identified in

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<sup>51</sup> The company behind the films, Cromwell Scotland Limited, sold shares in them (450 at £1000 per share) to members of the public, in return for which they were entitled to appear as extras. See *British Film News*, no. 4 (Spring 1997). Most investors were Scottish. The large number of extras to accommodate means that in both *The Bruce* and *Chasing the Deer* there are many long-shots of battles and weary troops. Both however continue the domestic, intimate tendencies of the British historical film at this time by focusing on a troubled family.

<sup>52</sup> *The Bruce* begins with a voice-over which informs the audience that early in the fourteenth century, the Scottish fought for freedom 'against the tyranny of Edward of England', switching then to a scene in which Robert the Bruce and friend discuss the qualities of Scotland, 'so good, so strong.' Upon his coronation, The Bruce also promises: 'By the power of my sword, Scotland shall be free'. A closing voice-over underlines the message one more time, to the sound of stirring Scottish music. At the film's premiere, Sandy Welsh, who played Robert the Bruce, bellowed 'freedom!' to the crowds (*Sunday Post*, 3 March 1996), whilst *Look* magazine (we/e 10 March 1996) suggested that the patriotism occasioned by the film could be harnessed for the political good of the nation. The *Scottish Daily Mail* (18 May 1995) and *Scotsman* (3 July 1995) both discussed the film in extremely patriotic terms, arguing that this Scottish history was the genuine article, while Cromwell advertisements for the film promised to correct the misrepresentation of the heroic Bruce in *Braveheart*. The English in the film are depicted as arrogant metropolitans, which strongly calls to mind the Scottish National Party perspective on the Tory Governments in the '80s and '90s. The Queen calls Scotland a 'stupid little country', whilst Edward denounces it to his men as the 'arsehole of the universe.' The Scots are usually seen outside, the English inside in cramped, dark settings (the contrast being made obvious by the editing), and the Scots have a near-monopoly on honour and sacrifice. *Chasing the Deer* is less nationalistic in itself, being focussed on the plight of the populace during the 1745 rising. Both the English army (composed in fact of Scotsmen) and the cause of the heavily-accented Bonnie Prince Charlie are seen as an imposition on the native people. However, the press surrounded the film with nationalistic comment, ignoring its ambiguities and bending it to the 'cause' of freedom. *The Scotsman* (12 November 1993, p9) approvingly compared it to *Braveheart*, while *Glasgow Herald* (7 September 1994) thought it of 'national importance'.

<sup>53</sup> See for example *The Scotsman*, 5 November 1993. English and American attempts at Scottish history, it is claimed in the prospectus for *The Bruce*, 'made *Brigadoon* look like a gritty costume drama.' Share prospectus, Cromwell Archives, Stratford-upon-Avon.

chapter four.<sup>54</sup> But he also suggested that the films were devised to appeal primarily to a Scottish audience, and to address the issue of independence. Unlike *Mary, Queen of Scots*, they were to be clear and unambiguous calls for self-government, and *The Bruce* in particular was to be a critique of the English crown and 'English oppression'.

#### b.ii. Rates of Production

Perhaps the most striking development in the British historical film genre in the 1980s is the vertiginous decline in the number of films produced that were popularly and confidently assigned to it.<sup>55</sup> Two crucial determinants were the government's weakening of the film industry at this time, and Britain's increasingly more youthful (and 'Americanized') film-going audiences, which were discussed above in relation to the historical film and style. Perhaps equally important however was the kind of critical and industrial response these factors engendered.

At the end of the decade, Clyde Jeavons, the author of a text for a British Council Exhibition on 'British Filmmakers of the 80s', suggested that the 1980s had been 'an era of fresh, pertinent, small-scale films'. His emphasis is on youth and

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<sup>54</sup> In particular, Carruthers attached great importance to the validating function of nature and the outdoors, to the principle of using memorable and easily-recognizable history, and to the key theme of individual/state-nation relations. The interview was dated 14 July 1997.

<sup>55</sup> Where the '60s could boast *Becket*, *Khartoum*, *A Man for All Seasons*, *The Lion in Winter* and *Alfred the Great*, and the '70s *Cromwell*, *Anne of the Thousand Days*, *Carry on Henry*, *Mary, Queen of Scots* and *Henry VIII and His Six Wives*, the only major production universally felt to be historical was now *Lady Jane*.

newness, and the adjective 'daring' is recurrent. In *Learning to Dream*, James Park similarly discusses the progress made in the '80s in terms of 'new ideas and visions', vigour and 'vibrancy'.<sup>56</sup> In the context of an industry thus represented, and amidst films which based their appeal on 'newness' and smallness, *Lady Jane* might seem like an aberration, or even an irrelevance. *Variety* worried that it 'may strike youthful contemporary viewers as rather anachronistic and out of synch with current attitudes'. The film was argued to have a 'strong 1960s feeling', and the suggestion was made that modern audiences were no longer interested in elaborate, distant history.<sup>57</sup> *Screen International*'s audience rating was a sniffy '[m]ainly for middle of the roaders'.<sup>58</sup> The film was not an enormous financial success,<sup>59</sup> but little information exists to elucidate public attitudes towards history and historical film in general.<sup>60</sup>

Reviewing the era along similar lines to Jeavons and Park, John Hill contends that 'the "Britishness" of the British cinema in the 1980s was neither unitary nor agreed but depended upon a growing sense of the multiple national, regional, and ethnic identifications which characterized life in Britain in this period'.<sup>61</sup> If 'the certainties

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<sup>56</sup> Roddick also argues in his survey of 'The British Revival' (in *A Night at the Pictures*): 'The Renaissance proper has really been fuelled by newer, less immediately accessible – and less commercial – talents . . .', p105; with the exceptions of Attenborough and Lean, the old guard 'seem to have been rather fazed by the methods and subject matter of the eighties', p93.

<sup>57</sup> *Variety*, 22 June 1986, p18.

<sup>58</sup> *Screen International*, no. 552 (14-21 June 1986).

<sup>59</sup> The film's box-office amounted to £300, 000, generated by 25 prints. David Merritt, the Head of Sales at U.I.P., which distributed the film, described this to me as 'very disappointing' and 'well below expectations.'

<sup>60</sup> In *The Last Picture Show?*, Docherty, Morrison and Tracey conclude that audiences still watch roughly the same kinds of films now as in previous eras, p91. But the survey they carried out in 1984 does not offer historical film (nor anything like it) to respondents as an option in the list of generic preferences. See p94.

<sup>61</sup> *British Cinema in the 1980s*, p244.



concerning the “nation” upon which many earlier British films relied’ (p241) no longer applied at this time, the historical film as understood in chapter four could again be expected to suffer. I shall return to this question in my conclusion.

At the same time as so much emphasis was being placed on small-scale films with a contemporary setting, another section of the film industry was again looking toward international production and co-production as a solution to its problems. Nick Roddick argued in the mid-80s that ‘the dividing line between American films and British films has grown narrower and narrower over the years . . .<sup>62</sup>; and that given the erosion of the British box office, British films must be ‘cosmopolitan and geared to the world market’ (p83). As far as British historical film goes, this could perhaps have been another hostile context. The genre’s apparent mythic-ritual concern with patriotism and the nation, its use of British history, and other references seemingly directed specifically at British audiences, might together seem to militate against a historical film achieving world-wide distribution and success. However, international aims and imperatives need not necessarily preclude the viability of historical film, as the example of *The Private Life of Henry VIII* demonstrates for an earlier period.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> ‘The British Revival’, p77.

<sup>63</sup> *Chariots of Fire* (which is not generically historical, but which is set in the British past) serves as a similar caveat for the 1980s, as we shall see. Item 16 of the *Chariots of Fire* section of the David Puttnam Special Collection at the BFI, a letter from Larry White to Tim Vignoles dated 23 August 1979, reads: ‘Return herewith “Chariots of Fire”. I am sorry to tell you this has no viability at all in the American market-place because of its style and tone as well as its subject matter.’ Two years later however, the *New York Times* (20 September 1981) was running an article by Vincent Cranby on the same film: ‘What is extraordinary is that a story that was once considered too old, and too

A further important factor in the decline of the British historical film in the 1980s is television. 'The box' has long been regarded as a thorn in the flesh of British cinema, and in the '80s, television remained very much the more popular medium.<sup>64</sup> But Docherty, Morrison and Tracey convincingly argue on the basis of their audience research that television *did not* usurp the audience for film.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, the financial support of television was of decisive importance to the renaissance of the '80s. As Roddick suggested at the time: 'The traditional frontier between film and television is no longer a realistic one'<sup>66</sup>; personnel move back and forth and 'all the major production companies and the vast majority of the smaller ones are as much involved in supplying product for – or selling it to – television as they are in making films for theatrical release' (p27).

But if television did not undermine cinema in general terms, it may have had an injurious impact on the historical genre. One sense in which this is so ironically relates to the importance of television in providing funding for feature production. Channel 4, at the forefront of this trend, was 'obliged to appeal to tastes and

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British for American audiences, has been chosen as the opening attraction at the New York Film Festival on Friday'.

<sup>64</sup> Stewart Lane showed that 74% of the British population never visited the cinema at this time. See 'Out Dated', *Listener*, 24 April 1986, p36. Compare Sylvia Harvey's assertion that every adult in May 1988 watched a weekly average of over 25 hours of television. See 'De-Regulation, Innovation and Channel Four', *Screen 30* (1-2) 1989, p61.

<sup>65</sup> The authors of *The Last Picture Show?* make the case that it was not simply TV itself which undermined the cinema, but Elvis, the coffee house, the Town and City Planning Act of 1947, and changes in employment, housing and family life: in short, changes in the social structure for cinema-going, and the leisure options open to the general public, which were such as to make the experience a less valuable and important part of everyday life. Video is similarly exonerated. The authors find that ownership of a V.C.R. by the working-class (who formed the bulk of cinema attendances) was negligible in the early '80s (p31), while the middle-classes owned videos but nevertheless patronized the cinema. Hence, '[t]he reasons for owning a video do not preclude cinema attendance', p32.

<sup>66</sup> See 'New audiences, new films', in *British Cinema Now*, p22.

interests not generally catered for by existing television services.’ Its main commitment in terms of film was to ‘original screenplays on contemporary social and political topics’, and the facilitation of radical, experimental projects by groups and individuals who would otherwise lack access to filmmaking.<sup>67</sup> However, Channel 4 was not alone in investing in film production, and the BBC and other television companies were not constrained by any such remit.

Harlan Kennedy explored another dimension of the impact of television in 1986, suggesting that ‘[t]he long reach of video, cable and network TV, with their major market importance in terms of film-viewing, is shaping the way movies are made – ever more compact and televisual in both style and structure – even when those movies are “primarily” intended for the big screen.’ As film-makers look toward important small-screen revenues, they are ‘emphasizing the verbal, de-emphasizing the visual’, tending to stage action in a two-dimensional way, and favouring uncomplicated dramatic trajectories. Conversely, the cinematic blockbuster increasingly depends upon ‘rollercoaster kinesis’, in which issues and characters have little place. Kennedy argues that the middle ground of cinema, favoured by historical film, was disappearing. It is easy to see how the genre could have been deprived of some of the detail, scope and spectacle which we saw in chapter four has been a prime locus of both meaning and pleasure, and constrained into the more intimate orientation discussed above.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> John Hill, *British Cinema in the 1980s*, pp54, 56, and pp54-59 in general. See also his chapter two for a useful overview of the government policies and developments which led British cinema into its dependence on television.

<sup>68</sup> Harlan Kennedy, ‘The Incredible Shrinking Screen’, *The Film Yearbook*, 1986, pp140-4.



Nick Roddick suggested a more obvious effect of television on historical film. He draws an end to his survey of the British film up to 1985 by remarking:

It is not hard to say what there has *not* been much of: costume drama, literary adaptations and genre pieces. Because British television has already got the field covered, from *Brideshead Revisited* to the BBC's Sunday afternoon Dickens adaptations, the British film renaissance has not felt the need, as have other emerging or re-emerging national cinemas, to explore the country's past and the origins of the present national identity.<sup>69</sup>

Furthermore, Colin McArthur's analysis of television history programming suggests that it tends historiographically to be very similar to the historical film.<sup>70</sup>

As we have seen, television also recycled increasing numbers of old historical films during this period.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> 'The British Revival', p112.

<sup>70</sup> See Colin McArthur, *TV Monograph 8: TV and History* (London: BFI, 1978), especially p9. McArthur's book is highly polemical (objecting to 'bourgeois values' in historical television and calling for more 'revolutionary texts'), but it is thought-provoking. Its principal flaw is the skimpiness of its film analysis, for an example of which see pp42-5, where McArthur asserts more than demonstrates a number of points about an episode of *Upstairs, Downstairs*.

<sup>71</sup> It is arguable that television films during this period were also developing *new kinds* of popular history, which now in part performed the function of the traditional historical genre as outlined in chapter four. Writing on 'Channel Four Television Films of the 1980s' (in *British Cinema and Thatcherism*), Paul Giles suggests that 'the most successful British television films interrogate the comfortable and the familiar', 'inducing the audience to re-conceive its perspectives upon past and present in new and unsettling ways', p72. What Giles argues to be their reliance on 'popular memory', their emphasis on community, their explorations of the connectedness of past and present, and finally their fundamental conservatism, make these films sound similar to those of the historical genre, and indeed many of them (including *Wish You Were Here* (1987) and *A Letter to Brezhnev* (1985)) were set in the past. I shall leave these ideas as they stand, as possible explanations for the relative decline of the historical film in the 1980s. This is partly because space does not permit a deeper consideration of the differences between the reception contexts for television and cinema,

## Case-Study 2: *Chariots of Fire*

Many of *Chariots of Fire*'s textual features and secondary discourses suggest location within the biopic genre. The pressbook is prefaced by remarks which clearly establish the individualistic compass of the film - Abrahams and Liddell 'each had their own demons'; '[b]oth reached gold, but on their own terms' – and circulates data relating to both men's lives and achievements.<sup>72</sup> Newspaper and magazine coverage often followed this lead in summarizing and interpreting the film,<sup>73</sup> and the poster campaign emphasized the strength of each man's ambition and personal faith.<sup>74</sup> Notably, private correspondence exchanged during pre- and post-production also suggests that the filmmakers themselves were thinking of their opus in terms of biography.<sup>75</sup>

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and partly because, in order to maintain continuity with previous chapters, I am primarily interested in historical film and the cinema.

<sup>72</sup> David Puttnam Special Collection: *Chariots of Fire*, Item 38, Publicity – Press Kit. Amongst other biographical tit-bits, Abrahams' offices, records and honours are listed. These biopical intimations are reinforced by repeated references to the two characters as 'real people' and by the general promotion of the film as a 'true story', for instances of which see especially the section 'Playing for Real'.

<sup>73</sup> For example Patrick O'Neill in the *Daily Mail* (23 May 1980) suggested in a location report that '[t]he film tells of the fight for personal supremacy between Eric Liddell and Harold Abrahams,' whilst in *The New York Times* (20 September 1981, Arts and Leisure, section 2, article by Vincent Canby on the New York Film Festival), Hugh Hudson felt the film to be 'about two people, self-sacrifice, the human struggle and personal achievement.' The vital 'true story' element to this tale of individual motivation and success, which brings it into line with the biopic genre, is observed in a great many reviews, including those in the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Express*. See David Puttnam Special Collection: *Chariots of Fire*, Item 57, English Press Clippings.

<sup>74</sup> See Item 40, Publicity – General.

<sup>75</sup> A letter to Mr Langhorne of St Johns College, Cambridge, dated 7 February 1980 (in the David Puttnam Special Collection: *Chariots of Fire*, Item 22, Cambridge Locations) for example asserts that the film is 'about two famous British athletes of the 1920s'.

Within the film, a bracketing flashback structure is again in place, and title cards in the final sequence supply specifically *biographical* information.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, the film begins with the words ‘Let us now praise famous men’, which resonates with an important dimension of the biopic at large. Abrahams’ success in particular is constructed as a private matter. His actual race is accompanied only by the sound of his own heartbeat, and the point is underscored afterwards when coach Mussabini asks: ‘Do you know who you won for out there today? – Us!’ Both of the key characters experience the familiar series of doubts and setbacks on the way to their goals, and both have to make personal sacrifices.<sup>77</sup> The mythic-ritual discussion of the price of success that results is particularly clear because of the trimming of the film to meet the target of 120 minutes, which necessitated the elimination of much of the romantic subplot and the footage which focussed on the American team.<sup>78</sup>

However, features that have been associated with the heritage film are also in evidence, and indeed Higson lists it as a heritage text in ‘Re-presenting the National Past’ (p109). In particular, it has a stylistic tendency to relish the elegance and refinement of ‘the establishment’ even as this same milieu is being subject to criticism. When Abrahams takes issue with the attitudes of his college Masters, for

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<sup>76</sup> Another formal feature which is relevant in this connection is the constantly moving camera, which has the effect of generating greater emotional involvement, and which contrasts strongly with the often static camera, and distant, formal shots of the historical film.

<sup>77</sup> Abrahams for example loses a race he expected to win on the way to the Olympics. And as we shall see, both men ‘paid’ for their achievements to some extent through struggle and personal unhappiness.

<sup>78</sup> See Item 38, Publicity Press Kit ‘Charity Begins at Home’ article, p20: ‘Through [a] process of constant excision the plot was simplified down to an account of the individual motivation of Abrahams and Liddell’. The two-hour target was a condition of the film’s funding.



example, the unbalanced composition of the frame draws attention to his splendid surroundings.<sup>79</sup>

The film's detail and 'quality' occasionally attracted comment in the press, as in *Calendar* magazine, which felt that the film showed off the delights of the era, but 'without appearing to dwell on them.'<sup>80</sup> Other articles occasionally went still further, apparently reading the film in just the way that Higson criticizes. *Time* for example found that 'seeing *Chariots of Fire* is like exploring a wonderful historical restoration. All the brass has been polished, the draperies lovingly arranged [. . .] At the very least one gets from the film an authentic sense of life as it must have been lived in a more gracious and perhaps more innocent time.'<sup>81</sup> Such observations make *Chariots of Fire* unique amongst films in the 1980s in lending support to Higson's recent arguments about the reception of heritage film. But the film's prominent affiliations to the biopic greatly complicate the generic situation, whilst other aspects of its text, promotion and reception suggest a reading in the context of the British historical film.

Amongst a number of features which accord with the historical genre, it is notable that royalty, in the form of the Prince of Wales, has a small but significant role in

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<sup>79</sup> The fact of Hudson's background in advertising and the planned *Brideshead*-like serialization on television may have contributed toward the heritage feel.

<sup>80</sup> *Calendar*, 'Movies', 20 September 1981, p28.

