

Nostalgia versus Feminism in British Costume Drama

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Özet

İngiliz Kostüm Dramalarında Nostalji Feminizme Karşı

Bu makale son yirmi beş yılda yapılmış örnekler üzerinden kostüm drama (daha çok İngiliz) olgusunu ve "dönem" filmi olarak adlandırılan filmler üzerine olan kuramsal tartışmayı incelemektedir. 1980'lerin ve 1990'ların eleştirmenleri, söz konusu dönem filmlerinin, ulusal kimliğin yeniden tanımlanıp yön verilmesi ile ilgili Thatcher yandaşı politik projeyi desteklemek adına tarihsel kostüm filmlerinin nostaljik ve muhafazakar çekiciliğini istismar etme yolundaki girişimlerini farketmişlerdi. Buna rağmen, kostüm dramaları, özgür-bilinçli kadın kahramanlarıyla ve ikiye bölünmüşlük ve yobazlıkla ilgili keskin gözlemleriyle, feministler için ilgi çekici olmaya devam etmiştir, ve bu filmlerin mizansen ve oyunculuk sanatı alanındaki sinemasal özellikleriyle ilgili de sürekli olarak beğeni içeren eleştiriler ortaya konmuştur. Kostüm dramalarında sinsi ve gerici bir ideolojik projenin izlerini görenlerle, söz konusu filmleri estetik ve anlatım özellikleri açısından beğenenler arasındaki eleştirel tartışma, özgün edebi kaynakların içinde mevcut olan sosyal köktencilik ve bunun filmlerde ne derece ifade bulduğu konularının gözden kaçırılmasına neden olmuştur. 1980'lerin ve 1990'ların "klasik" dönem filmlerinin, bu tür filmlerde meydana gelen en son gelişmelerle beraber yeniden incelenmesi, ilk bakışta görünebilenden çok daha incelikli eleştirel boyutların varlığını ortaya koymuştur. İnceleme sonucunda elde edilen

çıkarımlar, ulusal kimliğin oluşturulmasında sinemanın rolü, feminist söylemdeki gelişmeler ve tür eleştirisinin farklı yönleriyle doğrudan ilişkilidir.

anahtar kelimeler: *kostüm dramaları, dönem filmleri, feminizm, mizansen, tür*

Résumé

Nostalgie contre féminisme dans les costumes drama britanniques

Cet essai examine le phénomène des drames en costumes (uniquement britannique) au cours des vingt-cinq dernières années et le débat théorique entourant les soi-disant films d'héritage. Les critiques des années 1980 et 1990 ont vu dans le film d'héritage un essai d'exploiter l'attrait nostalgique et conservateur des drames en costumes historiques, afin de soutenir le projet politique thatcherien de la réorientation et la redéfinition de l'identité nationale. Cependant, le costume drama, avec ses héroïnes indépendantes et sa forte perception de l'hypocrisie et l'intolérance, a continué d'exercer un attrait pour les féministes, et il y avait une appréciation critique cohérente de ses qualités cinématographiques de mise-en-scène et l'art performatif. Le débat critique entre les gens qui voient le costume drama comme un insidieux et régressif projet idéologique et ceux qui applaudissent la qualité esthétique et narrative de ces films a eu tendance à masquer le radicalisme social inhérent à l'origine des sources littéraires et la mesure dans laquelle elle a trouvé son expression dans les films. Un réexamen des "classiques" des films d'héritage des années 1980 et 1990, avec une analyse des plus récents développements dans le genre, indique la présence des plus subtiles dimensions critiques qui échappent au premier regard. Les résultats de l'analyse sont directement liés au rôle du cinéma dans l'établissement de l'identité nationale, à l'évolution dans le discours féministe et aux différents aspects de la critique du genre.

mots-clés : *le costume drama (le drame en costumes), le film d'héritage, le féminisme, la mise-en-scène, le genre*

