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**The Re-invention of Tradition:  
British Cinema and International Image Markets**

This essay will explore how British national cinema has been operating in the context of international image markets in the 1990s. In doing so it seeks to address a gap left by more endogenous accounts of the development of British cinema, and indeed national cinemas generally. I will not be focusing on the detailed institutional arrangements of British cinema but instead I am going to be operating at a fairly macro-economic and cultural level in order to explore how perceptions of Britishness held by others (Americans specifically) are a key determinant in the kind of representations produced by UK filmmakers. These representations, I will suggest, are dominated by a certain nostalgic and archaic quality. However, there is a 1990s twist to this familiar story. We can trace a debate and shift within business and political circles that have sought to *modernise* an archaic image of Britishness. I will argue that the cultural and economic strategies of one key multinational player in the British film industry during the 1990s, PolyGram Films, can be understood within this wider context of Britishness as an

international commodity-image. In particular, PolyGram Films sought to modernise a traditional image of Britishness for international/American consumption. I will question how far such modernisation really challenged social myths; it is, in this respect, a pseudo-modernisation.

### **National Identity**

A defining component of modernity is the formation and conceptualisation of the nation-state, where a centralised political authority claims sovereignty over a clearly defined territory and where the formation of a national culture becomes a crucial underpinning to the national polity. So crucial is the cultural dimension, in fact, that Benedict Anderson famously defined national identity as an imagined community. This has been an influential and in many ways fruitful formulation, because it orientates analysis to the cultural making of national identity. It has also been criticised by Schlesinger as a formulation that shares nationalism's own "internalist" assumptions. This is the idea that the key processes responsible for the construction of national identity happen *within* its own borders and beyond the reach of "external" influences.<sup>1</sup> Schlesinger argues that similar assumptions have dogged the study of national cinemas. This is what I have called the endogenous bias in accounts of British cinema. My account of British cinema in this essay will therefore try and foreground the external dynamics involved in its production.

Let us start with Anderson. He argues that the nation is an imagined community in several senses. It is imagined because the nation is too extensive for its members to "know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them." Thus national

identity requires *cultural* resources by which to construct representations, and to imagine from those representations the nature of their community and connectedness.<sup>2</sup> Anderson suggests that in the crucial period of national formation in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century western Europe, the emerging print media of the novel and the newspaper played the central role of imagining the national community.<sup>3</sup> Today, of course, the cultural resources for imagining the national community are more extensive and include radio, film, television, music, the heritage industry, and so on. Despite this, and in part because of it, imagining the nation has become a good deal more complex, and indeed contradictory, than ever before.

Anderson notes that all nations are imagined as “limited,” which is to say that nations have “finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations.”<sup>4</sup> This is problematised, however, when the nation is increasingly pulled into larger geopolitical spheres of influence, as is happening with the construction of economic and (very likely) political convergence within Europe. It is also problematised when those boundaries become increasingly porous. Ernest Gellner has argued that nationalism “is the political principle which maintains that similarity of culture is the basic social bond”<sup>5</sup> and that “the boundaries of social units and of cultures...converge.”<sup>6</sup> But what if the imaginings by which the community comes to understand itself are no longer primarily self-generated? In a situation where transnational corporations and international communications networks are responsible for a global flow of images and ideas, then clearly cultures no longer neatly fit social or political units. Even when signifying practices, such as films and television programmes, are indigenously made, they are

often locked into a relationship whereby perceptions of the nation that are held by *others* are a key determinant in the kind of imaginings produced.

Linked to the crisis over the limits and effective boundaries of the nation is the crisis of sovereignty. Ideally, the national state is understood as the guarantor of a chosen mode of life and the representative of the people, even where electoral representation has been severely or totally curtailed. Yet clearly the sovereignty or autonomy of the nation is in crisis, drawn as it is into the sphere of influence of such powerful forces as: the United States, the sole remaining superpower after the collapse of the Soviet Union; multinational corporations whose investment decisions affect large swathes of national populations quite outside the power and control of national governments; the financial markets, whose global and unregulated activities (the buying and selling of currencies, speculation on prices and so on) and periodic crises once more call the ideal of the sovereign nation acting alone and through its own internally generated processes, very much into question; and financial organisations, like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the European Central Bank, and so forth, all of whom operate outside the control of, but have a significant impact on, national governments. Just as the bourgeois ideal of the individual subject operating according to its own autonomous laws has been called into question (in different ways) by Marxism, psychoanalysis and post-structuralism, so the nationalist ideal of the sovereign autonomous nation is increasingly being called into question by real world developments within global capitalism.