<sup>81</sup> Richard Schickel, 'Winning Race', *Time*, 21 September 1981. *Playboy* thought it 'bathed in a kind of sepia scrapbook color that opens up the good old days as if they were here and now' ('Movies', October 1981, p33). Similarly, in a letter to David Puttnam, Janice Morley, feature writer on the *Daily Express*, said: 'You are right, it is important to preserve our heritage and represent our views through film'. See Item 40, Publicity – General, letter dated 17 February 1981. Predictably,

*Chariots of Fire*, and that like *Lady Jane* and several of the films identified as historical in chapters three and four, its makers engineered royal associations in the present day and utilized them in promotional activities.<sup>82</sup> Additionally, the principle of past-presentness is embodied in the deliberate comparisons in the film's publicity (and in early versions of the screenplay) of the 1924 Olympics with the 'tarnished' games of 1980.<sup>83</sup> References are made to other historical films (particularly *A Man for all Seasons*) in all kinds of secondary discourses,<sup>84</sup> and in Enigma press releases, the research effort behind the film and the use of original sources was presented as a major selling-point as well as a guarantee of historical 'truth.'<sup>85</sup>

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Peter Ackroyd in *The Spectator* was again very critical, accusing it of being 'chocolate box Englishness.' See *Spectator*, 11 April 1981, p79.

<sup>82</sup> See Item 41, The Royal Film Premiere, letters to the organizers from the Earl of Westmoreland, for evidence of the campaign fought by Puttnam et al to secure the coveted premiere slot. The royal connection was emphasized in advertizing (particularly on posters), and local theatre managers were encouraged to invite their own 'royal couple' to a premiere, and to issue mock royal invitations. See Item 39, Publicity – Visual. Similarly, Puttnam wrote to Ascanio Branca at Twentieth Century Fox asking what special plans had been made 'for the weeks immediately surrounding the royal wedding'. He continued: 'I even think we should consider a specific ad campaign'. See Item 40, Publicity – General, letter dated 13 April 1981.

<sup>83</sup> In an article entitled 'The Olympic Ideal', the pressbook asserts that in recent years, '[t]he spirit of the Olympics has been perverted and twisted to fulfil the needs of a particular regime.' The '20s by contrast was the 'setting for the most glorious victory of one man's, Eric Liddell, belief over the tawdriness of national pride . . .'. It was felt that the forthcoming Olympic year would be an especial advantage in any marketing campaign, on which point see especially Item 16, letter from Robert Parrish to David Puttnam, dated 13 December 1979. At one point, a past/present comparison was also to be explicitly made in the film itself. Hudson suggested to Welland that after the scene of Olympic victory in 1924, 'we mix with sound and vision to the end of the funeral service, 1968, in St Bride's. Lindsay and Aubrey, now old men [. . .] exit the church with the crowd and walk past tv screens now showing a dejected Russian athlete who has lost. This we see 20 times on the 20 different television screens and Andy looks across to Aubrey and makes a remark, that you suggested, that "what he needs, Aubrey old man, is a week in Broadstairs." [...] This would make a great ending to the film'. See Item 16, letter dated 24 January 1980.

<sup>84</sup> See for example 'Stanley Kaufmann On Films', *The New Republic*, 7 October 1981, pp26-7. Puttnam says: 'I was looking for a story not unlike *A Man for all Seasons*.' Official correspondence (see especially letter dated 5 November 1980 in Item 34, Post-production Correspondence) also reveals that Fred Zinneman was specifically invited to attend a screening. Other letters show that at least some members of the public also made connections between the two films.

<sup>85</sup> Of Colin Welland's endeavours, the pressbook reveals for example: 'As well as reading documents relating to the period and examining archival footage from the 1924 Olympics, through an advertisement in the Sunday Times, he contacted numerous people involved in the Games . . .'

But at the same time as the scholarliness and historical reliability of the film were being asserted, the same were actively undermined by frequent public admissions of artistic license. For example, Hudson told Quentin Falk in *Variety*: 'It's 75 per cent true; we've had to change some things to heighten the drama'.<sup>86</sup> More strikingly, the same pressbook that boasted of a thorough course of research recorded that 'suggestions made by living persons were only given as much attention as was helpful to the story, and the screenplay delivered was a long way from being an accurate depiction of history'.<sup>87</sup> Such comments are never found in or around the historical films discussed in chapter four. The historical associations activated by references to *A Man for All Seasons* are also called into question by the fact that the connection made between the two films appears often to be one of moral value. A large constituent of the letters of appreciation sent to David Puttnam viewed *Chariots of Fire* as a religious film and understood its past-present relevance in terms of faith.<sup>88</sup> Nick Roddick's observation that the film was 'the first

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Internal memoranda seem to confirm that the research which informed the film was indeed detailed and extensive. For example, material in Item 21, Wardrobe Department, shows the lengths to which Milena Camero was prepared to go to achieve an appropriate style. More generally, see Item 17, Research Material, which contains for example applications to the Radio Times Picture Library for photographs of the Games, and a memo based on a letter from Gordon Bussey, historical adviser to Philips Electrical Ltd, which notes: 'Philips didn't start making lamps until 1925 and radios even later, in 1927. The most likely make of radio would have been PYE - especially in Cambridge as they were based there.'

<sup>86</sup> See Quentin Falk, 'Cutting a Dash Against Time', *Variety*, 25 June 1980.

<sup>87</sup> Item 38, Publicity, Press Kit, 'Chariots Begins at Home'. A letter from Noel Brack to T. J. Rix (1 June 1982, in Item 34, Post-production Correspondence) is most interesting in this regard, and highlights some of the problems of biopic history as discussed in chapter five. Brack was the first husband of Abrahams' love interest in the film, and he objected to the manipulation of dates which enhanced the romance: 'For some it will be a short step for them to assume that [Abrahams' early meeting with Sybil] was why our marriage ended . . .' In reply (letter dated 18 June 1982), David Puttnam apologized and admitted 'our research was not quite as detailed as it might have been.'

<sup>88</sup> See for instance a letter of 8 March 1982 from Jerry Doric to David Puttnam: 'It was no accident that you came upon Eric's life history. It was in God's divine providence. God was showing you a better life by allowing you to make this movie. This is why God sent you the right people to help



British film [to win the Best Picture Oscar] in twentieth-century clothes' suggests another way in which it might be viewed as generically distinct from historical Oscar winners such as *The Lion in Winter*.<sup>89</sup>

However, the film's interest in questions of the individual's relationship to the nation, and its discussion of patriotism and national sacrifice, are very much in keeping with what I have argued to be the syntactic core of the historical film. Indeed Puttnam identified these as key concerns in *Chariots of Fire* when he wrote in 1982: 'Don Boyd tells me that *Chariots of Fire* is a jingoistic picture. I don't think it is. I think it's a film about the victory of the individual over the state. He honestly believes it's a film about the state's domination of the individual.'<sup>90</sup>

As in *Lady Jane*, politicians and 'the establishment' receive an unfavourable presentation. David Puttnam explains in the pressbook that *Chariots* explores "... the endeavour of the characters against the hypocrisy and intolerance, the total bigotry and double standards of the establishment at that time."<sup>91</sup> But the film seems also to be self-consciously conservative:

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you make this fine production' (contained in Item 34, Post-production Correspondence). For further examples in the same tone, see Item 32, Letters of Appreciation General 1. Puttnam himself apparently encouraged such interpretations by confessing on television that he was disillusioned before making the film, and then found God. On this 'conversion', see Alexander Walker, *National Heroes*, p174.

<sup>89</sup> See 'Breathing a little harder than usual', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 51, no. 3 (Summer 1982), pp159-163.

<sup>90</sup> *Marxism Today*, February 1982.

<sup>91</sup> Item 38, Publicity, Press Kit, 'Chariots Begins at Home'. A troubled period in the film's production history may also have encouraged such hostility. In reply to Hugh Hudson's request to shoot location footage at Trinity College, Cambridge, Dr Glauberti, Junior Bursar of the college, sent a very curt refusal. See Item 22, Cambridge Locations, letter dated 14 March 1980. David Puttnam felt very bitter about this: 'What has been most galling is the fact that Trinity and Kings College's [sic] at Cambridge are being most negative about our chances of being able to re-create

Progress that re-shapes the old can improve the quality of life but it can also distort and destroy. David Puttnam, producer of *Chariots of Fire*, believes that many of the values given to him as a child have been eroded and replaced by an unattractive expediency.<sup>92</sup>

In the pressbook, those values are said to include patriotism,<sup>93</sup> and indeed the film is replete with patriotic paraphernalia and professions of national pride. The historical background of the film is established in the Founder's Dinner scene to be the patriotic sacrifices of the Great War. As the Master of Caius College puts it, those who died were 'the flower of a generation. The glory of England.' Aboard ship, en route to Paris, Aubrey writes: 'We're here for Britain,' and Liddell's meeting with the Prince of Wales entails a discussion of precisely such patriotic attitudes. Lengthy shots of the opening ceremony of the games reiterate the same themes, and the victories of both Abrahams and Liddell are greeted respectively with a rendition of the national anthem and much enthusiastic flag-waving. These patriotic elements were readily recognized, and sometimes criticized in reviews,<sup>94</sup>

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our scenes WHERE THEY ACTUALLY HAPPENED. What is wrong, is anyone in this country really interested in having a Film Industry ...' (letter to Marcia, 14 February 1980, in Item 22, Cambridge Locations). Referring to the same obstacles in the pressbook Hudson felt: "It verifies what the film's about [. . .] It just shows their double standards. One is appalled then as today by the snobbery and bigotry of the place."

<sup>92</sup> Item 40, Publicity General, 'Sport as a Metaphor', supplied to Stanley Bielicki 18 August 1980.

<sup>93</sup> Puttnam is reported to have been attracted to the story because it 'showed two men with a fundamental respect for patriotic, British values . . .'. See Item 38, Publicity, Press Kit, 'Chariots Begins at Home'. Cinema managers were also encouraged to play the patriotism card in the battle for audiences: 'Britain is Best must be a timely tie in opportunity.' On this point, see Item 39, Publicity – Visual.

<sup>94</sup> Most reviews found the film to be stirringly patriotic. The *Surrey Mirror* review (in the issue dated 5 June 1981) described it as '[a]n exciting portrait of two heroes which made me proud of my country . . .'. *The Spectator* was predictably disapproving (see Peter Ackroyd's review, 11 April 1981, p29), and *Empire* magazine could comment by 1991 that *Chariots* had been 'consigned to the Patriotic Sporting Pabulum category by the hip and highbrow' ('Videos to Buy', June 1991, p90). In letters of congratulation also, patriotism is a prominent theme. Arthur B. Needham for example wrote: 'Yesterday, my daughter coaxed me to see *Chariots of Fire*. I wish I had known earlier that it was British-made. It reinforced my quiet pride in my English background'. See Item 12, Letter of Appreciation General 1, letter dated 24 June 1982.

but in fact they were not nearly so extreme as it seemed at one point they would be.<sup>95</sup>

The film thus seems to espouse contradictory sentiments: 'In a sense that is the dichotomy of the film. In a way it is pro-traditionalist and could be accused of being very conservative. And yet you have the two main characters fighting against various kinds of bigotry'.<sup>96</sup> In fact, the nation and the establishment are not simply celebrated but are interrogated. The striking thing is that they change in response to criticism, gradually assimilating Abrahams' foreignness, his professionalism, and his *individualism*.

The Jewish *arriviste* Abrahams accuses the established order of racism: 'This England [...] is Christian, and Anglo-Saxon, and so are her corridors of power, and those who stalk them guard them with jealousy and venom.' The Master of Caius pronounces him a traitor to core English values with his selfish pride and 'plebeian' approach,<sup>97</sup> to which Abrahams replies: 'Yours are the archaic values of the prep-

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<sup>95</sup> In Welland's original treatment for the film (David Puttnam Special Collection: *Chariots of Fire*, Item 1, dated July 1978), the American team is seen in rhetorical contrast to the charming, idealistic and patriotic British team. They are massively professional and distinctly impersonal, and are referred to as 'the US machine'. They are concerned only with winning, and are characterized by ruthlessness' and 'clinical' technical application (p3). An unused idea for the film's final shot is also suffused with near-jingoistic pride: 'Lifting from the tiny Georgian church in the heart of the city, carrying the singing with us, panning across the roofs of contemporary London, up its river, to the palace of Westminster – to home in on its giant fluttering Union Jack as the hymn rises to its crescendo' (p16).

<sup>96</sup> *Screen International*, no. 247 (25 June 1980).

<sup>97</sup> 'Pronounces' is very much the word for dialogue in the mouth of John Gielgud. As in *Gandhi* (which gave cameos to the 'entire British theatrical establishment', *Films and Filming*, no. 979 (December 1982), p26), the presence of an array of theatrical notables, including Gielgud, Mills and Howard reinforces the national dimensions of the narrative and of the issues discussed. See also Item 18, Casting Correspondence, letter from Esta Chartham casting, for the other well-established names linked to the film, including Olivier, Ralph Richardson and Michael Hordern.



school playground'. But for all such resistance and criticism, the establishment continues. The Master of Caius for example responds to Abrahams' success with vanity and hypocrisy, but above all with supreme assurance – everything turned out, he says, 'just as I expected.' Lord Lindsay, a charismatic aristocrat who represents the establishment, cedes to Abrahams in love and steps down from a race to allow Liddell his chance. But he is still there at the end, congratulating his fellows and sharing in their glory. Personal fulfilment, national recognition and 'Englishness' are thus earned through individual industry and achievement, rather than guaranteed by birth and a hierarchical order, and nationhood emerges as 'a dynamic thing, challenged by the interloper, yet remaining in essence unchanged.'<sup>98</sup>

In this connection it is notable that success is cast in highly traditional terms, which is to say that the individual who triumphs does so because he closely embodies the 'national' values outlined by the Master of Caius, including patriotism, sacrifice and respect for institutions. Abrahams upbraids his seniors: 'You deceive no-one but yourselves. I believe in the pursuit of excellence, and I'll carry the future with *me*.' But what are the values which inform his quest? 'I am a Cambridge man first and last. I am an Englishman first and last . . . What I have achieved is for my family, my university and my country.' When the Master accepts Abrahams' victory as 'just as expected', the moment can be seen as representing the absorption of the competitive individual into the collective, consensualist traditions of the

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<sup>98</sup> 'Charioteers and Ploughmen', in *British Cinema Now*, p104.

nation. In this light, Blake's *Jerusalem* (which plays at the end of the film, and from which the film's title is taken) may be viewed as expressive of the film's reconciliation of Abrahams' difference (his Jewishness) with his sameness (his Englishness), and the acceptance he wins is crystallized in a final credit which remembers him as 'the Elder Statesman of British athletics.'<sup>99</sup> Ultimately, as Sheila Johnston has argued, 'individual and state are, according to the rhetoric of *Chariots*, a false opposition'; they are inextricably linked together.<sup>100</sup>

In apparently espousing these attitudes towards the individual and the nation/establishment, *Chariots* is very much a film of its age:

*Chariots of Fire* remains overtly critical of an England built on rigid class demarcations and aristocratic hauteur, but in its stead it implicitly endorses the Thatcherite ethos of a nation based on a meritocracy of the ambitious, the diligent, and the gifted.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> The character and career of Liddell may also be interpreted in a similar light. After the meeting at which the Prince of Wales appeals to Liddell to bend his individualism and his personal commitment to God, a committee member observes that 'his speed is a mere extension of his life, its force. We sought to sever his running from himself.' The team manager replies: 'For his country's sake, yes', but he is rebuffed; 'No sake is worth that, least of all guilty national pride.' However, Liddell himself says: 'God knows I love my country', and his close-up delight in the ecstatic flag-waving that accompanies his victory is obvious. It is true, as John Hill notes, that this entails a gradual fading (or as Hill would have it, 'suppression') of Liddell's Scottishness. However, it is far from clear that he has been converted into 'a symbol of Englishness', as opposed to Britishness. See *British Cinema in the 1980s*, p24-5.

<sup>100</sup> 'Charioteers and Ploughmen', p102. The connectedness of individual and nation is made particularly clear in the programme for the Royal Film Performance, for which see David Puttnam Special Collection: *Chariots of Fire*, Item 41. The pressbook's vocabulary of individual achievement ('They were fired by their own purpose, inspired by their own dreams...' etc.) is borrowed, and relocated into an extremely patriotic context. E.M.I.'s good luck message for example is printed over an image of Buckingham Palace and the Changing of the Guard, while the one from Handmade Films appears with a Union Jack, bearing the legend: 'Congratulations on making Britain Great again'.

<sup>101</sup> Leonard Quart, 'The Religion of the Market: Thatcherite Politics and the British Film of the 1980s', in *British Cinema and Thatcherism*, pp25-6. The Thatcherite celebration of ambition, talent and competition, and the American-style vision of an England where good things are in reach, are still clearer in Colin Welland's initial treatment for the film (David Puttnam Special Collection: *Chariots of Fire*, Item 1). He writes: 'Across the Atlantic a new breed of success-seekers are literally wrestling into prominence. Raised in a society where personal ambition is the very source and impetus of existence, athletes like Charlie Paddock [...] are sweeping all before them', with an

The old and the competitive new coexist, in a new arrangement, and thus as Geoff Brown has written: 'it is perfectly suited to Thatcherite liberals' in that it 'castigates old Conservatives while revelling in patriotic claptrap...'.<sup>102</sup> The film's patriotism also struck a chord in the context of the renewed nationalism of the '80s. Nick Roddick writes that Welland's famous remark: 'The British are coming!', 'managed to anticipate the spirit of the times: a mere 48 hours after the Oscar ceremonies, General Galtieri's troops invaded the Falklands; and, whatever other effect this may have had, it certainly ushered in the biggest burst of national feeling since World War II'.<sup>103</sup> The film was re-released in Britain, and ran triumphantly throughout the Falklands war.

*Chariots of Fire* can be viewed as atypical of the British film industry in general at this time.<sup>104</sup> However, together with *Gandhi*, which I considered in chapter five, the film offers useful insights into the way historical filmmaking was developing. These films illuminate some of the currents and concerns which informed films like

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aggressive will to win. Change is happening in Britain now also: 'Virtually every accepted premise of the "British way of life" is, or is about to be, challenged,' and 'individuals are emerging determined to win through on their own right for what *they*, and they alone, believe is worthy' (p3). Athletics is also perceived as a metaphor for deregulated society; in essence it represents only 'each against each against the distance' (p2), and Abrahams is described as 'aggressively competitive' (p16). Moreover, Welland is insistent that Abrahams' family should be clearly understood to be self-made and solidly middle-class (p5).

<sup>102</sup> See *The Critics' Film Guide* ed. by Christopher Tookey (London: Boxtree, 1994), p126. The fact that a proportion of the film's funding came from "Allied Stars", a production company owned by Dodi and Mohammed Al Fayed who have been unsuccessfully courting British citizenship and acceptance since the early '80s, may also help explain the film's love/hate relationship with established authority and the 'keepers of Englishness'.

<sup>103</sup> 'The British Revival', pp76-7.

<sup>104</sup> In *The Film Yearbook* of 1983 for example, Adrian Hodges suggested that the fêted performance of *Chariots of Fire* at the Oscars masked 'an industry in disarray and apparently irreversible decline' ('The UK Year', pp79-81).