Abstract

This essay examines the phenomenon of (mainly British) costume drama during the last twenty-five years and the theoretical debate surrounding the so-called 'heritage' film. Critics of the 1980s and 1990s saw in the heritage film an attempt to exploit the nostalgic and conservative appeal of the historical costume drama in order to support the Thatcherite political project of redefining and reorientating national identity. Yet the costume drama, with its

independently-minded heroines and its sharp perceptions of hypocrisy and bigotry, has continued to exert an appeal for feminists, and there has also been consistent critical appreciation of its cinematic qualities in terms of mise-en-scène and performative art. The critical debate between those seeing in costume drama an insidious and regressive ideological project and those who applaud the aesthetic and thematic qualities of the films involved has tended to obscure the social radicalism inherent in the original literary sources and the degree to which it has found expression in the films. A re-examination of 'classic' heritage films of the 1980s and 1990s, together with an analysis of more recent developments in the genre, indicate the presence of more subtle critical dimensions than may at first appear. The implications have a bearing on the role of cinema in forging national identity, developments in the feminist discourse and aspects of genre criticism.

keywords: *costume drama, heritage film, feminism, mise-en-scène, genre*

Introduction

The popularity of historical costume drama of the 1980s and 1990s continues in the present decade, which has already seen new adaptations of Jane Austen, Henry James and William Thackeray, historical dramas such as *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (Kapur, 2007), *The Other Boleyn Girl* (Chadwick, 2008) and *The Duchess* (Dibb, 2008), and biopics on the life of C.S. Lewis, Beatrix Potter and others. These films continue to achieve success at the box-office and win compliments from critics regarding chronotopical veracity and *mise-en-scène*. The films are predominantly British in terms of literary progenitors, historical context and geographical location, but the subject may also be French, as in *Marie Antoinette* (Coppola, 2005) and some of the writers concerned are American, notably Henry James and Edith Wharton. In common with other mainstream films of today, they are the product of multi-cultural and multi-national resources in terms of personnel, skills and finance. Directors have been American (James Ivory, Sophia Coppola), Indian (Mira Nair, Shekhar Kapur), Canadian (Patricia Rozema) and New Zealander (Jane Campion), as well as British. To label these films 'British' is inaccurate, yet the argument relating to their role in the making of national identity refers primarily to Britain.

Defining the parameters of the genre is problematic. The commercial labels 'period drama' and 'costume drama' may be attached by promoters and reviewers to any works with historical settings. No distinction is made between films based on literary classics, original film scripts and modern novels. There is no agreement as to when a historical moment becomes a 'period' and no effort to determine the significance of the historical context in the narrative of the film. Surprisingly, there is no mention of 'costume drama' as a genre in the comprehensive *Cinema Book* and only one mention in Steven Neale's *Genre and Hollywood* (Cook and Bernink, 1999; Neale, 2000).

I would argue that it is unhelpful to categorise *Wilde* (Gilbert, 1997), *Carrington* (Hampton, 1995), *The English Patient* (Minghella, 1996) or *The Piano* (Campion, 1993) as costume dramas. The subject of *Wilde*, and also of *Carrington*, is art and homosexuality and the theme of both films may be broadly defined as sexual politics. In both cases, the period setting (the carriages, buildings, early motor cars, dress) is incidental to these central narrative concerns, and the camerawork testifies to the fact. *The English Patient* is set in the Second World War, mostly in Italy and North Africa and largely in war-torn landscapes and deserts. Generically, the film is an epic adventure, comparable to David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* or, to take a more recent example, Baz Luhrman's *Australia*. *The Piano* is set in a remote area of colonial New Zealand. The costumes are significant, but in a personal and symbolic way little related to the notion of 'period'. The landscape is dark and threatening and (for western audiences) alien. Nevertheless, all these films have been considered by

academic critics under the category of costume drama (e.g. Monk, 1995; Butler, 2000; Higson, 2003; Garrett, 2007).

In order to ensure the comparison of like with like, which may be taken as the essential critical function of genre, I propose three generic conditions for the classification of costume drama, as follows: (a) the sense and style of 'period' should be integral to the narrative and themes of the film, an integrality which will be evidenced in the camerawork and *mise-en-scène*; (b) a clear distinction be drawn between 'costume drama' and 'period drama', taking into account the significance of *costume*, with its implications regarding rank, class and setting; (c) the issue of dress and other styles should be used to establish an approximate chronological definition of periods considered sufficiently 'other' to be termed 'historical'. In the absence of a broadly acceptable chronological limitation of this kind, there is nothing to prevent films about the 1960s or the Cold War being approached as 'period pieces'. Sheldon Hall points out that *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Newell, 1994) has been 'annexed' to the genre 'on the basis of its upper-middle class characters and "heritagey" locations, and its "export-friendly" representation of Britishness' (Hall, 2001:198), regardless of the film's contemporary setting. On the other hand, there seems no need to distinguish between what is fiction in film and what is avowedly history or biography, since fictional elements are always present in the latter to a greater or lesser extent.