*Lady Jane* - the more critical attitude towards government and authority within a fundamentally conservative and patriotic framework, for example; and the greater emphasis on the domestic environment, the individual and the biopic theme of personal achievement. And of course they also form part of the reception context for *Lady Jane*, perhaps drawing audience attention to these aspects at the expense of other readings.<sup>105</sup> As films that have something of the historical genre about them, they can also help to confirm some of the tendencies noted in *Lady Jane*, in the absence of further examples from the 1980s.

### Case-Study 3: *Henry V*

#### a. Branagh As Auteur

Peter S. Donaldson has asserted Branagh's personality and ambition to be the crux of *Henry V*,<sup>106</sup> and at the time *Henry V* was being made, the popular press tended to agree. A great many column inches were devoted to comparisons of Branagh and Olivier, often concentrating on an assessment of the younger man's qualities and of his achievement in bringing *Henry V* back to the screen.

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<sup>105</sup> Their success as prestigious representatives of Britain on the international awards circuit may also have raised the status of, and piqued audience interest in, 'quality' productions such as *Lady Jane* and *Henry V*.

<sup>106</sup> See his article, 'Taking on Shakespeare: Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V*', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42 (Spring, 1991), pp60-1.

Branagh and his film were not without their admirers.<sup>107</sup> But by the film's release in October 1989, the general attitude of the media towards the young pretender was becoming decidedly hostile. In the *Guardian* for example, Nicolas de Jongh described Branagh as 'the most over-rated, over-celebrated British actor to have achieved leading man status in two decades', a man who was actively 'overdosing on hubris.'<sup>108</sup> Much of the bitterness behind these attacks seems to have been motivated specifically by Branagh's choice of *Henry V* for his first foray into directing, in an unmistakeable and surely intentional echo of his illustrious predecessor. Public consciousness of Olivier's 1945 *Henry V* was raised in July 1989 when it was televised by the BBC,<sup>109</sup> and as Dilys Powell reminisced in the *Sunday Times*, it has always been understood that Olivier was at the heart of it.<sup>110</sup>

The parallel with Olivier was already emerging with Branagh's high-profile marriage to Emma Thompson, which recalled Olivier's to Vivien Leigh.<sup>111</sup> Against this background, direct comparisons between the two *Henry Vs* were said to be

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<sup>107</sup> Derek Malcolm for example was especially appreciative in the *Guardian*, 10 October 1989.

<sup>108</sup> 'The Branagh Business', *Guardian*, 9 October 1989.

<sup>109</sup> The film's transmission date coincided with Bastille day, of all things. See Bernard Richards' review of Branagh's *Henry V*, *English Review*, vol. 1, no. 1 (September 1990), p7. We will examine *Henry V* in relation to jingoism in a later section.

<sup>110</sup> 'Henry V was his film, and the audience knew', *The Sunday Times*, 8 October 1989. At Olivier's memorial service the same year, the thesphy tributes and theatrical laments of the memorial service were punctuated by a recording of his St Crispin's Day Speech, as delivered in the 1945 film. The assembled luminaries longed for Olivier's presence, Nicolas de Jongh wrote. 'But in some good sense, Olivier, as a scene from *Henry V* reminded us, is still here: and will be as long as film survives'. See 'The Curtain Falls on Olivier as 2000 pay homage at Abbey', *Guardian*, 21 October 1989. In *Sunday Telegraph* (22 October 1989), Sheridan Morley even went so far as to suggest that *Henry V* was the theme of the gathering.

<sup>111</sup> Also, the London Shakespeare seasons of Branagh's Renaissance Theatre Company were 'the first developed, led and sustained by an actor working outside the confines of the RSC or NT since the days when Olivier, Richardson, and Gielgud, organised seasons for Lilian Baylis at the Old Vic or under their own management in the West End.' See Samuel Crowl, *Shakespeare Observed: Studies in Performance on Stage and Screen* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1992), p166.

inevitable.<sup>112</sup> When Olivier died later that same October, resentment towards Branagh further intensified, extending even to Alec Guinness, who referred obliquely and disparagingly to the Branagh phenomenon in his memorial address at Westminster Abbey.<sup>113</sup>

In the public discourses around the film, there was thus no doubt about who was the dominating influence behind the new *Henry V*. Branagh himself appeared to sponsor such auteurist comparisons, observing in the introduction to his published screenplay of the film that he was certain that *his* approach, influenced by the sensibilities of the 1980s, 'would make for a profoundly different experience'.<sup>114</sup> But though the two films are indeed very different, the actual text of Branagh's *Henry V* may be seen as deeply cognisant of Olivier's film, being replete with apparent acknowledgements of and references to it.

Thus the initial scenes of Branagh's film specifically recall those of Olivier's film, whilst also betokening dissimilarity and distance. In perhaps the clearest of Branagh's quotes, a film set replaces Olivier's Elizabethan theatre as the locus of

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<sup>112</sup> See for example Alexander Walker's piece for the *Evening Standard*, 25 May 1989, p32, and Iain Johnstone in *The Sunday Times*, 8 October 1989. The latter review is accompanied by a Gerald Scarfe cartoon which depicts Branagh and Olivier sharing a charger, the former looking ill, the latter (sitting at the reins) seeming proud and triumphant. Academic work on Branagh's film has also often been structured around the comparison with Olivier's. In addition to Donaldson's 'Taking on Shakespeare', other examples are Bernice Wikliman, 'Branagh's *Henry V*: Allusion and Illusion', *Shakespeare on Film Newsletter* 14, no. 1 (1989), pp9-10; and Ian Aitken 'Realism and Formalism: *Henry V*' in *Critical Survey* 3, no. 3 (1991).

<sup>113</sup> The *Independent* (21 October 1989) quoted Guinness as saying: "Sometimes we read in the press of a young actor being hailed as a second Olivier. That is nonsense of course, and unfair to the actor." The *Sunday Times* (22 October 1989) also included Guinness' warning that "quite minor or wayward acting which only catches the tone of the time, is sometimes hailed as 'great'." The author of this article adds: 'Kenneth Branagh was not in the audience to receive these tributes, but they were not lost on the congregation, who nodded sagely.'



the chorus' first speech, a change which James Loehlin further interprets as 'mirroring and parodying' Olivier's peek backstage.<sup>115</sup> The soundstage sequence gives way to the cleric scene, which Branagh films in tense claustrophobic close-ups that again serve to evoke and revise Olivier, under whose direction the same passage was played for laughs.

In respect to some of the larger issues and more central sequences of his film, and with regard to overall style, Branagh may be seen to carry the connection further, arguably basing his approach on a general reversal of Olivier's. Olivier gives us a Harry whose 'personality is complete at the start,'<sup>116</sup> and we see him toss his crown over the back of his throne with Bond-like brio.<sup>117</sup> Branagh's Henry by contrast is marked by effort rather than charisma. Where Olivier exercises power primarily through his resounding voice, Branagh is active, wrestling the traitor Scrope as a dynamic camera moves with him. Moreover, Branagh makes his entrance in silhouette through enormous doors, and we assume his point-of-view as we see his councilors react in such a way as to suggest an imperious figure. But when the King is actually revealed (in threatening shadows cast by a concealed fire), he looks

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<sup>114</sup> Kenneth Branagh, *Henry V: A Screen Adaptation* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1989), p9.

<sup>115</sup> Loehlin, *Shakespeare in Performance: Henry V* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p133. There is no such filmic self-reflexivity in the rest of Branagh's *Henry V*, and Loehlin suggests the 'Muse of Fire' speech was retained 'only because it is famous, and because the soundstage setting is a clever way of quoting but diverging from Olivier.'

<sup>116</sup> Donaldson, 'Taking on Shakespeare', p68.

<sup>117</sup> The constancy and consummateness of Oliver's Henry nourish the critical position which sees Olivier's film as the tale of a skillful performer-king. I shall return to the question of meta-theatre and the implications of Olivier's performance in due course.

pale and drawn, and is made by a too-large throne to seem callow and small, a 'solitary, pensive boy.'<sup>118</sup>

In his battle sequence too, Branagh may be seen as deliberately distancing himself from Olivier. Olivier's Agincourt has a pronounced picture-book quality, like the skirmishes in *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938).<sup>119</sup> Even before it starts, the outcome of the battle arguably stands in little doubt, the matched gazes of Katherine and Henry, supported by a romantic strain on the soundtrack, suggest early on the inevitability of their eventual union.<sup>120</sup> The contrast with Branagh's film is striking. In place of the sunniness and tournament trappings of Olivier's battle, Branagh shows us mud, ravaged earth and pools of bloody water, and a drab, slate-gray sky. Rather than banners and pageantry, Branagh leads into his battle with a scene in which a hooded Henry, shrouded in a black coat, picks his way amongst his sleeping men like death stalking the fallen. And at the first rumbling of the French cavalry charge (which is never seen), Branagh cuts from Henry to his men, who clearly manifest fear.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> *Henry V: A Screen Adaptation*, p21.

<sup>119</sup> Like *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, Olivier's battle features vibrant colours and verdant fields. Men drop from trees onto the enemy, and crowd around their charismatic leader in long-shot. There is death but little blood, and the battle ends with Henry confronting his nemesis the Constable, just as the climax of Curtiz's film is a duel between Robin and Gisborne.

<sup>120</sup> After Harfleur, Henry looks out over the landscape, and the camera moves with his gaze, arriving finally at the French Court, where Kate is receiving her English lesson. Afterwards, Katherine's gaze returns us to the land, and then back to Henry and the English.

<sup>121</sup> Branagh generally devotes more time to the commons than does Olivier. He shows us personal responses to Henry's speeches, as opposed to an unindividuated cheering throng, and we see their exhaustion as they file past the camera en route to Calais. The fighting of Agincourt is all the more affecting for the camera alighting on the occasional familiar face, and afterwards Branagh pans across a grimy knot of soldiers, showing their pain and anxiety as they await the casualty figures. The Boar's Head gang is also featured more prominently in Branagh's film.

The actual combat in Branagh's film is de-dramatized, with no music in parts, and with a low perspective which accentuates the confusion and which again seems to recall and revise the choices made by Olivier, who shows us both sides in a high-angle crane shot. Branagh's use of slow-motion occasionally comes close to aestheticizing the fighting, but it also reveals, in conjunction with extensive close-ups, the physical demands made on the participants. The victory is uncertain to the last,<sup>122</sup> and when it arrives, it is conveyed in images and sounds which may be interpreted as profoundly regretful. An elaborate panning shot reveals a panorama of waste, and Henry carries the body of a boy across it to a cart, forming a circle with the Olivier-esque cart-mounted St Crispin's day speech which began the battle day. Thus again an echo of Olivier may be seen to lead the viewer toward a new interpretation of the play.<sup>123</sup>

In these ways, by seeming to evoke whilst deliberately diverging from a celebrated piece of previous authorship, Branagh may to some extent have magnified critical

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<sup>122</sup> Arguably, however, knowledge of Branagh's real-life relationship with Emma Thompson might for some audiences have hinted at the victory-marriage at the end of the film. Olivier too planned to put his own wife in the role of Katherine, but Leigh was contracted to Hollywood at the time and was refused release. See Harry Geduld, *Filmguide to Henry V* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), p17.

<sup>123</sup> In the film at large, as in his battle scenes, Branagh makes much of the close-up. In the Salic Law exposition for example, the camera follows the Archbishop, tightly studying the confused and nervous reactions of the King's advisers, and noting their relaxation at the 'Summer sun' joke, whereupon they become implicated in the cleric's scheme. But Branagh then cuts to the King in close-up, where his scepticism and the strain of choosing whether or not to wage war are obvious. There are very few long-shots in the entire film, the main exception being the panning shot at Agincourt, and only one tableaux-style composition is included, at the end, as the action freezes on Henry's negotiations with the King of France. By contrast, Olivier typically situates his Henry authoritatively at the centre of a long-shot, running the show both in the theatre and in battle. Proponents of the performer-king interpretation of Olivier's film argue that in fact Henry's authority is questioned and weakened by these shots, because he is shown to be acting to his audiences. See for example Graham Holderness, *Shakespeare's History* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan Ltd., 1985), p189. But the context of the historical film genre, if this were chosen as the primary interpretative



and public perception of his own responsibility for this *Henry V*,<sup>124</sup> offering himself as a primary frame of interpretation. The prominence of this particular frame is important, because it impacts heavily on other possible interpretations. We will also see that the apparent status of the film as the work of an *auteur* has perhaps helped to lead critics away from assigning *Henry V* to any coherent or readily-recognizable generic category. I turn now to ask how Branagh's personal profile and the issue of authorship may have affected political readings of the film.

#### b. Thatcherism and Enterprise

In the introduction to the film's screenplay, Branagh asserts that his divergences from Olivier add up to a more sober, challenging and contemporary film. He declares that his intention had been to include all the ambiguities and tensions which Olivier had omitted.<sup>125</sup> Made for post-Falklands audiences, it was to be a

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frame, might induce an audience to associate Olivier's choices with the convention of the monarch's power being displayed through his or her dominance of the frame and spectacle.

<sup>124</sup> For those not conversant with Olivier's film, other techniques may have had the same end effect. A subtle example of this appears in Branagh's autobiography *Beginning* ((London: Chatto and Windus, 1989), serialized in the *Observer* on 17 and 24 September, and much commented upon elsewhere), where Branagh supports the passages in which he presents himself as the inspiration behind the film with a style which adroitly elides the distinction between player/film-maker and King/campaigner, presenting a vision of himself struggling, doubting, innovating and inspiring, much as Henry does in the film. See pp221-2, where Branagh gives a distinctly St-Crispin's-day-esque address to his 'troops'; and p228, where he uses language which constructs the film's units as his army. Interestingly, the same patterns of setbacks, doubts and unprecedented success is evident in C. Clayton Hutton's *The Making Of Henry V* (London, 1945), which benefited from Olivier's assistance and input. Several members of the press observed that, at 28, Branagh was now the same age as Henry at Agincourt.

<sup>125</sup> *Henry V: A Screen Adaptation*, p12.

work of revisionism, questioning and superceding the jingoism apparently favoured by Olivier.<sup>126</sup>

Branagh emphasizes the political decisions behind war and its human cost, and for Richard Corliss in *Time* magazine, it had about it 'the acrid tang of World War I carnage' and 'the guilty aftertaste' of victory in the South Atlantic.<sup>127</sup> But elsewhere in the same article, Corliss describes Branagh as 'an icon of Thatcherite initiative', who raises money 'through private and corporate channels rather than lining up for an Arts Council Dole', and who 'seems as proud of his Tory-like entrepreneurial skills as he is of his status as a working-class actor' (p46). In *GQ* magazine, Bryan Appleyard discussed Branagh's financial astuteness, impatience and protestant work ethic,<sup>128</sup> whilst in his review in the *Independent*, Adam Mars-Jones made a connection between Branagh's Thatcherite image and his choice and interpretation of *Henry V*:

Clearly, he has some sort of affinity with the part of King Henry, but it doesn't seem an actorly affinity. Branagh, too, talks like a winner, and Henry V offers him better than any other play in the repertoire what might be called a yuppie dynamic, a mythology of success and self-definition rather than of struggle.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> As he wrote in *Beginning*: 'There was to be no question about the statement the movie was making about war', p236.

<sup>127</sup> 'Branagh the Conqueror', *Time International*, 13 November 1989, p49.

<sup>128</sup> 'Renaissance Man', *GQ*, October 1989.

<sup>129</sup> *Independent*, 5 October 1989. See also 'My Brilliant Career', a review of *Beginning* in the *Sunday Times*, 1 October 1989, where Robert Cushman notices Branagh's 'youthful perseverance, talent and energy', as well as his apparent classlessness; and 'Acts of a Nervous Conqueror', in *The Times*, 16 September 1989, by William Leigh, who argues his salient characteristics to be persuasiveness, energy and determination. In the *Guardian*, Nicolas de Jongh damningly described him as 'the most accomplished theatrical entrepreneur and self-publicist of his generation' ('The Branagh Business', 9 October 1989). More recently, in a supposedly more erudite context, Mark Fortier branded the 'upwardly mobile' Branagh a traitor to his class, and regretted his 'profoundly anti-revolutionary' film as a lost opportunity. See 'Speculations on 2 *Henry IV*, Theatre

The key factor in associating *Henry V* with the values of its Thatcherite context then is clearly Branagh himself, his temperament and ambition, and the auteurist frame of interpretation examined above. But a number of other considerations are pertinent here. Firstly, Branagh and Renaissance Films espoused the reverence for popularity and popularization that was widely-held in the 1980s.<sup>130</sup> Against a background of electorate-pleasing Tory policies, and the government's cultivation of 'national-popular' sentiment during and following the Falklands war, Branagh stressed with evangelical zeal the importance of accessibility, and hoped in the film's production notes that it would be 'a huge popular success.'<sup>131</sup>

Branagh also frequently professed his faith in the free market, competition and talent.<sup>132</sup> In *Beginning*, he objects to the 'burgeoning bureaucracy' of the R.S.C. establishment and its near strangle-hold on Shakespearean theatre.<sup>133</sup> And his creation of the Renaissance Theatre Company as a streamlined, modern and independent commercial venture resonates with the Thatcher Government's policies of privatization, its dismantling of the unwieldy and inefficient Socialist

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Historiography, the Strait Gait of History, and Kenneth Branagh', *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 7.2 (Fall 1992), pp61, 60, 65.

<sup>130</sup> The appeal of the Renaissance Theatre Company was 'to be very broad'. See *Beginning*, p193. Branagh describes the company's 'creed' as 'life-enhancing populism', p197.

<sup>131</sup> 'Kenneth Branagh – Director and Henry V', Renaissance Films PLC Production Notes, p4. Rejecting the option of world-wide distribution to the art-house network, he helped to engineer more mainstream exhibition, releasing the film in the U.K. through the Odeon circuit. Journalists such as Peter Lewis approvingly and unhesitatingly described him as a 'populist', and wrote of his compulsion to 'take Shakespeare to the people'. See 'The Man Who Would Be Harry', *Sunday Times*, 10 September 1989.

<sup>132</sup> See 'Phew, Acting!', *Empire*, no. 5 (November 1989), an interview by Angie Errigo, where Branagh asserts that the cream should be allowed to rise to the top, and that achievement should be respected, referring angrily to the 'Age of the Sneer', and the "who do you think you are" syndrome' (p5).



State, and its encouragement of small businesses. Furthermore, copious information circulated about the film's budget, the process by which it was obtained, and the steps taken to recuperate it as quickly and certainly as possible. The production notes get around very promptly to the 'financiers' who were 'wooded successfully into investing in the film', and Branagh refers in the same place to film production as 'a high risk business.'<sup>134</sup> Stephen Evans, the city gent who became *Henry V*'s executive producer, also assumed an unusually high profile in the press,<sup>135</sup> and Branagh even dedicated the screenplay to him, for 'making it all possible.'<sup>136</sup>

In connection with the apparent political values of the text, we shall also see that while Branagh's scepticism and ironic approach tend to fade away,<sup>137</sup> it is possible to maintain that the attitudes expressed toward war in *Henry V* are not the same as those directed at 'the nation'. Certainly, soon after the film's release, Kenneth Baker appropriated King Henry's Agincourt speech, and deployed it to patriotic ends at the Conservative Party Conference.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> *Beginning*, p166.

<sup>134</sup> Renaissance Films PLC Production Notes, pp1-2.

<sup>135</sup> See for example 'A different message for a different age', *Yorkshire Post*, 26 September 1989, and an article entitled 'The Finances of Henry V' in the *Financial Times*, 12 September 1989, in both of which Evans is quoted as a representative of Renaissance Films. See also *The Sunday Telegraph*, 24 September 1989, where Peter Lewis explains the usefulness of Evans' city contacts. Branagh's description of him (as a 'shrewd businessman', 'something of a maverick', a stockbroker who was 'seeking a realistic collaboration between the worlds of commerce and art') can be found in *Beginning*, p197.

<sup>136</sup> *Henry V: A Screen Adaptation*, p10. Mark Fortier was further inflamed by Evans' involvement. He writes: 'The aesthetic which Evans contributes to is one in which there is "no fat", which ruthlessly seizes opportunity for economy', in which almost everything is 'sacrificed "on the altar of instant understanding."' See 'Speculations on 2*Henry IV*, Theatre Historiography, the Strait Gait of History, and Kenneth Branagh', p62, quoting from *Henry V: A Screen Adaptation*, pp10-11.

<sup>137</sup> Donaldson alleges that Branagh 'responds to the more affirmative, optimistic side of *Henry V*', and that the film 'moves from Brechtian counter-cinema to an affirmation of cinema's traditional claim to represent real people with authentic feelings'. See 'Taking on Shakespeare', p71.

<sup>138</sup> For a report on this, see Oliver Pritchett, 'Cry God for Harry, if it's all right by you', *Sunday Telegraph*, 15 October 1989.

### c. *Henry V* as a 'Shakespeare Film'/ Heritage Text

Some reviewers related *Henry V* to other screen adaptations of Shakespeare in such a manner as to suggest that they were being collectively viewed as a discrete genre in themselves. For example, Anthony Lane wrote a piece in the *Independent*, expressing approval for the Shakespearean efforts of Polanski, Jarman, Kozintsev, Olivier and Welles.<sup>139</sup> Televisual reworkings of Shakespeare do not appear in these discussions; like most popular and traditional genre-writing, the scope of Shakespearean film is usually confined to (high-profile) theatrical releases.

In more scholarly publishing also, Shakespeare films have been ascribed the coherence and longevity of a separate genre. Jack Jorgens' *Shakespeare on Film*, Roger Manvell's *Shakespeare and the Film* and Anthony Davies' *Filming Shakespeare's Plays* focus exclusively, as their titles suggest, on the category of Shakespearean cinema.<sup>140</sup> Strikingly, the Shakespearean academic Russell Jackson also contributed to this tradition with an article on 'Shakespeare Films' in *Henry V*'s official souvenir brochure.<sup>141</sup> None of these authors is short of material, as

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<sup>139</sup> 'Insubstantial Pageants', *Independent*, 30 September 1989. In *The Times*, 2 October 1989, Geoff Brown also looked at the 'mixed fortunes of Shakespeare on film', finding satisfaction in little other than Olivier's own *Henry V*. But with Branagh's film ('the most elaborate Shakespeare film for some time') poised for release, he is not entirely dismayed to find that a 'venerable British tradition, with its occasional glories and many pitfalls, looks set to continue . . .'.

<sup>140</sup> Consult Jorgens' *Shakespeare on Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977); Manvell's *Shakespeare and the Film* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1971); and Davies' *Filming Shakespeare's Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). See also Jorgen's 'The Cinematic Bard', *The Washingtonian*, 1 May 1976, pp272-7.

<sup>141</sup> *Henry V* Special Collection at the BFI, Item 13, Souvenir Booklet, October 1989. Jackson was the film's textual adviser.

Shakespeare has been translated to the screen since the very emergence of the medium, and has provided the source for more film adaptations than any other author.<sup>142</sup> Branagh's film was carefully situated within this particular context by, for example, Kenneth S. Rothwell, who argued it to be 'one of the outstanding Shakespeare movies of the century.'<sup>143</sup>

Branagh of course made his reputation in the theatre, and the film arose directly from his performance as Henry V for the R.S.C.<sup>144</sup> He frequently recurred to Shakespeare in interviews,<sup>145</sup> and underscored the centrality of Shakespeare to his project on a number of occasions, claiming that his aim was to realize the spirit of the play and to produce 'a popular Shakespeare film.'<sup>146</sup> Most critics felt that Branagh had succeeded in this, even to the extent of producing an overly-theatrical film.<sup>147</sup> The film was often characterized in relation to its source text, and Pauline McLeod for instance described it as a treatment of 'Shakespeare's classic Henry

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<sup>142</sup> Several authorities have argued that Shakespeare is in fact particularly suited to the cinema. See Ian Aitken, 'Formalism and Realism: *Henry V*', pp260-1; and Roger Manvell, *Shakespeare and the Film*, pp5-10.

<sup>143</sup> 'Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V*: The Gilt [Guilt] in the crown Re-examined', *Comparative Drama*, 24.2 (Summer 1990), p173.

<sup>144</sup> Branagh supplies a number of revealing insights into this production in *Beginning*, pp136-150. In overall approach (darkness, doubt, dramatic conflict, complexity, ambiguity) there are strong similarities with his film. But it is the congruencies of detail that are really striking, including the rain, the general intimacy, the pivotal death of Bardolph, the dramatic and emotional high-point provided by the discovery of the slaughtered baggage-boys, and the rousing 'Non Nobis', sung by Harry's troops. See Crowl, *Shakespeare Observed*, pp168-9. The film also came at the height of Branagh's success with the Renaissance Theatre Company, on which see *Beginning*, p209.

<sup>145</sup> See for example 'Branagh the Conqueror', *Time International*, 13 November 1989.

<sup>146</sup> See 'Kenneth Branagh – Director and Henry V', in Renaissance Films PLC Publicity, Production Notes, pp4-5, and *Beginning*, p203.

<sup>147</sup> Julia Briggs argued that the film 'sets new standards for the production of Shakespeare in the cinema' ('Deep down and personal', *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 October 1989). For Adam Mars-Jones, 'certainly the virtues of the film remain theatrical'; 'Inevitably, the impression is not of unified excellence, but of some sort of march-past of British theatrical talent' (*Independent*, 5 October 1989, p17).



V.’<sup>148</sup> Within the film itself however Shakespeare is not foregrounded. Words are given a mostly modern inflection, though the occasional word is stretched out to complete the ten-syllable blank verse line.<sup>149</sup> The most famous lines are also ‘buried,’ through a lack of emphasis.

The idea of Shakespearean film as a genre, with its reliance on prestigious literary texts and established theatre actors, recalls the heritage film, as discussed in chapter five. Notably, Charles Barr included Olivier’s *Henry V* in his original definition of the heritage type,<sup>150</sup> and Branagh’s association with Thatcherite values and politics suggests that *Henry V* be included in what Higson and others have claimed is a conservative, object-obsessed category.

It is certainly the case that the film accords with Higson’s broadest and most recent articulation of heritage, which takes into account a longer trajectory of heritage film-making.<sup>151</sup> But *Henry V* also manifests some of the specifics of Higson’s cycle of the 1980s and ’90s which, as a subset of the broader heritage category, has ‘a strong group style and institutional coherence.’ For example, it was independently made with a low budget; emphasis was placed on its authorship; it was ‘valued for [its] cultural significance’; and it has an intimate style. It may be counted as one of a number of contemporary ‘adaptations of culturally prestigious and canonic

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<sup>148</sup> *Daily Mirror*, 6 October 1989, p26.

<sup>149</sup> After victory at Agincourt, for example, Henry says: ‘Praisèd be God, and not our strength, for it!’.

<sup>150</sup> As we saw in chapter five, Barr argues it to be the culmination of a series of wartime heritage films. See Barr, ‘Amnesia and Schizophrenia’, in *All Our Yesterdays*, p12. See also ‘The Heritage Film and British Cinema’, in *Dissolving Views*, p236, where Higson notes that Barr’s thoughts provided the starting point for his inquiries into heritage in the 1980s.

literary and theatrical properties', and it is true that 'the acting honours tend to be carried by almost a repertory company of key players, many of them drawing on the heritage of the English theatrical tradition.'<sup>152</sup>

However, *Henry V* is not (at least overtly, in view of Branagh's populism) a 'middle-class quality product' and is not elitist. It is not a story of 'everyday bourgeois life', nor a 'countryhouse version of Englishness.' It is not nostalgic, there are no grand buildings in it, and no 'museum aesthetic'. It is not 'slow moving and episodic', being conceived and edited in the classical narrative mode, and there is no preponderance of long and medium shots. We are not faced with an unbroken spectacle of 'social deference' and upper-class ease, though the film does 'depict England as once more great.'<sup>153</sup> In any case, Branagh was assiduous in distancing himself and his film from the notion of heritage, telling one interlocutor: 'I want this to be a popular film, not an art-house film or a museum piece.'<sup>154</sup> Nor was the term 'heritage', or anything suggesting or approximating to it, ever used to characterize the film in the public discourses surrounding it.

For viewers who made the heritage connection for themselves however, and who read *Henry V* in the context of heritage cinema, the film might have seemed a daring and visually visceral example of the type. Certainly it may have seemed

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<sup>151</sup> See 'The Heritage Film and British Cinema', p237.

<sup>152</sup> All these features are enumerated by Higson in 'The Heritage Film and British Cinema', pp232-33.

<sup>153</sup> The qualities nominated in this paragraph are also seen by Higson as characteristic of the heritage film in the 1980s. See *ibid.*, pp232-3, 234, 239-41.

<sup>154</sup> The quotations are from 'Hal and High Water', *Sunday Telegraph Magazine*, 24 September 1989. See also Branagh's interview with Baz Bamigboye in *Daily Mail*, 24 September 1988, p7.

more original by comparison with heritage films than by comparison with other films of the Shakespearean genre, and perhaps Olivier's *Henry V* in particular.

#### d. *Henry V* as a Historical Film

Before moving on to the textual features and the various discourses which support the possibility of reading *Henry V* in terms of the historical genre, I want to briefly suggest that such a reading would not necessarily be incompatible with much of the material apparently promoting the film as an example of Shakespearean filmmaking. The compatibility relies on the fact that much of this Shakespearean material conceives of *Henry V* as a text which Branagh has adapted, makes little apparent distinction between novels and plays, and usually ignores its involvement in a long tradition of performance.

A number of writers have expressed concerns that, in various ways, film is 'inadequate' (that word again) for the task of representing literary texts.<sup>155</sup> In their frequent lack of sympathy for and sensitivity to the film medium, its possibilities and techniques, these arguments return us to the perspectives offered by Parenti, Connor and Jackson on historical film.<sup>156</sup> Again, the written word is felt to be 'the

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<sup>155</sup> Jonathan Miller for example finds that '[a]lthough film has an unrivaled capacity for showing events as they happen, it has none of prose's fluent dexterity for representing the present in relation to the past'. See *Subsequent Performances* (London: Faber, 1986), p233. And for Giddings et al: 'The camera can reveal external truths, it can show us the appearance, it can probe the surface, but it cannot deal with abstract concepts'. See *Screening the Novel – The Theory and Practice of Literary Dramatization* by Robert Giddings, Keith Selby, Glenn Wensley (London: Macmillan, 1990), p20.

<sup>156</sup> Voice-over, flashback and the inter-title, colour and sound, editing, symbolism and modes of filmmaking other than realist ones are variously ignored in the criticisms cited in the previous footnote. However, not all contributions to the literature/film debate are of the same mark. Morris



real thing', of which film adaptations, because of their formal limitations, can only be seen as a pale imitation.

It is true that, as Tom Ryall suggests, sometimes 'the world of imaginative convention is regarded as infinitely more malleable than the world of historical actuality, and liberties taken with artistic convention and precedent are frequently expected of the artist.' On this view, the distinguishing factor between historical and literary adaptation is 'the past itself.'<sup>157</sup> But when confronting classic/historical literature, and issues of time and temporal perspective, discourses of adaptation in fact draw still closer to those dealing with historical film.<sup>158</sup> In this connection, it is interesting that the reception surveys considered in chapters three and four yield evidence that historical films and films-of-novels may in some periods have been closely associated in some areas of public consciousness.<sup>159</sup> To return to *Henry V*, it

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Beja for example has argued: 'Of course what a film takes from a book matters; but so does what it brings to a book. When it brings dedication and talent (or, if we are truly fortunate, genius), the result can be [. . .] a work of art that relates to the book from which it derives, yet is also independent, an artistic achievement that is in some mysterious way the "same" as the book but also something other: perhaps something less but perhaps something more as well'. See his book *Film and Literature* (New York: Longman, 1976), p88.

<sup>157</sup> Tom Ryall, *Britain and the American Cinema* (London: Sage Publishers, forthcoming), chapter six.

<sup>158</sup> Giddings and his co-writers for example refer to the past as visualized in adaptations of nineteenth-century novels as 'palpable forgery' (*Screening the Novel*, p28): 'Film-makers invariably work on the assumption that they are doing Dickens a service in attempting to make their movies look as much like "Phiz" illustrations as possible. But this, in fact, can lead to some severe distortions' (p32). They suggest that as the popular sense of the past leans so heavily on television, it is dangerous to present the public with anything other than 'true' history (pp32-3), which is of course another notion very familiar from chapter one of my thesis. A warning is issued to the effect that: 'The media invite us to look back at our past through the refractions, flaws and distortions of our present' (p35), and thus a bad adaptation is equated with bad history.

<sup>159</sup> See for example Mass-Observation's Bolton Survey, Doc. 32, where both are proposed as educational categories (*Mass-Observation at the Movies*, p65), and Mayer's 'A Study in Film Preferences', Doc. 27A, p201, where the respondent groups together his comments on film adaptations (which he suggests should be respectful to their sources) and filmed history (which elicits similar sentiments).

is possible to argue, as Georgia Brown did in *Village Voice*, that the chorus speaks for history and literature at one and the same time.<sup>160</sup>

#### d.i. Historical Readings of *Henry V*

Though it is distinctly less widespread than discussion of the film's provenance and adaptedness, there is nevertheless a clear appreciation amongst reviewers of *Henry V* of the historicity of the events with which it is concerned. Some found Branagh's naturalistic approach (and particularly the motifs of mud and rain) to be truer to the historical record than Olivier's.<sup>161</sup> Bernard Levin was also moved by the film to write a piece called 'Shakespeare – the history man', in which he remarked:

I had the extraordinary good fortune to be introduced to Shakespeare and history at the same time, by one of my schoolteachers, who was devoted to both. I thus understood, early on, the importance of history, seeing that Shakespeare devoted half his *oeuvre* to the subject . . .<sup>162</sup>

In addition, a clutch of writers went beyond mere allusion to history and the historical realities and significance of Henry's French campaigns, to actually describing *Henry V* as a historical film. Thus, Wendy Riley described it in *Film Monthly* as a 'historical saga', and opined that: '[h]istory, so long seen as the starched and exclusive province of culture-hogs, is coming clean out of the

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<sup>160</sup> Review of *Henry V*, *Village Voice*, 14 November 1989, p113.

<sup>161</sup> See for example Peter Lewis, 'Hal and High Water', *Sunday Telegraph Magazine*, 24 September 1989.

<sup>162</sup> *The Times*, 18 September 1989.

closet.’<sup>163</sup> Similarly, *Empire* warned: ‘Because it is Shakespeare and HISTORICAL it is clearly not everyone’s cup of tea . . .’<sup>164</sup> The same typology occurs in several alternative discursive contexts, encompassing such materials as the schools’ pack assembled for the film by Film Education.<sup>165</sup>

To some extent, Branagh’s *Henry V* furnishes textual justifications for the historical dimensions of its critical reception. It quotes a contemporary map, for example,<sup>166</sup> and the formal, symmetrical composition of many of the shots is reminiscent of medieval paintings. Furthermore, in the references made to ‘future history’ by Henry at Agincourt and the chorus at the end of the play, Shakespeare’s dialogue also conforms to the generic convention of historical self-consciousness.<sup>167</sup> Extra-textual justifications include the granting of a royal premiere, and Branagh’s references in secondary discourses to other historical films, including *A Man For*

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<sup>163</sup> *Film Monthly*, October 1989.

<sup>164</sup> Angie Errigo, *Empire*, August 1990, p76 (the capitalization is not mine). In later criticism also, the film has been discussed as a historical picture. See for example ‘*Henry V*: Two Films’ by Anthony Lewis in *Past Imperfect* ed. by Carnes. Lewis discusses the historical accuracy of Shakespeare’s, Olivier’s and Branagh’s *Henry Vs*, supplying the background to the Hundred Years War, biographies, and salient factual details.

<sup>165</sup> Alongside tasks and projects addressing questions of adaptation and character, the Film Education schools pack incorporated a section entitled ‘The Genre of History’, which suggested that students consider: ‘When we watch the film of “Henry V”, how far does it relate to our ideas of what an historical film should be like? How has the director used our expectations of “history”?’ See the BFI’s *Henry V* Special Collection, Item 17, Photocopy of the Study Guide for the film produced by Film Education, n.d., p3. As the document was energetically promoted to teachers, it may have had a powerful agenda-setting impact on younger audiences.

<sup>166</sup> It should be noted however that the use of red dashes to trace Henry’s route makes the map moments more evocative of action films such as *Casablanca* (1942) and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) than the historical genre.

<sup>167</sup> The two passages I am thinking of are Act 4, scene 3, lines 14-67 (‘This story shall the good man teach his son/ And Crispin Crispian shall ne’er go by/ From this day to the ending of the world/ But we in it shall be rememberèd’ etc.), and Epilogue, lines 6-13.



*All Seasons*,<sup>168</sup> as well as the distinctly historical dimension to the educational material noticed above. In auteurist mode, Branagh also expounded on both the importance of historical detail to the film and the research effort which underpinned it<sup>169</sup> (though he also strove to divert the film away from “medieval film land”<sup>170</sup>), and by the end of the film, he claimed to be thoroughly tired of ‘living in the past’.<sup>171</sup>

Branagh’s use of historical genre indicators is much less extensive than in Olivier’s *Henry V*, and this may account for the greater assurance and frequency with which the earlier film was identified as ‘a pageant of history.’<sup>172</sup> It is true that in his version Branagh includes more of the historical perspectives and contextualization inherent in the play.<sup>173</sup> But the important point is that the Olivier film is more *conventionally historical* in film genre terms. For example, the frequent use of long-shots, as described earlier in this chapter, is characteristic of historical cinema, while the high angles from which the battle is photographed lend a sense of

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<sup>168</sup> See for example *Beginning*, p238. In fact, as Branagh relates here, Zinneman paid a visit to the set. Such references also appear in reviews. See Oscar Moore’s piece in *Screen International*, which associates Branagh’s film with *A Man for All Seasons* and *Mary, Queen of Scots*, October 1989.

<sup>169</sup> See ‘Phew, Acting!’, *Empire* no. 5 (November 1989), and *Beginning* pp140-1.

<sup>170</sup> See Lindsay Mackie, ‘A Big Hooray For Branagh’s Henry’, *The Scotsman*, 14 October 1989.