Despite the imprecision of definitions and generic criteria, the costume drama as a category has a long history, including various examples among the lavish 'prestige' films produced by Hollywood studios in the 1950s (Neale, 2000:237), but the reinvention of the genre can be dated to the early 1980s, with the appearance of the popular British television series of Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (Granada, 1981), followed by such films as *The Bostonians* (Merchant/Ivory, 1984) and *A Room with a View* (Merchant/Ivory, 1985), adaptations of novels by Henry James and E.M. Forster respectively. *Brideshead Revisited* contained all the elements which came to be viewed as conventional for the genre - an attention to dress, architecture and furnishings; vintage cars on rural roads; steam trains arriving at remote stations; romantic liaisons among the upper classes. By degrees, the adaptation of literary classics proved to be the mainstay of the genre. During the 1990s, there were screen adaptations of all the major novels of Jane Austen as well as four more works by Henry James and two more by E.M. Forster. The team that directed, produced and wrote *A Room with a View* - James Ivory, Ismail Merchant and Ruth Praed Jhabvala - were to be responsible for six further films based on literary classics, mostly set in Edwardian times and often featuring the same cast of players. The two best-known of these films were released in 1991 and 1993: *Howards End* and *The Remains of the Day*. The abbreviation Merchant/Ivory duly became a shorthand description for the entire cycle.

The films shared 'a detail-rich, meandering, languorous quality' (Pidduck, 1997:172). There were 'lush locations, visually exquisite', which were 'handsomely designed and lovingly shot' (Sight & Sound, 2000). The musical scores were characterised by 'soft, tinkly piano music' (Garrett, 2007: 66). Higson, who undertook a close analysis of *Howards End* emphasised 'its period detail, its self-consciously artistic production values, its relatively conventional storytelling style, its avoidance of irony, and its slow-moving and gentle narrative about English elites of the Edwardian period' (Higson, 2003:147). Among journalistic reviewers, adjectives such as 'sumptuous', 'exquisite' and 'elegant' summed up an increasingly recognisable cinematic style containing a strong element of the nostalgic.

The question raised in this study is essentially that of how this significant body of work (significant in terms of box-office success and degree of critical attention) can be most appropriately addressed and, consequently, how the films in question can be most usefully read.

The Heritage Film: An Ideological Project

The issue of categorisation has been further complicated by the emergence of the critical category 'heritage film'. In brief, it was argued by various critics that the popularity during the Thatcher years (the 1980s) of 'nostalgic, conservative fantasies' (Higson, 1996:232) constituted a reflection in the realm of popular culture of the ideological project of the Thatcher governments: namely the reassertion of a brand of British nationalism associated with the evocation of real or imagined values from the English past –emotional reserve, elegant manners, amateurism, a love of fair play. Stuart Hall called this project one of 'reactionary modernisation' (Hall, 1988:164)– a combination of technological and industrial restructuring with a historically false, philosophically utopian and emotionally immature sense of past glories. As Corner and Harvey put it, 'enterprise' and 'heritage' formed the 'key mythic couplet for preserving the hegemonic equilibrium and momentum during a period of major national reorientation' (Corner and Harvey, 1991:4). Politically, these two terms reflected the efforts made by Thatcherite governments to stimulate the private sector at the expense of the public sector, and to counter the challenges of radical workers (the miners' strike), anti-war groups (opposition to the Falklands War) and disaffected minorities (feminists, gays, leftwing dissidents). Andrew Higson was responsible for the popularisation of the label 'heritage film' (Higson, 1995 and 2003) which then and since has been employed with a derogatory connotation.

The appearance in 1981 of *Chariots of Fire* is usually held to have initiated the cycle of 'heritage' films. The film concerned the struggle by a Jewish athlete to be accepted as a member of the British Olympic team, in other words to overcome the innate elitism and exclusiveness of the British sporting

establishment. The script was written by a prominent socialist writer, Colin Welland, and the director, Hugh Hudson, was active in left-wing politics. The film was designed to appeal to anti-elitist and anti-racist sentiment, but in fact it was the stirring patriotic scenes, notably the sequence in which the athletes run in slow-motion along the beach to the strains of 'Jerusalem', that stayed in viewers' minds. As a result, a film written and directed by socialists was abrogated by conservatives and nationalists. The British Conservative Party used the theme music for a party political broadcast, while Ronald Reagan named *Chariots of Fire* as one of his favourite films. According to Haeffner, the film 'offers a mythical view of Englishness, and a "fairytale" resolution to the main project of the narrative' (Haeffner, 1997:78).