<sup>171</sup> *Beginning*, p232.

<sup>172</sup> The phrase comes from Roger Manvell, ‘Shakespeare as a Scriptwriter’, in *World Review*, May 1952, pp56-9. In the Souvenir Booklet for Branagh’s *Henry V*, Russell Jackson recalled Olivier’s film in similar terms; in apparent contradistinction to Branagh’s project, it was a ‘grandly historical film comparable with *Fire Over England* and *The Private Life of Henry VIII*’. See ‘Shakespeare in the Cinema’, Souvenir Booklet, BFI *Henry V* Special Collection, Item 13, October 1989.

<sup>173</sup> Branagh refers to Henry’s youth in flashback, and restores scenes discarded by Olivier, including the treachery foiled at Southampton, Fluellen’s jubilant after-battle recitation of Henry’s lineage, Henry’s memory of his father’s crimes, and the chorus’s forward-looking final speech. Harry Geduld writes that Olivier excludes much background in order ‘to simplify the story for audiences unfamiliar with English history’ (p51). But Olivier does incongruously visualize the death of Falstaff, which is only reported in Shakespeare’s play. In this death scene Olivier has Falstaff recall his rejection from Hal’s circle, which entails reference to Henry’s ‘reformation’. Olivier also retains

authenticity and objectivity. As Peter Davison notes, the Agincourt sequence is effective 'not so much because what we see is like it really was [. . .] as because we are accustomed to such scenes in historical film-dramas.'<sup>174</sup>

Above all, the historical conventionality of Olivier's *Henry V* in film terms resides in its range of references and quotations. The handbill which opens the film suggests an original historical document, advertising a performance of 'The Chronicle History of King Henry Fifth' (dated 1 May 1600); in that it seems both to provide evidence that the performance we will see is genuinely historical and to self-consciously assert the historical status of the play to be performed, this is a doubly historical element. The impression is galvanized by the visualization of Elizabethan London that follows, which is based on the well-known Visscher engraving.<sup>175</sup> The same model of London as used here reappears at the end of the film, and so it brackets the action in the same way as does the Globe. In the recreated Globe itself the presence of an orange seller is an arresting historical detail, like the straw-strewn floors of *Henry VIII and his Six Wives*, which directs attention to the meticulousness of the *mise-en-scène* in general.<sup>176</sup> A number of other quotations are arguably more subtle.<sup>177</sup> But at the time of the film's release, Olivier

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the French King's nerry references before Harfleur to Edward the Black Prince and Henry's 'victorious stock.'

<sup>174</sup> Peter Davison, *'Hamlet': Text and Performance* (London: Macmillan, 1983), p49.

<sup>175</sup> That the recreation is of London is made clear by the tendency of the camera to dwell momentarily on the most recognizable elements of the landscape. Thus, the image which succeeds the handbill on the screen is one of the Tower.

<sup>176</sup> Another self-conscious assertion of history occurs when a board is produced on the stage of the Globe, reminding the audience in the cinema as well as the one on the screen that they are about to witness the chronicle history 'of HENRY THE FIFT with his battel fought at Agin Court in France'.

<sup>177</sup> Geduld suggests that when the camera leaves the Globe and moves to Southampton, a close-up of the King in a white hat 'reproduces a traditional portrait of Henry V' (*Filmguide to Henry V*, p32), while Olivier himself has pointed out that the poised, graceful style of the French court scenes

did much to draw attention to the research invested in the film, and occasionally did so again in later years.<sup>178</sup>

In these various ways, Olivier can be seen as putting medieval religion, Agincourt, Shakespeare, the stage and Elizabethan history at the service of the wartime nation, minimizing ironies and historical differences which might problematize the relation of present to past, and establishing England as a repository of virtue and culture. Thus James Chapman seems justified in viewing the film as a patriotic, historical narrative that is also a heritage film.<sup>179</sup> The continuities involved are emphasized in the film itself by dissolves, hidden cuts, and tracking through gauze backdrops, the effect being to suggest the seamlessness of theatre and cinema, and of Agincourt, Elizabethan England and the present. In Branagh's version *discontinuities*, between art and life, film and theatre, history and reputation, are underscored by the modern dress chorus, though the chorus does become gradually less critical and distancing, ending the film merely as one of Henry's men.

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was borrowed from *Les Tres Riches Heures du Duc de Berri*. See *Confessions of an Actor*, p131. The characters involved begin these passages motionlessly and then ease into life, though they are still filmed with little camera movement, the effect being of an animated Medieval manuscript. Again, additional historical capital is derived from the reference when we see a character introduced to us as the Duke de Berri reading at a lectern in the French court, the witty implication being that he is reading the very book of hours which bears his name and which has inspired the design of his current surroundings. The strange, distorted perspectives at Harfleur, wherein the city walls seem tiny in relation to those who stand on them, also seems to 'quote' pre-Renaissance practices in art.

<sup>178</sup> See for example Olivier's 'The Filming of *Henry V*', in the souvenir programme *Laurence Olivier's Henry V by William Shakespeare*, 1946; and 'The Making of *Henry V*', Olivier's introduction to the film's published screenplay, 'Screenplay for *Henry V*' by Laurence Olivier and Reginald Beck, in *Film Scripts One* ed. by G. P. Garrett, O. B. Hardison and Jane Gelfman (New York, 1971).

<sup>179</sup> James Chapman, *The British at War*, p247. As Dudley Andrew saw it, Olivier had 'joined [...] the fragile momentary innerlife of every viewer to the continuity of cultural life in history.' See *Film in the Aura of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p151.



A second possible reason why contemporary reviewers were comparatively more ready to describe Olivier's film as historical than Branagh's is the generally greater awareness of history during World War Two. As noted above, the 1940s witnessed particular emphasis on national heroes and national culture, as evinced by such films as *The Prime Minister* and *The Young Mr Pitt*. From this point of view, the incorporative orientation of Olivier's film may be seen as characteristic of the period in general. As we have seen, the 1980s was a decade which, though far from devoid of historical awareness, was rather more ambivalent and diverse in the ways in which this was expressed.

I now consider both *Henry V* films in relation to some further characteristics of historical film. These will take us away from textual features and formal strategies, and towards perspectives and values; that is, from the semantic to the syntactic.

#### d. ii. Jingoism, Patriotism and the Nation

The nation and nationality have been widely taken to be motifs fundamental to Shakespeare play, and have especially preoccupied critics during the present century. For some writers, the progressive decay of the first tetralogy is reversed in *Henry V*, where Shakespeare celebrates 'England's recovered majesty.'<sup>180</sup> However, there is also a large body of comment which delineates paradoxes,

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<sup>180</sup> See M. M. Reese, *The Cease of Majesty: A Study of Shakespeare's History Plays* (London: Edward Arnold, 1961), pp317-32, p317. The roistering Prince Hal 'becomes a model king and military leader' (Niky Rathbone, 'Henry V', in *Shakespeare in Performance* ed. by Keith Parsons

ambivalences and subversive subtexts in the play, and which argues that these undermine the patriotism apparent on the surface. In the resultant debate, the perspectives focussing on tension and ambivalence, and those which characterize the play as (excessively) patriotic, have at times been represented as mutually exclusive, as in Norman Rabkin's famous duck/rabbit essay.<sup>181</sup> But Stephen Greenblatt contends that the play's complexities allow it to be both patriotic and interrogative at the same time.<sup>182</sup> How were these features of their source text treated by our two film-makers and received by their critics and audiences?

The context of national emergency was vital to the pre-production and promotion of Olivier's film, and it has been almost as prominent in discussion of the film since 1945 as it was on the film's release.<sup>183</sup> Recalling his initial inspiration in distinctly patriotic terms, Olivier wrote: 'I had a mission; [...] my country was at war . . .'.<sup>184</sup> The use of rare colour stock identified the project with others such as *Western Approaches* (1944), as an officially-endorsed film of especial relevance to the war effort, and the text is studded with images that appear likely to have had national and patriotic resonance for wartime audiences. For example, the slaughter of the luggage boys is redolent of Nazi atrocities, while in its Technicolor, pristine

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and Pamela Mason (London: Salamander Books, 1995), p83), and the state is shown to be just and unified.

<sup>181</sup> 'Rabbits, Ducks, and *Henry V*', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 28 (1977), 279-296.

<sup>182</sup> See 'Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and its Subversion, *Henry IV* and *Henry V*', in *Political Shakespeare* ed. by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), p43.

<sup>183</sup> Criticism of Branagh's film frequently related Olivier's to the Second World War. Alexander Walker for example wrote that it 'remains sealed inviolably in the wartime euphoria of the D-Day invasion that parallels Henry V's invasion of France . . .'. See *Evening Standard*, 25 May 1989, p32.

<sup>184</sup> *On Acting* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), p275. Indeed the film was commissioned by the Ministry of Information early in 1942, at a particularly dire juncture. See Hutton's *The Making of Henry V* for details of the film's origins and a wealth of other information.

splendour, the model of London discussed above might have been affecting for viewers accustomed to grey-black images of the Blitz.<sup>185</sup> The film was also dedicated to the Commandos and Airborne Troops of the present day, described in the past-present style of the historical film as the 'descendants' of Henry's army. Many of Olivier's deletions and changes tend to support the continuity of achievement implied in this dedication (this being particularly true of the omitted final choral speech), and construct England as an unblemished ideal. Above all, the excisions relate to the suggestion of disunity among the British, with both the conspiracy of the nobles and references to the Scottish threat disappearing completely.<sup>186</sup>

Taking all these features into account, it is not hard to find sympathy with *Kine Weekly's* assessment that Olivier's *Henry V* is 'burning patriotism' of the most rousing kind.<sup>187</sup> There is no real enemy in the film, and this rather complicates the attempt to read it in straightforwardly propagandistic terms.<sup>188</sup> But if the propaganda is unconventional, it is not without power. Loehlin found it persuasive

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<sup>185</sup> In the context of these past-present connections, it is interesting that Carol Reed, whose *Young Mr Pitt* exemplifies the phenomenon well, was an early target for the directorship of *Henry V*. See Geduld's *Filmguide to Henry V*, p15.

<sup>186</sup> In connection to the Scottish question, see James E. Philips, 'Adapted from a Play by W. Shakespeare', *Hollywood Quarterly*, no. 2 (October 1946), pp82-7, who suggests that Henry's attitude toward Scotland might have struck audiences as harsh, associating the monarchy with the very totalitarian rhetoric against which Britain was fighting. Henry V's profile, Philips argues, has been modernized, and adapted so as to be likeable in a recognizably contemporary way.

<sup>187</sup> *Kine Weekly*, 30 November 1944, p28. Certainly, Shakespeare's *Henry V* was regularly performed as propaganda on the radio, in concerts and in troop entertainments at this time (see *Filmguide to Henry V*, p14), and may be seen as part of the national programme which sought to explain 'why we fight'.

<sup>188</sup> As Durgnant noted: 'the English are the English but Agincourt is D-Day where the French are Germans until Henry courts Katherine, whereupon the French are probably the French'. See *Films and Feelings*, p262. By the end of the film, 'whether France here is France our ally, to whom



by being 'patriotic without being war-mongering',<sup>189</sup> and on the whole, critics both then and since have concurred. James Agee's famously poetic piece on nationality, national pride and conservatism in *Henry V* captures the feeling of contemporary reviews,<sup>190</sup> and more recently, Gordon Beauchamp for example has identified similar themes, but was rather less impressed by them.<sup>191</sup>

This consensus, when coupled with the patriotic overtones of the film's text, its original publicity and Olivier's later comments, seems likely to have had a considerable impact on both Olivier's original audiences and those in 1989 who responded to Olivier's presence in discourses surrounding Branagh's new film. In fact reviews of the latter film often contained an explicit reminder and reinforcement of the received wisdom on Olivier's film, the *Monthly Film Bulletin* for example alluding to it as a 'patriotic pageant'.<sup>192</sup>

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Churchill had [...] proposed "marriage", or Germany our enemy whom we mustn't hate forever is quite ambiguous', *A Mirror for England*, p109.

<sup>189</sup> Loehlin, *Henry V*, p48.

<sup>190</sup> Agee's review is reproduced in *Focus on Shakespearean Films* ed. by Charles W. Eckert (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, 1972).

<sup>191</sup> See 'Henry V: Myth, Movie, Play', *College Literature* 5 (1978), p228; he describes the film as a 'pasty patriotic ragout.'

<sup>192</sup> Geoff Brown, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, October 1989. Similarly, Baz Bamigboye wrote of 'Lord Olivier's patriotic version' in the *Daily Mail* ('Once More unto the breach', 18 November 1989), whilst in *What's On In London* (4 October 1989), Mansel Stimpson commented on the 'patriotism inherent in Olivier's wartime adaptation'. It is important to note a recently-emerged current of opinion that places the patriotism in Olivier's film secondary to other issues and affects. Thus, in *Screening Shakespeare from 'Richard II' to 'Henry V'* (Delaware, 1991), Ace G. Pilkington maintains that the speeches of Henry and the chorus have 'more to do with theatrical than patriotic victories' (p129), and that in general the film is principally concerned with questions of art (pp112-4), whilst Graham Holderness argues that the self-consciousness and subversive artifice in the film produce 'an ideological tendency which is quite different from – potentially contrary to – its ideology of patriotism, national unity, and just war' (*Shakespeare's History*, p186). However, aside from the reception evidence I have cited, it seems unlikely that many in the film's original audiences would have agreed, given the circumstances in which they watched it and the nature of the publicity that brought it to their attention. For later audiences too, we can look behind our reception evidence and speculate that Olivier's continued references in various media to the war context and his patriotic purposes have shaped both popular and critical expectations so as to draw attention to such elements of the film as its dedication and Henry's patriotic speeches.

There is also both textual and extra-textual material in Branagh's film which might have affirmed the appropriateness or validity of a patriotic frame of reference. For example, the St George Cross appears at key moments, setting these moments in a national or patriotic context. It is visible on the edge of the composition at the hanging of Bardolph, when Henry's tears are revealed, and soon after, his impressive speech in defiance of Mountjoy is delivered with a battery of flags as a backdrop.<sup>193</sup> But precisely what position does the film adopt with regard to the nation? What state-of-England messages might audiences have read into it? In short, can we detect any significant points of contact with the mythic-ritual function of the historical film genre that I have proposed?

Some critics alluded to the nation's modern-day position *vis-à-vis* France and the continent. Alexander Walker for example picked out the theme of 'reconciliation with Europe', 'a theme as topical in today's Community politics as it was in the wartime coalition against the axis.'<sup>194</sup> More frequently, references were made to the theme of war in foreign fields.<sup>195</sup> But this was no *Ships With Wings* (1941) or *Battle*

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<sup>193</sup> The chorus also comes across a St. George Cross among the flats and cameras, during the backstage sequence which begins the film. Olivier too uses flags to denote moments of especial significance. For example, they are evident when the English discuss how daunting are the odds against them, and during the battle they are seen in close-up against the sky. At the instant of victory, when Mountjoy surrenders, an English flag also flies over Henry's head, and the scene closes with the same flag in close-up.

<sup>194</sup> *Evening Standard*, 25 May 1989, p32.

<sup>195</sup> In fact, a few writers chose to characterize the film as a stirring 'war movie' (for example, see *Village Voice*, 14 November 1989, p113). Branagh himself described it to an audience of disabled sailors, soldiers and airmen as an 'account of a war time campaign', and hoped that they would find it inspiring. See the BFI *Henry V* Special Collection, Item 12, Souvenir Brochure for the Charity Screening for the Royal Star and Garter Home, 25 October 1989. However, he later lamented the readiness of the film industry to pigeon-hole it as just another film with fighting in it. See Tom Hibbert, 'What Makes Kenny Run?', *Empire*, no. 29 (November 1991).

*of Britain* (1969), and the attitude it exhibits toward war may be seen as part of Branagh's determination to challenge and distance himself from Olivier. In the film's production notes he related: "the more I thought about it, the more convinced I became that here was a play to be reclaimed from jingoism and its World War Two associations."<sup>196</sup> And one way of achieving this would be to ensure that the general realism of the film did not stop short at depicting the true horror of the battlefield.<sup>197</sup> Unlike Olivier's *Henry V* then (and *Fire Over England* and *The Young Mr Pitt* etc.), Branagh's version was seemingly not designed to put the past to work for the sake of any over-arching national project.

The majority of commentators subscribed to this view, casting the film as a work of pacific sensibility. Philip French for example argued:

Olivier's magnificent film, glowing with patriotic pride, was made to stir a nation at war, connecting us to a heroic past [. . .] Branagh's pictorially low-key picture is made for a generation that has the Indo-China war and the Falklands campaign just behind it and is very wary of calls to arms.<sup>198</sup>

Encouraged by these promptings and the publicity achieved by Branagh and the Renaissance Film Company, some viewers may have associated the film with the

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<sup>196</sup> Renaissance Films PLC Production Notes, p2. Similarly, in his screenplay he recognizes the morale-boosting value of the 1945 film, but voices reservations about 'its seeming nationalistic and militaristic emphasis' and its relevance for a 'late twentieth-century audience'. See *Henry V: A Screen Adaptation*, p9.

<sup>197</sup> In *Beginning*, pp220, 229, Branagh suggests that his Harfleur set was designed to call to mind images of World War One.

<sup>198</sup> *Observer*, 8 October 1989, p42. Similarly, the *Film Yearbook* recommended it as 'a Peckinpahish mud and blood update of the Battle of Agincourt for the post-Falklands era'. See 'The Films', *Film Yearbook*, vol. 9, p83. Anthony Quinn's suggestion in *Empire* (October 1989) that the play could never be 'reclaimed from jingoism' as 'national fervour is its dominant note' was atypical indeed.



flurry of low-budget, bitter and committedly liberal cinema which appeared in the later '80s, and which included Derek Jarman's *War Requiem* (1988); Richard Eyre's *Tumbledown* (1988); Martin Stellman's *For Queen and Country* (1988); and Paul Greengrass's *Resurrected* (1989).<sup>199</sup> Certainly, as John Hill has commented, 'there was no film made celebrating the Falklands/Malvinas war, though Thatcher herself apparently hoped for one.'<sup>200</sup>

But the anti-war tendencies in Branagh's *Henry V* should not be allowed to obscure its residual glamour. Branagh's images may be uncompromising on the question of the suffering and loss engendered by war, but words and sounds seem to suggest or betray a rather different set of values. Henry's St Crispin's Day rhetoric is realized with full-bodied passion,<sup>201</sup> and the soaring orchestral strains of Patrick Doyle's *Non Nobis*, though they can be viewed as ironic amid so much death, might very easily be interpreted as an indicator of triumph and divine sanction, like William Walton's score for Olivier.<sup>202</sup> The same music leads us neatly into the wooing scene which is distinguished by its charm and the theme of redemption, and though the final lines of the play can be enacted with biting irony, Derek Jacobi seems to

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<sup>199</sup> Most of these films have some affiliation with the biography: *Tumbledown* for example is based on the autobiography of Falklands veteran Robert Lawrence, while *Resurrected* re-creates an actual incident in which a soldier was lynched.

<sup>200</sup> See *British Cinema in the 1980s*, p19.