Another Country (1984) was also a film whose original intentions were distorted in the popular imagination. The story made a target of political and sexual bigotry (the two main characters were a communist and a homosexual), but stronger than this was the sense of a lost idyll of Britain, suggested by the hymn from which the title was taken: 'There's another country I heard of long ago; her ways are ways of gentleness and all her paths are peace.' These sentiments did not correspond to Thatcher's aggressive foreign policy, but the sense of nostalgia was overpowering. The defeat of extremism and fanaticism in an English public school –which constituted the film's principal theme– was seen as mirroring the triumph of moderate liberal values in the society at large. (Moderate liberalism, it should be pointed out, was the guise in which Thatcherite values of free trade and minimal regulation were then presented.)

These two films put 'nostalgia' in film at the heart of the critical debate. Writing of Merchant/Ivory's *Room with a View* in the British film magazine *Sight and Sound*, Cairns Craig asked his readership to 'imagine a film with scenes shot in Cambridge Colleges and lush English countryside set to an accompaniment of horse-drawn carriages'. The predominance of the genre in the 1980s, he claimed, was 'symptomatic of the crisis of identity through which England passed during the Thatcher years. It is film as conspicuous consumption. We are indulged with a perfection of style designed to deny everything beyond the self-contained world the characters inhabit ... a theme park of the past' (Craig, 1991:10). Richard Dyer referred to 'the museum pleasures' of a longed-for experience of gracious nineteenth century living (Dyer, 1994:17). Claire Monk attacked the heritage film for its 'innate escapism' and its promotion of a 'conservative, bourgeois, pastoral national identity' (Monk, 1995:5).

In his reading of *Howards End*, Higson (Higson, 2003:171-173) drew attention to: 'the general emphasis on character rather than action'; how grand buildings were 'framed in order to capture as much of the architectural splendour as possible; the way in which opportunities were taken to 'display fine authentic period artefacts'. Higson employed the expression 'the aesthetics of display' to summarise these techniques. The average shot length in *Howards*

End was nearly nine seconds, he calculated, more than twice the average for contemporary Hollywood films and closer to the more leisurely pace of classic Hollywood. Long and medium shots were preferred, with the close-up almost entirely abandoned, enabling the visual emphasis to fall as much on the background as on the characters themselves. Characters were often viewed from the middle distance, in the setting of elegantly landscaped parkland or elaborately furnished interiors. Journalistic reviews of heritage movies in radical periodicals were dismissive. James Bowman referred to *Howards End* as 'a designer movie ... a way of conveying a simulacrum of artistic experience to those who are not interested in the real thing but only in having their good taste ratified'. The reviewer in the *Morning Star*, a Communist daily, commented that the film was 'blatantly commodified', and 'pickled in the formaldehyde of nostalgia' (quoted by Higson 2003:183 and 185).

Such comments are indicative of the increasing polarisation of British politics in the late 1980s and early 1990s as it became clear that Thatcher's reforms constituted an attack not only on left-wing beliefs and trades unionist politics but on the idea of social democracy. There was in the reaction a clear class-based antagonism, which tends in Britain (and elsewhere) to become fiercer at times of divisive political activity - in this case, Thatcher's decision to force pit closures in the mining sector and to curtail the rights of workers in industrial disputes. Cinema thus became implicated in a political debate (an unusual development in a country where art has generally enjoyed a detached intellectual status rather remote from the 'real world') and the costume drama became conflated with the 'heritage film', principally on the basis of *Chariots of Fire* and *Another Country*, both of which had little in common with the screen adaptations of literary classics and in which 'period costume' was of very marginal significance. As a result, the cinematic and discursive features of costume drama as a genre became buried under an ideological debate that was impertinent. A convincing case can be made (and has been made by Higson, Dyer et. al.) for the emergence in British cinema for a certain form of patriotic nostalgia which can be connected with major developments of the Thatcher era, notably the Falklands War (1982) and the miners' strike (1984), but this notion of the political exploitation of 'heritage' belongs to a specific era and should properly be restricted to a relatively small number of films.