<sup>201</sup> Margaret Walters noted in *The Listener* (19 October 1989) that '[a]lthough his Henry is a calculating politician, Branagh is anxious to retain his stage glamour and allow full-blooded, charismatic readings of the big speeches'.

<sup>202</sup> That Patrick Doyle was aiming at the latter effect is suggested in the Souvenir Brochure for the film, where he comments that the score was intended to be rousing. See 'Music to Arouse People's Emotions', *Henry V* Special Collection, Item 13, Souvenir Brochure, October 1989.

lend them a sincere and regretful quality, so that the viewer may reflect nostalgically on a great achievement lost.<sup>203</sup>

Moreover, neither Englishness nor the English nation are necessarily sullied by England's involvement in the war. By the typical historical device of loaded comparison with the foe/foreigner, the English emerge with considerable credit. At the outset, for example, the dramatic lighting and the excitement of Henry's court are in stark contrast to the lethargic, frustrated discussions of the French, and the energy and volatility that Branagh invests in Henry make Scofield's creaking, measured Charles VI a far less attractive proposition. Later on, Henry's 'ceremony' soliloquy implicitly rebukes the aristocratic excesses of the enemy, and Branagh does nothing to redress the imbalances of Shakespeare's text, which ignores the French commoners altogether. However the director does enhance the part of the English rank and file; by the advent of the battle, they have been established as familiar, independent characters, and their recognizability in the *melée* increases both the overall pathos and our particular sympathy for the English cause. These national contrasts are not so bold as in the Olivier film,<sup>204</sup> but nevertheless they

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<sup>203</sup> Shakespeare's compression of events after Agincourt suggests that the battle guaranteed peace and the extension of Henry's authority over the French, an effect which Branagh does nothing to subvert.

<sup>204</sup> The distinctions drawn by Olivier between the French and the English are clearest in the montage sequence which precedes the battle. The Dauphin is decadently lowered onto his horse with a pulley, whereas the English are vigorous and organized in their work. Henry bristles with determination, whereas the French drink toasts in the jovial atmosphere of a hunting party or a tournament. More generally, Olivier dresses the French in weak colours, like turquoise and watery green, and sets them in fragile, artificial backgrounds. They are often static within these backgrounds, and so are signified as men of inaction (an inadequacy which is particularly apparent when Exeter visits them, his superior energy and presence underlined by the way in which the camera moves with him). The English wear contrasting reds and bruised blues and purples. Their armour is seemingly real, and they move dynamically, as when a shot of the cowardly, fainting King Charles cuts immediately to surging English soldiers on the beach at Harfleur. The French are

were bold enough to fuel a rumour that the film had been denied screen space at Cannes because the wounds in French pride had been reopened.<sup>205</sup>

It is thus possible to sustain an argument to the effect that Branagh's *Henry V* is favourably and even enthusiastically disposed to the nation, at the same time as it is profoundly sceptical about ideas of conquest and imperialism. Indeed, Branagh wrote in one of the film's souvenir programmes that though he aspired to explore some of the ambiguities of the play, this would have to proceed '[w]ithout reducing the love of country, which the piece undoubtedly contains...'<sup>206</sup> In this light, jingoism and nationalism may be seen as concepts which are understood by Branagh (in his public utterances) primarily in terms of their warlike consequences, and which might therefore be differentiated from such 'softer' sentiments as patriotism. The important thing for my purposes is that reviewers and other contemporary commentators were inclined to make a similar distinction.

For example, though it agreed with Philip French, *Time Magazine*, *The Film Yearbook* and others in aligning the film with the post-Falklands resurgence in pacifist opinion, the *English Review* detected distinct elements of patriotic feeling. Its reviewer wrote: 'So finally, what is Branagh trying to say to us, with Shakespeare's help? Perhaps that aggressive patriotism is not dead yet', and that if

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almost all foppish and effete, and the Dauphin is spoilt and childlike; only the Constable appears threatening, and indeed he goes on to face Henry in single combat.

<sup>205</sup> Alexander Walker, for example, reports on this in *The Evening Standard*, 25 May 1989, p32.

<sup>206</sup> *Henry V* Special Collection, Item 14, Souvenir Brochure for the First Royal Premiere in Tokyo, 1990.



some aspects are deplorable, others are good and 'noble'.<sup>207</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, critics of a left-wing/liberal persuasion refused to recognize any distinction between patriotism and chauvinism.<sup>208</sup> Even though these writers do not accept the attractions and the claims of Englishness and national pride, they do at least register (albeit negatively) the importance to the film of the notion of nation.

#### d. iii. Royalty, Leadership, Duty and Sacrifice

In place of the formality, ceremony and spectacle which often help to articulate the national values and perspectives of historical film (by showing us the loneliness of the monarch, his/her devotion to duty, and the proper attitude to be taken by others towards the monarch as figurehead), Branagh favours a more intimate and prosaic style. As noted, he relies heavily on close-ups and deft, telling reaction shots, and he develops his scenes in low-lit, close-packed interiors. One important impact of this is to intensify the discursive focus on leadership and the King.

Leadership and the issue of the ideal king are key motifs in the play; and it is arguable that Shakespeare's war is more an examination of kingship than a subject

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<sup>207</sup> Bernard Richards, 'Olivier's and Branagh's *Henry V*', p7. It is notable, in connection with my earlier comments on the possible patriotic relevance of the Olivier frame, that Richards begins by pointing out that Olivier's film 'was a contribution to the war effort, not so much emphasizing the glamour of militarism but reinforcing the myth (if that is what it was) of national identity . . .' (p5). Similarly, though David Robinson felt that Branagh had 'remade Henry as a hero for our times – humane, generous, just, pacific', he had nevertheless 'left a lot of the play's shameless national self-congratulation untouched'. For Robinson's review, see *The Times*, 5 October 1989.

<sup>208</sup> Adam Mars-Jones for example ventured that 'it's astonishing that Shakespeare's Henry V should become, except at a time of national emergency, a resonant figure of any sort'. See *Independent*, 5 October 1989. Graham Fuller was dismayed to discover 'a darkly ambiguous conflation of intoxicated jingoism and mournful disgust at the foulness of war'. See his essay 'Two Kings', *Film Comment*, vol. 25, no. 6 (1989), p2.

in its own right.<sup>209</sup> In discussing the play, Branagh appeared to subscribe to this view, writing that it ‘seemed less like a historical pageant and more like a highly complicated and ambiguous discourse on the nature of leadership.’<sup>210</sup> His interest in this issue, and in particular in the personal dimensions of leadership, can be illustrated through a comparison of his directorial choices with those of Olivier. Olivier begins the King’s orations in close-up and then pulls back in a reverse zoom. This allows his gestures to become more imposing and his voice grander and more expressive, while at the same time allowing us to see other men in (subservient) relation to the King. In other words, the technique conveys the King’s power.<sup>211</sup> By contrast, rejecting the long-shot, Branagh begins to film the King’s speeches in mid-shot and then pans in, searchingly. Thus at Harfleur and Agincourt for example, we can see the King’s sternness and concern, his pain and intensity all etched massively on his face.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> It is one of the conclusions of the 1587 account of Henry’s reign by Raphael Holinshed, upon whose *Chronicles* Shakespeare’s play is largely based, that Henry was ‘a paterne in princehood, a lode-starre in honour, and mirrour of magnificence’. See *Holinshed’s Chronicle: As Used in Shakespeare’s Plays* ed. by Allardyce and Josephine Nicoll (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1959), p89. Indeed, Renaissance History in general may be conceived as a ‘mirror for magistrates’, instilling the lessons of remarkable success and famous failures, and imploring the observance of good order and of duty to the monarch. See Reese, *The Cease of Majesty*, p12. See also p13, where Reese notes that Tito Livio’s *Life of Henry V* was translated and dedicated to Henry VIII in 1513 when he was at war with France, in the hope that ‘the knowledge and sight of the pamphlet’ would inspire Henry to emulate his predecessor.

<sup>210</sup> *Beginning*, p139. See also his *Henry V: A Screen Adaptation*, p10, where the play is described as a ‘detailed analysis of leadership.’

<sup>211</sup> However, Olivier’s own motivations for employing this technique seem to have had more to do with acting and the questions raised by adaptation than with ‘the nature of leadership.’ Its purpose, he explained to Roger Manvell with reference to *Richard III*, was to allow himself room for a properly Shakespearean delivery: ‘The film climax is a close-up; the Shakespearean climax is a fine gesture and a loud voice’. See *Shakespeare and the Film*, p37.

<sup>212</sup> In fact, Branagh’s compass is drawn closely around the King from the very start, which is consonant with his peculiarly close identification with the role as both director and star. The King’s entrance immediately raises ongoing questions as to his authority and status, and he is the centre point of the ensuing scene, as Branagh repeatedly cuts back to him watching and listening to his courtiers. At other crucial points, his personal responses are again prominently displayed, as where the climactic tracking shot follows his progress across the battlefield, and ultimately comes to rest on him.

That the film is fundamentally concerned with kingship is also strongly intimated by the screenplay, the first draft of which begins with a voice-overed transposition from *Richard II*, addressing the onerousness and the human frailty of the monarch.<sup>213</sup> In the actual shooting script, it is notable that the hanging of Bardolph is described from the King's point of view as 'a public trial of strength', in which '[t]he cost to the King is enormous,'<sup>214</sup> and in the corresponding scene in the film, Branagh selects long reaction shots of Henry and includes few images of Bardolph. Thus the King is very much presented as the victim of the incident.<sup>215</sup> In Kenneth Rothwell's words, the hanging scene 'enlarges a few lines into a mini-essay on the duties and responsibilities of the prince'.<sup>216</sup> But for all the film's tightly circumscribed convergence on Henry, it was never represented or interpreted in the media as a biopic, despite being released alongside *My Left Foot*.<sup>217</sup>

Germane to questions of leadership and personality, and the other issues to be considered in this section, is the fact that the play itself seems to explore the issue

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<sup>213</sup> *Henry V* Special Collection, Item 1, Script – First Draft, January 1988. The transposed passage is *Richard II*, Act 3, Scene 2, lines 151-161. Newspaper reviews and interviews often took up this concern with royalty and highlighted it in headlines which made metaphorical allusion to Branagh's theatrical pre-eminence and ambition, such as 'King Ken's crown slips' (*Daily Mail*, 4 October 1989); 'A new king gets his act together' (*South London Press*, 15 September 1989); and 'The man who would be king' (*Irish Times*, 30 September 1989).

<sup>214</sup> *Henry V: A Screen Adaptation*, p71.

<sup>215</sup> But in any case, as James Loehlin notices, in the irony of a rainstorm breaking at the precise moment the army is commended into God's hands, 'Branagh ends the scene with a touch of humour that gets the viewer thoroughly back on Henry's side'. See *Henry V*, p138.

<sup>216</sup> 'Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V*', p173.

<sup>217</sup> They are reviewed together in *Village Voice*, 14 November 1989, p113, for example.



of the King's Two Bodies,<sup>218</sup> and is therefore supportive of the mythic function identified in historical film by Jeffrey Richards. Branagh's interest in the man under the crown is apparent in his initial visualization of the King as a pale and gaunt young man. The price of power is also manifested in the King's tearful response to the hanging of Bardolph, and the film's brooding flashbacks, as Branagh himself relates, 'help to illustrate the young King's intense isolation.'<sup>219</sup> However, this has to be seen as only one constituent of Henry's total image and meaning, because Branagh also devotes much attention to the divine/ideal facets of the King's persona and to the nature of his office. On this side of the equation is Henry as a righteous leader and hero-warrior, and it is here that the themes of duty and sacrifice begin to figure.

Peter Davison maintains that 'by far the most important consideration' in Henry's invasion 'was his duty, as medieval and renaissance rulers and theoreticians would understand it, of claiming and holding that which was properly his kingdom by dynastic right.'<sup>220</sup> Henry's preoccupation with kingly duty and responsibility is also signified in the night before Agincourt scene, which Niky Rathbone views as 'central to the play', and in his troubled sleeplessness.<sup>221</sup> However, Henry's unswerving dutifulness is made clearest in the film through his refusal to reprieve

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<sup>218</sup> The issue is prominently addressed in the Ceremony speech in particular. For a discussion of the questions involved, see Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).

<sup>219</sup> *Henry V: A Screen Adaptation*, p12.

<sup>220</sup> Davison, *Henry V*, p19.

<sup>221</sup> Niky Rathbone, 'Henry V', in *Shakespeare in Performance*, p86. Henry's failure to find respite or repose is consistent with sixteenth-century expectations of the ideal, dutiful ruler, whose concern for his subjects and states should be tireless. On this point, see Davison, *Henry V*, pp63-5.

the condemned Bardolph.<sup>222</sup> The admonishing presence of the George Cross at Bardolph's execution and the fact that during the exhausted final negotiations Henry deals with the French King as 'England' (and indeed is referred to in those terms) altogether may be read as confirming that his sacrifices have been patriotic ones.

Elsewhere, we are furnished with evidence of the King's piety and solicitous regard for his army. For example, when he inquires of his spiritual counsellors whether he can make war in good conscience, he does so earnestly, and Branagh cuts immediately to the French King, whom we see has just dismissed his prelates. The pressure of determining the fate of so many is revealed in the image of the wakeful Henry watching over their sleeping forms, and in the extent of his relief after the English triumph. He embraces Fluellen, and we become party to 'his attempt to balance the isolation of his role with the possibility of closeness to others.'<sup>223</sup>

In his leadership, Henry is passionate as well as benevolent. His St Crispin's Day address bristles with avid determination, and in his anger he personally enforces the cashiering of the Southampton quislings. From an unprepossessing depiction at the beginning of the film, he becomes increasingly forceful and confident through the course of such scenes, and by the time of the battle, Mountjoy is visibly impressed with his bearing and stature.

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<sup>222</sup> Further duties of the ideal king, as Davison describes them, are to show no clemency to those who (like Bardolph and the traitors) would injure the state, and to 'execute or banish parasites' (such as Falstaff). See *Henry V*, p16.

<sup>223</sup> Donaldson, 'Taking on Shakespeare', p66.

Overall, it seems to me there is ample evidence to challenge the view that 'Branagh avoids (at least until the ambiguous choral hymn after Agincourt) appeal to "higher" virtues like patriotism or honour'.<sup>224</sup> His Henry is eminently recognizable in terms of the historical genre, as a committed, England-loving, self-sacrificing leader/monarch.<sup>225</sup> As is again often the case in historical film, Henry is also designated and sanctioned as the hero by nature. In the stunned aftermath of the battle, we find Henry with the sounds of birdsong and the breeze around him, and it is notable that he has been mainly outdoors since his first appearance. He thus seems more vigorous and natural than the closeted King Charles.

These features, or more precisely the readings of them I am proposing, are very much in keeping with a prominent view of Shakespeare's *Henry V* in the 1980s, which Roy Hattersley summarized in *The Guardian*:

*Henry V* is not about reality. It is about royalty. Shakespeare, as well as being an incomparable genius, was a terrible creep. *Henry V* was written to portray the essence of kingship and to popularize the idea that kings were noble, brave and breathlessly romantic in a Mills and Boon sort of way.<sup>226</sup>

Branagh supplies the romance at the end of the film, when Henry is transformed from war-weary soldier to pristine and sincere suitor, in a way that seems likely to

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<sup>224</sup> Ibid., p64.

<sup>225</sup> Like other historical impersonations by Charles Laughton, Robert Donat, and Vanessa Redgrave, Branagh's Henry is extremely likable, a performance which is energetic, reflective and charming. His modern haircut, in contrast to Olivier's pudding-bowl style, seems also calculated to increase spectator identification.

<sup>226</sup> 'Endpiece', *Guardian*, 23 September 1989, p23.



have engaged audience sympathies.<sup>227</sup> Here Branagh also cuts a number of bawdy references to Kate's virginity to make the scene more romantic. Henry's conduct is decidedly honourable, but the fact that his partly political interest in Katherine is not removed from the script ('It *will* please him, Kate') also reinforces the seriousness of his endeavours and his commitment to his country's cause one last time.<sup>228</sup>

#### d. iv. Branagh and Prince Charles

A further interpretative context which seems likely to have impacted on popular readings of Branagh's film - and particularly on attitudes toward Henry, kingship, sacrifice and questions of genre - is Branagh's relationship with Prince Charles.

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<sup>227</sup> His sincerity is detectable in the hard-working affection of the courtship, in the couple's convincing first kiss, and in the comic playing of 'Here comes your father'; all of which is supported extra-textually by the reality of Branagh's recent marriage to Thompson.

<sup>228</sup> It has been argued by some that 'for Olivier, kingship is inescapably performative' (Donaldson, 'Taking on Shakespeare', p65), and that this makes the King's apparent patriotism and glamour seem hollow and sinister in Olivier's version of the play. The actor under the crown is hinted at with a throat-clearing cough at the very beginning of the film, and with Henry's glowing acceptance of the audience's applause at the end. However, there are elements in Olivier's film which are conducive to readings of his Henry as a more conventionally heroic figure. The deletion of passages which reveal Henry's ruthlessness, and such fulsome images as the 'halo' formed by the addition of Henry's crown to his helmet, all construct him as a man who is deserving of respect and admiration. Olivier also uses the camera to emphasize Henry's anxious attention to duty and responsibility, shooting the eve of battle sequence in a smooth, continuous style (achieved through tracking shots and the absence of sudden cuts), which contrasts with the next day's pacy montage, and makes the night seem longer and more tortured. It is also possible to argue that Olivier's Henry is heroic in the specific style of the historical film. In his impassioned rhetoric and patriotic prayer before battle, 'Olivier manifests [...] qualities peculiar to British conceptions of heroism in the first half of the twentieth century', which add up to 'a uniquely English notion of grace and courage, extending in popular depictions from the Raj to the RAF' (Loehlin, *Henry V*, p41), and owing a great deal to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century heroic traditions (ibid., pp41-48). The potential importance of the Olivier frame of reference to readings of Branagh's film should again be asserted, as it may have predisposed Branagh's audiences to look for or to recognize a hero-king in the mould of the British historical genre.

The Prince of Wales visited the *Henry V* set during filming.<sup>229</sup> Some years before, Branagh had also sought his advice when preparing for his performance as Henry V at Stratford.<sup>230</sup> On that earlier occasion, in response to his questions about the nature of royalty, Branagh had been told of the loneliness and dutifulness of regal status, and of the need for faith.<sup>231</sup> As in such historical films as *Victoria the Great* and *Sixty Glorious Years*, this on-going royal involvement and approval was widely publicized and offered as evidence of the film's accuracy and authenticity.<sup>232</sup> And as in several of the examples of the historical genre considered in earlier chapters (*Mrs Brown* and *The Madness of King George* being the ones most contemporaneous with *Henry V*), connections were established between play/film and 'real life' royal/historical events.<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> See *Beginning*, p230. Ned Sherrin, mischievous as ever, wrote of Branagh at the time: 'Although he had already shot the speech on kingship, my spies tell me he staged it again for the Prince of Wales' benefit', 'The Ned Sherrin Column', *Times*, 30 September 1989, p30.