Costume Drama as Revival of the Women's Film

Costume drama of the 1990s also provoked a very different strain of critical appreciation, which applauded the depiction of independently-minded heroines and sensitive treatments of the woman's point of view. This was recognised even by those concerned with the ideological implications of the heritage film. Higson wrote: 'It becomes very clear that what I call the heritage film could equally be classed as a modern variant of the woman's picture. The relative popularity of such texts does not necessarily indicate that audiences are

buying into a fantasy of the national past, or an international mythology of Englishness. It may on the contrary be that audiences are engaging with the films as dramas of romance and desire' (Higson, 2003:167). Monk connected this engagement with what she called 'feminine narrative pleasures: concern for character, place, atmosphere and milieu rather than for dramatic, goal-oriented action' (Monk, 1997:3-4). With particular reference to *Room with a View* and *Maurice*, she suggests that such films 'treat the journeys of personal and sexual identity with an unpretentious humanity that itself constitutes a serious politics of sex and self, while offering plentiful post-modern pleasures: of the performative, of self-referentiality and irony'. She alluded to *Room with a View*'s 'queered, gender-scrambled, deeply ambiguous celebration of female desire' (Monk, 1995:34).

Women directors and women writers are conspicuous in the recent history of costume drama. Using a broad definition of the term, Higson identifies twelve women directors, eleven women screenwriters and over twenty women producers involved in the making of such films during the period 1980 - 2000 (Higson, 2003:268-270). The directors include Mira Nair (*Vanity Fair*), Patricia Rozema (*Mansfield Park*) and Jane Campion (*Portrait of a Lady*), and among the writers are Ruth Praed Jhabvala (six Merchant/Ivory productions) and Emma Thompson (*Sense and Sensibility*). For *Sense and Sensibility*, Thompson 'tweaked the novel in order to strengthen the female characters and place the sisters' relationship at its heart' (Garrett, 2007:31), while Patricia Rozema's adaptation of *Mansfield Park* (1998) inserted scenes of explicit sexuality, as well as fragments of dialogue, which were not present in the original story (Pidduck, 1998:388), including the following exchange between the protagonists:

Elinor: You talk of feeling idle and useless. Imagine how that is compounded when one has no hope or choice of any occupation whatsoever.

Edward: Our circumstances then are precisely the same.

Elinor: Except that you will inherit your fortune. We cannot even earn ours.

Pidduck refers to such additions as part of a 'liberal feminist update', but they closely matched passages which were to be found in the pages of the novels. For example, in *Persuasion*, the heroine Anne Elliott addresses Captain Benwick as follows: 'We live at home, quiet, confined and our feelings prey upon us. You are forced on exertion. You have always a profession, pursuits, business of some sort or other, to take you back into the world immediately...' (Austen, 1993:221). The fact is that in the works of nineteenth century writers such as Austen, Thackeray and Eliot, there existed independently-minded heroines who required no 'updating' - Emma Wodehouse in *Emma* or Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair*. Becky Sharp in Thackeray's story (written in 1847) was ambitious, manipulative and ruthless, more than a match for the male characters who might have been expected to direct her fate.

More than any other writer, Jane Austen has influenced the theme, tone and setting of the British costume drama, especially in the period 1995 - 2005 when screen adaptations of *Sense and Sensitivity*, *Persuasion*, *Emma*, *Mansfield Park* and *Pride and Prejudice* were released. The heroines of Austen's novels were intelligent, brave young women who, despite the social and legal disadvantages affecting them in the early nineteenth century, maintained and expressed a sense of their individual worth. Austen herself had refused the chance of a 'good' marriage (one which would have restored the family's fortunes) because she would not agree to marriage without love. Even though she was one of eight children (six of them boys), her father consistently encouraged her literary ambitions and took the lead in attempts to find publishers. Her juvenile writings were remarkable for their boldness and originality, and her discriminating, perceptive mind was from the start the clue to her success as a writer. All of her heroines insist (as far as possible) on directing their own destinies, which has been admired by women readers ever since. Inevitably, the plots of her stories focus on the search by young women for a husband with property or wealth, since that was the most important feature, emotionally, socially and economically, of the lives of women in the society in which Austen lived. The novels reveal a very 'modern' awareness of the legal and physical restrictions that women confronted, in particular the degree to which women were vulnerable to the character and behaviour of their husbands, the exclusion of women from property rights and 'the claustrophobic, oppressive nature of Victorian gender expectations and women's confinement to the domestic sphere' (Garrett, 2007:147), all of which made both divorce and the unmarried state so difficult to contemplate.