<sup>230</sup> This initial contact later led to the Prince becoming patron of Branagh's Renaissance Theatre Company, which of course directly spawned *Henry V*. See *Beginning*, p217.

<sup>231</sup> See *Beginning*, pp141-4.

<sup>232</sup> Newspaper coverage of this involvement, stimulated by the revelations in *Beginning*, by the serializations of that book, and by *Henry V*'s publicity campaign, was immense. Branagh used the Prince of Wales' comments to validate his own interpretation of Henry, writing for example: 'Prince Charles' comments were immensely helpful and I had the impression that he shared with Shakespeare's Henry a desire to strike a delicate balance between responsibility and compassion'. See *Beginning*, pp143-4. The two men have seemingly remained close, and public consciousness of their association has been regularly refreshed in various kinds of journalism. See for example Michael Coveney's review of Branagh's *Hamlet* at the R.S.C. in the *Observer* (20 December 1992), which claims that the production can be read 'as a defence of the Prince of Wales, an unofficial but carefully planned promotion of the dilemma of the modern monarchy.'

<sup>233</sup> '[Henry's] loneliness is intense and his hurt at the various betrayals and losses is very acute. I asked Prince Charles whether the various newspaper betrayals of events, dramatic and mundane, had changed him. Yes it had, profoundly [. . .] He bore the inevitable bruises of his position with great courage, and though, sitting opposite him, I could detect the haunted look of responsibility, the very fact that he was speaking to me was an indication of his continuing desire to give people the benefit of the doubt'. See *Beginning*, p143. Perhaps encouraged by such disclosures, Branagh's audiences too were willing to draw parallels between art and life. Of a performance in the stage run that inspired the film, which was attended by the Prince and Princess of Wales, Branagh writes: 'One of the first speeches in the second half was Henry's 'Upon the king' soliloquy which deals,

At the time of the film's release, both in theatres and on video, the key themes of leadership and royalty, nationality and national heritage, were also lent added prominence by the Prince of Wales' campaign for better English, his particular focus on Shakespeare, and the press's propensity for casting him as a battling Henry V. The *Independent* for example imagined him as a Shakespearean monarch under the banner: 'Prince takes arms against bad English.'<sup>234</sup>

Overall, in the absence of any overtly patriotic posturing, it is through its sympathetic, positive and passionate portrayal of the royal figurehead, and through such related extra-textual discourses as those relating to the Prince of Wales, that the film apparently manages to favour the nation at the same time that it seems to express reservations about jingoism and the notion of a national crusade.<sup>235</sup> Thus in Norman Rabkin's terms, the King is a lens which allows us to recognize both duck and rabbit at the same time. In that the film connects the 'tremendous personal cost' Henry suffers to England's ultimate triumph,<sup>236</sup> it seems to conclude its mythic-ritual debate on the individual's proper attitude towards the nation by recommending patriotic self-sacrifice.

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among other things, with the lack of privacy in private life. From the audience that had just robbed Prince Charles of this very thing there was an almost audible shudder', *Beginning*, p151.

<sup>234</sup> *Independent*, 20 December 1989. Similarly, urging its readers to 'Follow Prince's standard into a battle royal', the *Daily Express* mused that 'Shakespeare's "madcap" Prince of Wales went on to become Henry V, urging his troops at the battle of Agincourt "once more unto the breach." In the battle for the restoration of standards in English teaching and the preservation of our literary heritage, the present Prince of Wales should charge once more unto the breach . . . and then again, and again, and again'. See *Daily Express*, 'Opinion', 23 April 1991. The Prince of Wales was also pictured as Henry V in a cartoon by Dave Brown, for which see 'Class War – Can Prince Charles save our schools?', *The Times*, 28 April 1991.

<sup>235</sup> As James Loehlin suggests: 'Throughout the film, Branagh manages to make negative statements about war reflect positively back upon Henry', by showing him sharing the hardships of his men and ultimately transcending them. See *Henry V*, p139.

<sup>236</sup> This connection is made explicit in a handout from Renaissance Films PLC Publicity.



#### d. v. The Political Meaning of *Henry V*

With regard to my comments in chapter four about the apparently conservative associations of the British historical film, it is perhaps worth briefly considering some of the most violent criticism of *Henry V*. The combination of the film's central topics of leadership and the leader's patriotic sacrifices with Branagh's Thatcherite image and his friendship with the Prince of Wales, incurred the wrath of such writers as Curtis Bright, whose comments usefully draw together some of the main strands of this case-study.<sup>237</sup>

Bright argues that Branagh's true inclinations result in him 'subordinating any supposed "leftist critique and liberal pacifism" about war to dubious overlapping ideologies conceivable as *responsibility of leadership* and *militaristic brotherhood*' (p96). In this film, Henry is a charming and 'humanized' figure, who 'serves to mask the butchery of high political power' (p99). But 'the central Thatcherite foundation' of his project can be found in the treatment of the deviant (see p102), who may suffer but only to enhance Henry's status.<sup>238</sup> The end effect is that

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<sup>237</sup> 'Branagh and the Prince, or a "Royal Fellowship of Death"', *Critical Quarterly* 33, no. 4 (Winter, 1991), pp95-111. An evidently angry Bright concludes with a rather incongruous rant about 'technological slaughter' (p109), the Gulf War, Grenada, Panama, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala and Vietnam.

<sup>238</sup> Mark Fortier, whom we saw in section two of this chapter also regards Branagh's *Henry V* as a Thatcherite, 'anti-revolutionary' and generally repugnant text, similarly attacks the film's supposedly exclusive focus on Henry. Fortier says: 'In the face of the king's sentiments other more resistant and angry emotions are silenced'. See 'Speculations on 2 Henry IV, Theatre Historiography, the Strait Gait of History, and Kenneth Branagh', p63. We are thus forced to invest in Henry's 'charismatic, messianic leadership', and acquiesce in the aggrandizement of the ruling nobility', p64.

Branagh privileges 'what we in the late twentieth century ought to regard with deep suspicion – the old "responsibility of kingship" or "burden of leadership" idea that characterizes traditional conservative criticism of Shakespearean drama as well as the public philosophy (or rather ideology) generated by ruling classes and their apologists' (p102).

Like many other writers (of both left- and right-wing persuasion) considered during the course of my work, Bright justifies his personal perspectives with reference to inaccuracy, bad history, and inattention to the details, subtleties and ironies of the sources or source text, paying little attention to the film as a film.<sup>239</sup> Through these strategies, any traces of conservatism in the film are simply disqualified as illegitimate, as products of the director's misreading of Shakespeare.<sup>240</sup> Again, as with Cook, Landy and others in previous chapters, we can see the apparently conservative tendencies of historical film being resisted or undermined by modern critics. But if only the film were located within the context of the British historical film genre, its apparent conservatism could begin to be understood. And if only it could be approached without Bright's prescriptions in mind, it might even be

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<sup>239</sup> Thus Branagh's interpretation is held by Bright to be 'forced' ('Branagh and the Prince', p96) and the proper character of Henry (i.e. unmeditative) is 'converted' into something new and tendentious (isolated, thoughtful, self-questioning), (p97). Branagh's research is 'O-Level standard', he 'cannot grasp Shakespearean irony' (p98) and acts 'without textual authority' (p104).

<sup>240</sup> On the subject of questionable or selective readings, it is notable that Bright's own analysis rests on ignoring a number of scenes and images in the film. For example, his assertion that the economically dispossessed are excluded to help define Henry's 'band of brothers' (see *ibid.*, p102) disregards the many lingering scenes of Henry's supporters, men-at-arms and otherwise, which were noted above. Bright is also sometimes inconsistent in his line of criticism. For example, on p101 he takes issue with Branagh's use of references to 'the English', which are held to 'erase class divisions' and 'promote nationalism'. But these lines are in the text. Should Branagh have cut them? At these moments, it is clear that Bright is not at all committed to the integrity of Shakespeare, but to a political position; fidelity to history and to the ideal of faithful adaptation seem nothing more than a ploy.

possible to appreciate the value and interest of this conservatism for the audiences who paid to be exposed to it.<sup>241</sup>

#### d. vi. *Henry V* and the British Historical Film Genre

I have shown that in several significant ways, Branagh's *Henry V* fits the profile of the British historical film developed in chapter four. Particular features – including the film's prominent use of flashbacks and Branagh's heavy use of close-up – also resonate with the changes in the historical genre noted above, in that they contribute to the more personal and intimate biopic-style tendencies manifested in *Lady Jane*, and in such 'border-line cases' as *Chariots of Fire*.<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> Predictably, Bright almost entirely ignores these audiences, asserting unproblematically, for example, that Shakespeare 'absolutely negates' the idea of Henry as a responsible, kindly leader. See 'Branagh and the Prince', p98. Bright also frequently refers to the 'message' of a scene (see for example p107, on the message of Henry's conversation with Williams, 'that commoners must not think for themselves but must yield to authority . . .'), and when he sets the notion of 'messages' aside and makes reference to the film's viewers, he homogenizes them when he concludes: 'Young American men [. . .] (and British too, I suspect) do not flee in horror from representations of gratuitous butchery. They revel in it [sic]', p110. Rather bizarrely, in my view, he imagines them to be directly seduced by the film into supporting the Gulf War. Fortier's approach to the film's audience is again very similar: 'Branagh and his Henry are in total control, and make of the audience passive and compliant recipients . . .'. See 'Speculations on *2HenryIV*, Theatre Historiography, the Strait Gait of History, and Kenneth Branagh', p62.

<sup>242</sup> In this connection, it is perhaps significant that, as in the case of *Mrs Brown* and *The Madness of King George* for example, *Henry V* received a substantial contribution to its budget from television, the BBC supporting it to the extent of £2.6m. The combination of its intimate, 'televisual' style, with knowledge of the BBC's involvement might have encouraged some audiences to read *Henry V* in light of other small-screen Shakespeares. For some idea of the meanings such a reading might produce, see Michael Manheim, 'The English History Play on Screen', in *Shakespeare and the Moving Image* ed. by Anthony Davies and Stanley Wells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp131-143. Jane Howell's first tetralogy, made in the '80s for the BBC/Time-Life, is particularly interesting, in that it is apparently governed by similar post-Falklands sensibilities to those professed by Branagh, and in that it also adopts an intimate and realist approach. See 'The English History Play on Screen', pp132, 137, and Dennis Bingham, 'Jane Howells' First Tetralogy', in *Shakespeare on Television* ed. by J. C. Bulman and H. R. Coursen (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1988), pp221-9.



But as my study has suggested, the film was not often viewed in criticism and other discourses as historical, as a 'new historical film' or as a challenge to the traditional historical genre. What can we learn from this situation?

That *Henry V* was not frequently or confidently identified as part of the historical genre, despite exhibiting many of the traits, themes and perspectives of the historical film, all points towards the limits of the idea of historical film in the 1980s. The genre was evolving (and the presence of Olivier's *Henry V* as a key intertext for Branagh's film may have emphasized or exaggerated the extent of change), but it maintained a coherent enough identity (one which reinforces the definitions derived from chapter four) for the label 'historical film' to be restricted in its application to such texts as *Lady Jane*. *Henry V* lacks some of the key elements of the historical film, including title cards, source quotations, spectacular long-shots, and the domination of extra-textual discourse by issues of history, historicity and authenticity, and this was apparently enough to create doubt about its historical status. In place of certainty about its historicity, we have seen that critics observed and construed a number of other generic associations, with the much-written-about involvement of Shakespeare and Olivier, and the multivalency of Kenneth Branagh's image, making for an especially complex interpretative landscape. The generic history of Olivier's film, its own apparently mutating generic associations (from patriotic/historical to radical/*avant-garde* film or 'Shakespeare movie') may have contributed to the indeterminacy.

*Henry V* thus makes clear the possibilities and choices that can be involved in applying genre to a film as a reading frame, while part of the intention of these case-studies has been to underline the potential impact of this choice on the reading produced. Whether or not one sees *Henry V* as a war (or anti-war) film or historical film or adaptation, affects one's political interpretation of it, and one's view of Branagh and his personality, just as, in a hermeneutic circuit, one's attitude towards Branagh and one's sensitivity to anti-war images, historical motifs and so on affect one's choice of genre. One's view of and attitude towards Olivier's film, with its longer history and thicker encrustations of meaning, and one's sense of its relevance to Branagh's project, are similarly dependent on a choice of the most appropriate generic context to apply to it.

I have tried to show that the historical genre, as historically constituted from a variety of documents and sources, is a significant possible frame of interpretation for certain films. It is my view that empirical and historically wide-ranging studies of genre such as that which I have attempted to make, are necessary to more fully understand and soundly situate both individual films such as *Henry V*, and audiences' real and hypothetical responses to them.

## **THE BRITISH HISTORICAL FILM IN CONTEXT 2: NATIONAL IDENTITY AND NATIONAL CINEMA**

### **CONCLUSION**

My research has identified and analyzed the British historical film genre, tracing its development and shifting relationships with the genres that lie adjacent to it. I also hope to have laid foundations for a more productive encounter between academic historians and film, and to have explored some of the practical considerations entailed in constructing and interpreting a long-standing genre. In conclusion, I will locate the historical genre within two further contexts, which my analysis has indicated are of especial relevance; namely, discussion of British national identity and British national cinema. These two areas are closely related, and in that they draw together a number of problematic issues and concerns discussed in earlier chapters, will help me delineate new avenues for research into historical cinema.

### **1. The British Historical Film and British National Cinema**

I do not intend here to re-enter the debate surrounding definitions of national cinema. Rather, I want to discover why a genre which has had a continuous and profitable presence in British filmmaking has received so little attention from those who (from a variety of theoretical perspectives) have participated in the recent proliferation of work on 'British national cinema.' Even Jeffrey Richards, who has



a long-lived interest in the genre, makes scant reference to it outside the context of the Second World War in his recent monograph on British cinema, whereas the British crime and British horror films for example have been the subject of multiple large-scale publications in recent years.<sup>1</sup> I have argued that Sue Harper problematically elides the historical film with other categories in *Picturing the Past*, the only undertaking of the last few years to pay it sustained attention.

One of the factors governing this situation relates to the polarities that critics have established in addressing British cinema. Pam Cook for example opposes 'consensual' cinema (parochial, realist and restrained) to 'anti-consensual' (i.e. hybrid and expressionistic) cinema, whilst Sarah Street draws on notions of official and 'unofficial' filmmaking.<sup>2</sup> Others have attempted to distinguish between 'literary' and 'cinematic' films and, most commonly of all, between realism and

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<sup>1</sup> See *Films and British National Identity; British Crime Cinema* ed. by Steve Chibnall and Robert Murphy (London: Routledge, 1999); Phil Hardy, *The BFI Companion to Crime* (London: BFI, 1997); Howard Maxford, *Hammer, House of Horror: Behind the Screams* (London: B T Batsford, 1996); Marcus Hearn and Alan Barnes, *The Hammer Story* (London: Titan Books, 1997); Denis Meikle, *A History of Horrors: The Rise and Fall of the House of Hammer* (London: The Scarecrow Press, 1996); Andy Boot, *Fragments of Fear: An Illustrated History of British Horror Films* (London: Creation Books, 1996); and Peter Hutchings, *Hammer and Beyond: The British Horror Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993). I address other recent work below. In earlier critical assessments of British cinema also, historical film is often conspicuously absent. Pam Cook does not include it in her 1985 consideration of British genres (*The Cinema Book*) and Charles Barr's *All Our Yesterdays* (1986) finds no room for it amidst a catholic array of essays, though we have seen that Marcia Landy does devote a chapter to it in her book, *British Genres*.

<sup>2</sup> See *Fashioning the Nation*, especially p5 and pp11-2, 55; and Street, *British National Cinema*, especially pp1 and 25. Along similar lines, Clive Coultass divides wartime British cinema into 'escapist entertainments' and sober, 'official' productions. See *Images for Battle: British Film and the Second World War, 1939-1945* (London: Associated University Presses, 1989). Marcia Landy also sets 'popular' (or 'commonsense') history in opposition to 'official' types in *Cinematic Uses of the Past*; see especially p1.

fantasy.<sup>3</sup> Crucially, the British historical film as examined above cannot easily be accommodated into such frameworks.

This is because historical films have often been on the one hand fantastical and escapist in their remoteness, in the opulence of their *mise-en-scène*, and in their occasional fictionalization of history. On the other hand, at the same time, they have been documentary-like in some of their features, in their avowed aspirations toward 'truth', and in the concern of key examples with contemporary politics. They also seem to have decidedly conservative elements, and yet as Jeffrey Richards argues, in humanizing the great and the good they contain the potential for radical readings. Furthermore, I have discussed instances of the genre, particularly in the 1930s and '40s, which have been both officially sponsored *and* popular. Finally, unlike genres such as the heritage film and the documentary, historical films have occupied several of the alternative strategies for producing and conceiving of national cinema, encompassing high-budget, Hollywood-style films such as *The Private Life of Henry VIII*, distinctive, indigenous productions such as *Carry On Henry*, and international 'art-films' such as *Mrs. Brown*.

Charles Barr called in 1986 for a greater sense of 'the inter-relationship of different layers and currents within a cinema which criticism has sometimes caused to seem

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Murphy announces an example of the latter dichotomy in the very title of his book, *Realism and Tinsel*, though of course the book itself is rather more sophisticated. Similarly, Julian Petley described non-realist filmmaking as the 'repressed side of British cinema' in his essay 'The Lost Continent,' whilst Paul Swann has rather sweepingly opposed the realism of British cinema to the fantasy of Hollywood in *The Hollywood Feature Film in Post-War Britain*, p147. The realism/fantasy framework encompasses many other oppositions, including that which sets the

schizophrenic', an appeal echoed by Alan Lovell and Tom Ryall in more recent years.<sup>4</sup> This kind of attention to the interstices of film history seems especially important if justice is to be done to the historical genre.

A second reason for the neglect of historical films relates to my earlier observations concerning the aesthetic and political priorities of writers such as Pam Cook. Just as Cook is highly critical of 'consensual' cinema, so Gilbert Adair, reviewing the history of British filmmaking, denigrates Korda's productions of the 1930s and '40s for their 'establishment tendencies' and the way they 'complacently conform to the heresy that the only stories worth telling are those involving Top People.'<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Alexander Walker lamented the fact that of the twenty-one British film chosen to celebrate 'British Film Year', '[n]ot one film was included by any of those "uncomfortable" directors noted for their highly critical look at today's Britain.' 'Where was the controversy?', he asked.<sup>6</sup> Two of the most prominent of recent volumes devoted to British cinema confine their attentions to 'new ground': neglected, questioning films and approaches which may facilitate an 'escape from

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'literary' against the cinematic (for an example of which, see *A Night at the Pictures*, pp24-6, where Gilbert Adair champions Hitchcock against other, more literary and 'middle class' strands).