The problem of women's lack of property rights was a significant theme in Sally Potter's *Orlando* (1992), based on the modernist novel by Virginia Woolf. When Orlando becomes a woman, she can no longer inherit the family mansion. She is informed that she is 'legally dead, and a woman, which is tantamount to the same thing.' The language has altered during the passage of more than a hundred years between Austen's writing and Woolf's, but neither the issue itself nor the awareness of it has substantially changed between the pre-Victorian epoch of *Pride and Prejudice* and the modernist, 'emancipated' era of Bloomsbury. Virginia Woolf's celebrated comment in *A Room of One's Own* - 'A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction' - might have been made by Jane Austen, whose last years were blighted by worries over money and a home, for which the actions of the men of her family were responsible. What I wish to emphasise here is that to view costume drama as an innately conservative genre is to ignore the strongly feminist nature of much of the original source material. As Garrett suggests, 'the subjective focus of costume drama is the ideal vehicle for addressing woman's historical oppression' (Garrett, 2007:153).

Post-heritage, Post-modern and Post-colonial Developments

Discussing films such as Potter's *Orlando*, Campion's *The Piano* (1993) and Christopher Hampton's *Carrington*, Claire Monk proposed a category of 'post-heritage film'. The proposal was founded mainly on the depiction of 'transgressive sexuality', a central narrative element in these films. Yet her argument is weakened by the fact that homosexuality had been a key feature of earlier films, including *Another Country* (1984) and *Maurice* (1987) as well as the televised version of *Brideshead Revisited* (1981). Monk herself suggests: 'the post-heritage film's upfront sexuality owes rather more to its heritage predecessors than the post-heritage filmmaker might like to think' (Monk, 1995:7). In addition, the categorisation of *The Piano* and *Carrington* as 'heritage films' is problematic, for the reasons discussed in the introduction to this essay, but especially because of the absence from both films of the appeal to *nostalgia*. Accordingly, they also lack the typical elements of *mise-en-scène*: the emphasis on architectural and aesthetic details, the leisurely chronological narrative, the sumptuous environments. It would seem more useful to view the so-called 'post-heritage' films as a development or elaboration of the earlier films in the cycle. *Orlando* in particular is unlikely to have been made in that way at that time without the precedents of the previous decade, which it both complements and, to an extent, parodies.

There were other kinds of development within the genre. Pamela Church Gibson identified in the historical drama *Elizabeth* a 'postmodern and generic hybridity ... a fissuring and fracturing in the monolith of heritage' (Church Gibson, 2000). These 'hybrid' elements may derive, at least in part, from the direction of the Indian director Shekhar Kapur, who described himself as 'an Indian who knew nothing about British history', referring to his recruitment as director of the film as 'the revenge of the colonials' (quoted by Higson, 2003:199). Higson commented that Kapur's films were marked by a particular kind of irreverence (for international diplomacy, court rites and etiquettes, and the dignity of the Queen herself), which he associated with Kapur's atypical background. Kapur was at that time chiefly known for his 1994 film *Bandit Queen*, an account of a female leader of Indian bandits. Similarly, when Indian director Mira Nair was chosen to direct *Vanity Fair*, her previous film had been *Monsoon Wedding* (2001), also a satire of upper class manners, but in the very different milieu of late twentieth century Delhi. The phenomenon of Indian directors directing British costume dramas may initially have derived from the strong Indian connections of Merchant/Ivory. Ismail Merchant was himself of Indian origin and one of his first collaborations with Ivory was a documentary on Bombay street-musicians. In a review of a book about the films of Merchant/Ivory, Alison Light emphasised the 'cosmopolitan' and 'cross-cultural' aspect of their work (Light, 1992).

'The revenge of the colonials' raises an issue discussed by Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* in his close examination of Austen's *Mansfield Park*. Said argues that the absence from Austen's works of any awareness of Britain's eighteenth and early nineteenth century colonial ventures is not a matter of ignorance or neglect. 'The Bertrams of *Mansfield Park*,' he points out, 'could not have been possible without the Slave Trade, sugar, and the colonial planter class' (Said, 1993:112), detailing Austen's clear references to the source of Sir Thomas Bertram's wealth and his visits to his plantations in Antigua. He stops short of accusing Austen of concealing an important historical truth, merely describing her as 'most economical' on this point and, in a later passage, alluding to the 'aesthetic silence or discretion of a great novel' (*ibid.* 113). At one point in *Mansfield Park*, Fanny Price reminds her cousin that after her question to Sir Thomas about the slave trade, 'There was such a dead silence'. Said assumes from this, and 'from everything we know about Austen and her values' (*ibid.* 115), that the subject was avoided, but not exonerated. Following Said, Julianne Pidduck includes among the characteristic 'movement-images' of British costume drama, 'the frame of colonial space that lurks just off the page of Austen's novels' (Pidduck, 1998:392). She points out that in *Persuasion*, the 'five and twenty thousand pounds' with which Captain Wentworth returned from his naval career and which enabled him to be considered 'good' enough to marry Anne Elliott, also derived from colonial ventures.

Icons and Audiences

As with Said, Pidduck does not make the avoidance of the colonial background into an ideological issue. For her, the function of the 'colonial space' is as a counterpoint to the physically restricted life of the nineteenth century woman. She claims that this sense of physical restriction is more sharply defined in the novels than in the screen versions. In the former, the focus is on 'dialogue and mannered interiors', in the latter there is 'a more dramatic emphasis on the picturesque outdoors ... the staging of an iconic "nostalgic" countryside' (*ibid.* 386). It is here - as Pidduck suggests by her use of the word 'iconic' - that the films depart from the novels, in the sense of inserting an additional level of meaning. Evidently the landscapes of formal gardens and parks could not have been 'iconic' to the contemporary inhabitants, since they were merely a part, however agreeable, of the physical environment. No particular emphasis is given to trees, flowers, fields or views in Austen's writing, or indeed in that of Thackeray, James or Forster. They provide the background to events but no more than that. What Pidduck implies is that the way in which the camera dwells especially on the countryside transforms a physical environment into an 'icon', in other words an object of veneration. Higson supports this reading, even employing the same metaphor: 'the alluring spectacle of iconographic stability' which provides 'an impression of an unchanging, traditional and always delightful and desirable England' (Higson, 1996:240). Higson, as we have seen, was responsible for the term 'heritage

film' and its essentially pejorative value, but he seems unsure whether the 'love affair' between the camera and the landscape is a source of a weakness or strength in the films. *Howards End* is 'gentle and tasteful', he wrote. The attention to period detail was dictated by the need for 'as full a diegesis and as convincing a setting as possible' ... 'it is clear from the way that the film is organized that it works as a heritage film and draws on the conventions of art cinema' (Higson, 2003:174). Here he appears to be saying that the film is aesthetically pleasing and successful, which is far from criticising it as in some sense manipulative or false. He even suggests that 'the mise-en-scène of desire is also the mise-en-scène of heritage' (*ibid.* 167), implying that the objective of the film (*Howards End* in this case) was to tell a moving love story and not to evoke some generalised nostalgia for the past as a way of degrading, or disguising, the present.

The elaboration of the period detail in the British costume dramas provides the means by which nostalgia is conveyed. In other words, the nostalgia among audiences of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century is evoked by a privileged viewing of landscapes, buildings, furnishings and other objects the collective impact of which is to recall a more 'graceful' or more tasteful age and which make up the 'aesthetics of display'. From this aesthetic, Sheldon Hall argues, 'can be extrapolated a typical heritage spectator: uncritical, indiscriminating, a passive and complacent consumer of images' (Hall, 2001:196). The typical audience for costume dramas is generally somewhat older and more 'literary' than the average cinema audience. According to Higson, films such as *Shadowlands* (Attenborough, 1993), *The Remains of the Day* (Merchant/Ivory, 1993) and *The Age of Innocence* (Scorsese, 1993) were 'overwhelmingly favoured by women, by older cinemagoers and by more upmarket cinemagoers' (Higson, 2003:102). It can be assumed, he claims, that members of such audiences visit the cinema more rarely than younger audiences, but there is no evidence that they will be less critical or less discriminating than younger and more regular cinemagoers. It has been established by figures provided by Cinema and Video Industry Audience Research that costume dramas tend to attract the same socio-economic class of audiences as art-house films, which means those who also frequent art galleries and concerts of classical music (CAVIAR, 1995: 93/94) and therefore unlikely to be 'passive and complacent consumers'. Sheldon Hall argues that the 'extrapolation' of this typical audience is based on a mistaken idea of the appeal of the 'aesthetics of display'. 'One could argue,' he writes, 'that such enjoyment (vocalised or otherwise) is not confined to heritage or women's films, but is basic to the appeal of the cinema itself. It is in the nature of cinema's representational "realism" (a term here to be understood in its broadest sense: the photographic reproduction of real places and things) that the richness of film images of locations, sets, costumes, objects, and actors, almost always exceeds their assigned dramatic or narrational functions' (Hall, 2001:196).