<sup>4</sup> See Charles Barr, 'Introduction: Amnesia and Schizophrenia', in *All Our Yesterdays*, p25. In particular, Barr suggests, the realist/non-realist opposition is too rigid, in that it fails to accommodate such films as *Dead of Night* (1947) and *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946), pp15-6. See also Alan Lovell, 'The British Cinema: The Known Cinema?', in *The British Cinema Book*, p239 (criticizing scholars for 'posing excess and restraint against each other'); and Tom Ryall, 'British Cinema and Genre', in *Journal of Popular British Cinema 1: Genre and British Cinema*, pp19-20 (where it is suggested that many British genres 'combine elements of realism and fantasy, of observation and introspection . . .').

<sup>5</sup> Gilbert Adair, 'The British Tradition', in *A Night at the Pictures*, pp30, 32.

<sup>6</sup> Alexander Walker, *National Heroes*, p270.



the past.’<sup>7</sup> As noted above, even within the more limited range of John Hill’s study of the 1980s, historical films don’t get a look in.

These new perspectives and emphases have engendered many revealing and stimulating insights into British cinema, which can no longer be said to be ‘unknown’.<sup>8</sup> As Sarah Street suggests, interventions into this field must avoid narrow notions of ‘Britishness’ and ‘cinema’ which ‘restrict the scope of enquiry and do not reflect the British context of film culture, exhibition and reception.’<sup>9</sup> But in this broader cinema, there appears to be little room for ‘consensual’ film-making which, if it is covered at all, is usually confined to the realist war films of the

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<sup>7</sup> See Wheeler Winston Dixon, ‘Introduction: Re-Viewing the British Cinema’, in *Re-Viewing British Cinema – 1900-1992* ed. by Dixon (New York: New York Press, 1994), pp1-4; and Andrew Higson, ‘Introduction’, in *Dissolving Views*, pp2-3. A measure of Dixon’s fetishization of newness can be found in the fact that he criticizes James Curran and Vincent Porter’s *British Cinema History* for its focus on ‘canonical films’ (pp2-3) despite pioneering articles in that volume on Hammer, the *Carry On* series, and post-war independent cinema. Dixon also ignores appeals in a keynote piece in *British Cinema History* by Raymond Williams (entitled ‘British Film History: New Perspectives’, pp11, 23) for an appreciation of the diversity of British film-making, for ‘alternative’ types of film production, and for a reinterpretation of British cinema history. Though its declared concern is ‘with the whole institution of British cinema’, the recently launched *Journal of Popular British Cinema* also espouses a particular commitment to the ‘lost continent’ of ‘unknown’ films. See Julian Petley and Alan Burton, ‘Introduction’, *Journal of Popular British Cinema 1: Genre and British Cinema*, pp2-3).

<sup>8</sup> The term was famously applied to British cinema by Alan Lovell in his much-discussed paper ‘The British Cinema: The Unknown Cinema’, BFI Education Department, 13 March 1969. Some of the most important contributions to the process of widening debate on British cinema have been Ian Christie’s *Arrows of Desire* (1985) and *BFI Dossier No. 18: Gainsborough Melodrama*, 1983. In addition to the anthologies by Higson and Dixon, other recent work in the same spirit includes David McGillivray, *Doing Rude Things: The History of the British Sex Film 1957-1981* (Sun Tavern Fields, 1992); Robert Ross, *The Carry On Companion* (London: B T Batsford, 1996); Terry Staples, *All Pals Together: The Story of Children’s Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997); *The British Avant-Garde Film, 1926 to 1995: An Anthology of Writings* ed. by Michael O’Pray (Luton: University of Luton Press/The Arts Council of England, 1996); *The Unknown 1930s: an alternative history of the British Cinema 1929-39* ed. by Jeffrey Richards (London: I. B. Tauris, 1998); and Jay McKerney, Nick Faulkes, Neil Norman and Nick Sullivan, *Dressed to Kill: James Bond the Suited Hero* (Paris and New York: Flammarion, 1996), as well as the volumes cited in note 1 above.

<sup>9</sup> Sarah Street, ‘Popular British Cinema?’, in *Journal of Popular British Cinema 1: Genre and British Cinema*, p16.

1940s.<sup>10</sup> Andrew Higson's introduction to *Dissolving Views* encapsulates the problem, in that it rejects marginalization in cinema studies whilst at the same time marginalizing historical film. Thus it seems to me that in terms of film criticism, British historical films are now close to being the pariah genre that Gainsborough melodramas were in the '40s and after. As noted in chapter two, even those recent studies which are devoted to history and film largely ignore mainstream and traditional forms in favour of the innovative and *avant-garde*.

In order to further our understanding of the genre and the popular responses to it that I have tried to uncover,<sup>11</sup> I suggest that discredited 'consensualist discourses' should be reconsidered, and adapted for use as an analytical tool. Pam Cook has some justification in arguing that Jeffrey Richards' notion of a 'dominant national ideology' tends to collapse all differences into a single, consensualist concept of

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<sup>10</sup> One reason for this concentration on the 1940s may be the seductive image of this period as a cinematic 'golden age' in Britain, when a 'specifically British' style of film-making was evolved to address the nation as a whole. On these topics, see Antonia Lant, *Blackout*, pp34, 31-3, and Dilys Powell's *Films Since 1939*, a contemporary celebration of the new 'native', 'semi-documentary' filmmaking, which Powell viewed as British cinema's 'coming of age'. I suspect that a further factor is that the conservatism and patriotism of the films involved is somehow 'safe' and therefore acceptable, partly because of the legitimating context of war, but also in so far as these films feature and address working-class people and 'ordinary life', neutralizing problematical social differences (see *Blackout*, pp35-7, 41). Thus for example Robert Murphy's recently expressed approval of *Millions Like Us* (1943) and *The Way Ahead* (1944) is couched in overtly political terms (see 'Conclusion: A Short History of British Cinema', in *The British Cinema Book*, p257). As Andrew Higson suggests, the desire for a social-democratic cinema is a consistent attitude in British intellectual film culture, which has impacted heavily on the orthodox history of British national cinema. See *Waving the Flag*, pp16, 22-3. In examining consensual cinema outside of the context of war, Stephen C. Shafer's *British Popular Films 1929-39: The Cinema of Reassurance* (London: Routledge, 1997) represents a rarity amongst recent studies.

<sup>11</sup> It is significant that when, in Dixon's *Re-Viewing British Cinema*, attention turns to questions of reception, Neil Rattigan ('The Demi-Paradise and Images of Class in British Wartime Films') assumes that audiences are passive and capable of being duped and 'lulled'. Similarly, we saw in chapter five that Higson has tendentiously misrepresented the situation regarding the reception of the heritage film in the 1980s. To reiterate a point made in chapter two, though the search for textual and sub-textual tensions can be very revealing, a complete understanding of any genre demands that historical context, agenda-setting criticism, audiences and their articulated views and feelings all be taken seriously.

Britishness.<sup>12</sup> But the sources suggest that in the case of the historical genre (particularly in the 1930s and '40s), there *was* a great deal of popular agreement as to its meaning and significance for national identity, and Richards' ideas represent a useful way of tackling this fact. The same sources also serve as a corrective to the widespread assumption that only 'forbidden', anti-consensualist films have elicited strong emotional responses from their viewers.

My third explanation for the dearth of work on historical film is that no great *auteur* has established a connection with it. Whereas the presence of John Grierson and Ken Loach in the documentary-realist tradition, of Terence Fisher in the horror film, and of the Rogers and Thomas combination in the *Carry On* series help to legitimate these categories as distinctive manifestations of British culture against the notionally more anonymous output of Hollywood,<sup>13</sup> writers and directors have tended to stop in on the historical film on their way somewhere else. The association of an *auteur* with the historical film – valued for his or her personal, creative vision of the past – might have helped stave off criticisms of the genre which have focussed on its failure to adhere to the historical record.

In this connection, questions of taste and aesthetic value also have significance. As we saw in chapter three, historical films have often been seen as bloated and theatrical offerings, with contributors to *Sight and Sound* being particularly

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<sup>12</sup> Pam Cook, *Fashioning the Nation*, p18, referring to Richards' essay 'National Identity in British Wartime Films', in *Britain and the Cinema in the Second World War*.

<sup>13</sup> On the general importance of notions of distinctive artistic expression to critical discussions of British national cinema and its specific movements, see Higson, *Waving the Flag*, p24.



scathing. Such tendencies have been exacerbated by the fact that almost all of the directors who have worked in the genre have achieved far greater acclaim in other fields. Thus again auteurist contexts are injurious to the reputation of the genre, in that (for example) *The Young Mr Pitt* may seem like a trough in a career marked by such lofty peaks as *The Third Man* (1949) and *Odd Man Out* (1947).<sup>14</sup>

However, I would suggest that the British historical film is far from devoid of merit or aesthetic interest. The various transitions deployed by Olivier in *Henry V*, the ‘march of time’ montage in *The Young Mr Pitt*, the acting of Scofield and O’Toole in *A Man for All Seasons* and *The Lion in Winter*; all these seem to me exceptional examples of film art. Other, less remarkable films are also deserving of consideration by the same argument which has produced a number of recent studies of pornography, gore and splatter films and the ‘video nasty’<sup>15</sup>; namely, that critically despised categories have nevertheless constituted part of the aesthetic landscape (admittedly, perhaps, the lowlands) of British cinema.

When the various impediments and imbalances I have been discussing are removed or redressed, we can begin to appreciate the potential centrality of the historical

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<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Basil Dearden’s success at Ealing (encompassing such films as *Dead of Night* and *The Blue Lamp* (1949)) has helped to push *Khartoum* into the critical shade, and it is striking that even within the confines of a recent book devoted entirely to Dearden’s career, it is discussed only fleetingly. See *Liberal Directions: Basil Dearden and Postwar British Film Culture*, ed. by Alan Burton, Tim O’Sullivan and Paul Wells (Wiltshire: Flicks Books, 1997). Victor Saville is also usually discussed with reference to *Evergreen* (1934) and *South Riding* (1938), to the exclusion of *The Iron Duke* and *Me and Marlborough* (1935). As we saw in chapter three, directors and stars themselves, in interviews, diaries and autobiographies, have also tended to confine themselves to their best or most favourably remembered work.

<sup>15</sup> See for example Laurence O’Toole, *Pornocopia* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1998); Allan Bryce, *Video Nasties* (Cornwall: Stray Cat, 1998); Mikita Brottman, *Meat is Murder: An Illustrated Guide*

genre to discussion of British national cinema. In addition to its industrial longevity and prominence, culturally it deals head-on with Britain and questions relating to the British nation, whilst we have seen that it owes a debt to native traditions in historiography. Finally, the fact that audiences often interpreted the genre in terms of patriotism and felt it to be somehow peculiarly British, means that accounts of national cinema which take a consumption-centred line might also attend more closely to it. In refutation of Jacques Rivette's assertion that British genres 'have no genuine roots' and are mostly 'imitations of American imitations,'<sup>16</sup> one might even borrow from Bazin and describe the historical category as 'the British film par excellence.'<sup>17</sup>

## **2. The British Historical Film and British National Identity**

Alan Lovell, weary of the ongoing debates surrounding cinema and national identity, has recently suggested that the ideas and issues connected with national identity fail to account for the popularity of many films, and that the connection

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to *Cannibal Culture* (London: Creation Books, 1998); and *Flesh and Blood, Book One* ed. by Harvey Fention (Guildford: Fab Books, 1998).

<sup>16</sup> Andre Bazin, Jacques Doniol-Valcroze, Pierre Kast, Roger Leenhardt, Jacques Rivette and Eric Rohmer, 'Six Characters in Search of *auteurs*: A Discussion about the French Cinema', in *Cahiers du Cinema, Vol 1: The 1950s: Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave* ed. by Jim Hillier (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1985), p32.

<sup>17</sup> The Western and the British historical film are in fact similar in a number of ways, including their shared interest in the formative periods of their respective national histories. On this aspect of the Western, see for example Colin McArthur, *Underworld USA* (London: BFI, 1972), p18, and Jim Kitses, *Horizons West* (London: BFI, 1969), p8, where Kitses contends that 'first of all, the Western is American is American history'. David Pirie also adopts Bazin's famous phrase to make claims for the quintessential Britishness of the Gothic horror film, which I think is less convincing in view of the confinement of the type to the 1960s. See *A Heritage of Horror: The English Gothic Cinema 1946-1972* (Gordon Fraser, 1973), p9. Like the historical film, the British horror film and the crime movie are rooted in indigenous literature, and Tom Ryall rightly raises them as further objections to

between British cinema and British national identity is actually rather obvious and unrewarding, in that 'any activity engaged in by British citizens can be seen as a way of constituting national identity.'<sup>18</sup> Against this view, it should be pointed out that certain genres, in particular periods, have been held by both official and popular opinion to have especial importance for national identity, the realist films of the Second World War being the most obvious example.<sup>19</sup> But the widely-shared national-allegorical readings of Ealing films by Charles Barr, and of British cinema in the 1980s by John Hill, seem a much less certain matter,<sup>20</sup> and I find it surprising that these categories have attracted more comment from critics interested in national identity than has the historical film.

After all, the historical genre displays an overt textual concern with the nation, whilst the reception material I have examined indicates that, *contra* Lovell, national identity seems to have a prominent role in attracting and satisfying its audiences. Moreover, Benedict Anderson has argued that '[h]istory is the necessary basis of the national narrative', whilst A. D. Smith has stressed the dependence of national identity upon 'earlier motifs, visions and ideals.'<sup>21</sup> As we have seen, the genre also

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Rivette's damning analysis. See Tom Ryall, 'British Cinema and Genre', *Journal of Popular British Cinema 1: Genre and British Cinema*, p22.

<sup>18</sup> Alan Lovell, 'The British Cinema: The Known Cinema?', p241.

<sup>19</sup> See Antonia Lant, *Blackout*, pp44, 19-20, and note 10 above.

<sup>20</sup> See Charles Barr, *Ealing Studios*; John Hill, *British Cinema in the 1980s*; and Andrew Higson, *Waving the Flag*, the last of which identifies what Higson regards as a typical 'national style' and characteristic way of 'imagining the nation' in British cinema. I discussed Hill's allegorical readings of the contemporary 'state-of-the-nation film' above, in chapter five.

<sup>21</sup> See Benedict Anderson, 'Narrating the Nation', *Times Literary Supplement*, 13 June 1986, p659, and A. D. Smith, *National Identity* (London: Penguin, 1991), p71. Andrew Higson suggests that films dealing with 'narratives of nationhood' will often 'imbue the experience of a shared culture with a profound sense of tradition and invoke a collective memory of an undisputed national past', *Waving the Flag*, p7. Higson cites the heritage film as a key example of this, but the tendencies he describes seem more readily applicable to the historical genre, which we have seen draws upon (and



emphasizes the nation's territorial boundaries, and promotes a sense of national preeminence and independence, which are further features Anderson associates with national sentiment and identity.<sup>22</sup>

The image of national identity which emerges from historical films is currently an unfashionable one, in that it is founded upon confidently articulated notions of duty, patriotism and British greatness. Clive Aslet and Jeffrey Richards have shown how this once dominant image has been complicated and eroded since the 1960s, and for Pam Cook and others, it is now outdated and oppressive.<sup>23</sup> Patrick Wright asserts that the national past should be seen as 'above all a modern past', continually re-imagined in response to 'the leading tensions of the contemporary political situation,'<sup>24</sup> and from this perspective, the historical film's problem may be that it has been too stable a form, seemingly denying changes in historical experience and perspective. The heavy preoccupation, noted in the first section of this conclusion with 'newness' in discussions of national cinema may thus be related to priorities and preferences connected to national identity, in that challenging and experimental films are felt to be more 'adequate' to the diversity of modern Britain. The tactic of reading films allegorically, with little reference to

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reinforces the currency of) popular historical traditions, events, and individuals of 'undisputed' significance in the nation's history.

<sup>22</sup> See *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

<sup>23</sup> See Clive Aslet, *Anyone for England?*, especially pp156-7, 160-4 and 245; Richards, *Films and British National Identity*, pp18-23; and Cook, *Fashioning the Nation*, p2. John Hill has argued that criticism of British cinema 'is often associated with a more general critique of the traditional conceptions of nationalism and national identity with which British films have characteristically been linked'. See his essay 'The Issue of National Cinema and British Film Production', in *New Questions of British Cinema*, p14. This would go double for the historical genre, which we have seen is often overt in its nationalism, depicting the struggles of England/Britain against the French or Spanish 'enemy'.

contemporary responses to the texts in question, may also be viewed as a way of producing appropriately complex and 'inclusive' readings. The same strategy cannot often be applied to conventional historical texts, because their position with regard to the nation is often spelt out in an unambiguously conservative way.

But for all its perceived political inadequacies, the British historical film has retained an important presence in British cinema, and it is unfortunate that the current literature on British film should create the impression either that it is some kind of irrelevant atavism, or (more commonly) that it has vanished entirely. By taking the genre and its values into account, we can achieve a clearer and less tendentious understanding of the relationships between British cinema, culture and national identity. At the very least, we should study traces of continuity in order to gain a better understanding of difference and change, and to generate more rewarding insights into new, 'alternative' forms by knowing what it is they are an alternative to.

### **3. Some Suggestions for Further Research**

In remedy of the neglectedness of the British historical film, and in recognition of the useful insights it can have to offer, my closing comments suggest specific directions which research into the genre may profitably take in the future, and are intended to complement the broader recommendations made above.

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<sup>24</sup> Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country*, pp2, 251.

The impact of American genres on British historical filmmaking and on British reading practices, is one area which merits a more in-depth consideration than I was able to give it in chapter five. Within the framework of my wide-ranging analysis of the British historical film and the genres adjacent to it, decades other than the 1980s might be case-studied, again with special attention to the development, marketing and consumption (at both national and local levels) of the films concerned. Research into current responses to historical films could test some of my suggestions and conclusions, and could generate valuable new hypotheses for use in further investigations into responses to British and American historicals in previous eras. The same might also provide a fuller appreciation of the reading frame represented by television repeats.<sup>25</sup>

I would personally be interested to see audience research into popular ideas of history and their determinants, to reveal whether the apparently close relationship between popular history and the historical film still holds good. An investigation dedicated to these issues would be able to take full account of the range of elements which contribute to popular historical discourse, including those such as television and the school curriculum which I could only briefly touch upon in chapter four.<sup>26</sup> My own (very limited) canvassing of audience opinion in the summer of 1997 showed that *Mrs. Brown* and *The Madness of King George* were strongly felt to be

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<sup>25</sup> Claire Monk's research into recent heritage films and their audiences (using postal questionnaires) promises to produce some interesting results. Her essay 'Heritage film and the British cinema audience in the 1990s', *Journal of Popular British Cinema 2: Audiences and Reception in Britain*, does not draw upon this material, analyzing instead surveys conducted for the film and advertising industries.



historical films, whereas *The Wings of the Dove* (1998) was not, and that the perceived historicity of the former was connected to the historical familiarity of the personalities and events depicted.

I hope that the approaches and findings presented in this thesis will be of value in helping to stimulate further research along these and other lines. One of my aims has been to challenge existing tendencies and orthodoxies in the study of the historical film, and that I should conclude with questions as well as answers thus seems appropriate.

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<sup>26</sup> I think it would also be interesting to determine how far the audiences for conventional historical films and the post-modern historical film described by Rosenstone overlap, and with what consequences for the reading process.

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