Conclusion

The conflation of the British costume drama of the 1980s and 1990s with a genre of heritage film having an implicit, ideological message requires re-evaluation. The first problem is that the parameters of the proposed genre have not been clearly established, and the effect of this is the aggregation of films which in fact have little in common. The heritage debate, as we have seen, initially focused on three films and a television series of the early 1980s, namely *Chariots of Fire*, *Another Country*, *Room with a View* and the television series *Brideshead Revisited*. Only the last of these, *Brideshead Revisited*, expressed the nostalgic sense of Englishness in an English setting which is held to be at the heart of the heritage film, and even here the idiosyncrasy of the aristocratic family and the ambivalent nature of the central relationships suggest a degree of eccentricity or even social and moral decadence which seems unlikely material for the evocation of patriotic nostalgia.

It is in fact usual for sexual ambivalence, class tensions, personal eccentricities and ethnic tensions to provide the main narrative dynamic in costume dramas with late Victorian and Edwardian settings, and there is no evidence in the narratives for the misleading *idyll* that has been the object of critical attention. This can be found only in the cinematography - the affectionate dwelling of the camera on expensive objects and buildings. The situation is rather different for the works of Jane Austen, where the aristocracy is not generally represented as decadent, and certainly not sexually ambivalent, and which seem historically more remote and therefore less recognisable to the modern mentality, economically, politically and socially. In Austen, there are no issues of Jewishness or homosexuality and, although there certainly are issues of rank and wealth, these seem, through the sceptical eyes of the writer, to be mannered and somewhat ridiculous. In Austen, undoubtedly, there is the depiction of something idyllic - connected with the absence of motor cars and the haste, rudeness and noise of an industrialised age, and the presence of a more courteous and, in some respects, more tolerant society. It is possible that this impression of an idyll originated more in the character and perceptions of the writer herself than the age she lived in.

A recent attempt to reinterpret the physical environment of Austen's families, the 2005 version of *Pride and Prejudice* directed by Joe Wright, sheds an interesting light on these issues. The effect is achieved by straightforward means: the house interiors and gardens are smaller and less opulent. The dialogue is delivered in a less stylized, more colloquial fashion. The cast is youthful and Keira Knightley, who plays the heroine, is an actress whose fame was then based on her role in the postmodern film *Bend It Like Beckham*, a girl's footballing story with an Asian heroine. Wright's *Pride and Prejudice* reveals how Austen's world is altered when 'the aesthetics of display' are not

in evidence. The result is a shrinking and democratising of the social milieu that, even if it may be more realistic historically, has the unintentional effect of lessening the impact of the wit and irony of the text, which depends on the self-conscious grandeur of the characters, their lives, their houses, their possessions. By removing or reducing those aspects, the depiction of hypocrisy, bigotry and self-centredness loses some of its acuteness.

The argument of the heritage critics is summarised as follows by Nick Haeffner: 'The apparently backward-looking nostalgic quality of films such as *Chariots of Fire*, *Another Country* and *A Room with a View* made in the 1980s can easily be linked to a form of ideology critique in which such films are seen as covertly justifying conservative values. It becomes hard to imagine these films disarticulated from the hegemonic project of Thatcherism' (Haeffner, 1997:65). It is not necessary to disagree with the first of these premises - the link between nostalgia and political conservatism - in order to point out that the subsequent development of the British costume drama, with its clearly feminist attitudes, its elements of postmodern hybridity, its post-colonial ethnic inclusiveness, its readiness to update and experiment, have become thoroughly disarticulated with any project of political hegemony. As Higson suggests, 'Nostalgia always implies there is something wrong with the present, but it does not necessarily speak from the point of right wing nationalism' (Higson, 1996:238).

More fruitful as a critical approach is to approach recent costume drama as the revival of the women's film in a rather specific form, one with a surprising potential to accommodate the shift in cinema towards a relativist and culturalist sensitivity.

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