Anderson notes that the nation is imagined as a *community* “because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail...the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.”<sup>7</sup> This is a crucial point. While liberal commentators

on nationalism such as Gellner and Zygmunt Bauman restrict their critiques of the nation to its intolerance of cultural diversity, they tend to play down this contradiction between the comradeship through which the nation is imagined and the inequality and exploitation which actually fractures this community. Gellner, for example, has virtually nothing to say about how the political elites which dominate the state apparatus are functionally linked into national and transnational capital. Within film theory, the nation has been increasingly critiqued for its smoothing over of internal differences within the community. Yet the way in which such “differences” are conceptualised is politically crucial and there are some important choices that need to be made. One could characterise the internal differences of the national community in the way Higson does: “those communities consist of highly fragmented and widely dispersed groups of people with as many differences as similarities and with little...real physical contact with each other.”<sup>8</sup>

What gets evacuated from such a conception of the nation’s differences (which here derive from geography and individuality) is any sense of the systemic, structured and structuring unequal power relations which constitute the nation. For me, cultural difference and specificity become interesting (and explicable) when they are articulated with the social power struggles that fracture the nation. The contradiction between the national ideal that all members share the same or similar *material* interests (backed up by cultural uniformity) and the actual division of interests (and cultural plurality) within the nation, is central to what I call anti-national national films. We will return to this category at the end of the essay.

The final characteristic of national identity that is important to understand is the dynamic between tradition and modernity. Anderson notes the historical fact that nations (as defined above) are comparatively recent phenomena, around three hundred years old, which often involve, in the course of their histories, fundamental geographical, political and cultural re-alignments. National identity is thus marked by discontinuities, transformations, accretions and the contradictory jostling between various components which have accumulated in the course of history. Yet despite this, national identity is almost always seen as having roots deep into antiquity and, as a result, there is a strong tendency to dehistoricise national identity, downplaying the changes and transformations that national identity has undergone or only acknowledging and incorporating those changes when they can be slotted into a mythical timelessness.

The emphasis on tradition provides a crucial resource of legitimation when the imagined community is buffeted by crises and riven by internal fissures. Tradition stresses continuity, and, if there is to be any change at all, gradualism. In *The Invention of Tradition*, a collection of authors identify the increasing tendency towards the invention of rituals, practices and symbols in imperial Britain, particularly around the monarchy and in colonial India and Africa, towards the end of the nineteenth century. This *modern* investment in invented traditions attempts to link relatively *novel* forms of power relations and exploitation, with continuity, with the past, with what has been, as a form of legitimation for what is, in a world premised on transience and change.<sup>9</sup> Here modernity uses tradition to legitimise social relations but conversely, as we shall see, tradition can adopt a veneer of innovation and modernisation; the social motive behind this *reinvention* of tradition is, however, exactly the same.

According to Stuart Hall, the Englishness which was forged in the period of the Empire was a classic binary one, a “highly exclusive and exclusivist form of cultural identity,” in which essentialising characteristics (mostly positive) were ascribed to the English and essentialising characteristics (mostly inferior) were ascribed to the other. The English were white, the other was not, the English were masculine, the other was feminine, the English were disciplined and rational, the other was emotional or spiritual, the English were administrators, the other was administered to, the English were bourgeois, the other was not.<sup>10</sup> Best of all, the English were modern *and* traditional, while the other (if American) was either *too* modern or, if the colonised, *too* traditional and backward. One of the defining characteristics of all national identities within capitalism is this struggle to negotiate the tensions between tradition and modernity. It is this tension which has dominated political and business-derived discourses in the 1990s.

### **National Identities and International Markets**

We live in a world dominated by images. The perceptions they construct and the values and meanings that they assign to products, companies, even nations, are absolutely central to the workings of modern capitalism. This is not a new phenomenon. The early domination of world film markets by Hollywood was widely recognised as a means by which to sell all kinds of American products and ideals.<sup>11</sup> More recent phenomena, such as the rise of the branded product, extend this logic further. Naomi Klein has shown how the process of branding invests material products (Nike Shoes, Starbucks coffee, Disney, GAP, Body Shop, etc.) with culture: that is, with a particular set of meanings and values which sell much more than the product, but rather signify a way of life. Multinational

corporations are spending an increasing amount of their investment in the expensive business of this *cultural* production. In fact, branding is even more of a priority than manufacturing and so multinationals have been downsizing their own industrial base and subcontracting production out, often to the Third World where labour costs are low. This means that products can be made cheaply which leaves plenty of surplus capital around to build brands.<sup>12</sup>

Yet while multinational capital operates globally, the image bank which it draws on to brand its goods taps much of their meaning and resonance from the master-images which constitute the *national* image. The 1990s have seen a debate within British capitalism as to whether the national brand is good for business or bad for it. The Walpole Committee, for example, was set up in the early 1990s to promote a traditional Britishness. The committee's members are primarily luxury goods and service companies like Savoy, the perfumer Penhaligon, Mulberry (bags and belts) and Asprey (jewellery). Many are foreign owned, others are part of huge international conglomerates, but they all see an old style Britishness as a valuable commodity in the international image markets. For companies like the National Trust, Beefeater Gin and Walkers Shortbread, this means exploiting heritage, pageantry and the stately home imagery associated with Britishness.<sup>13</sup> Others, however, think this image is a liability: British Airways spent £60 million in ditching its Union Jack tail fins and designing fifty "global images" to replace them. Famously, they were admonished by Margaret Thatcher for doing so. Yet this switch to a "modern" cosmopolitan identity did not help shore up British Airways in a competitive market and they subsequently brought the Union Jack tailfins back.



The problem is that while a traditional branding of Britishness can signify quality, luxury and craftsmanship, research has shown that it can equally signify a backward-looking, amateur cottage industry, unable to provide the reliable quality which modern professional businesses need. Shortly after New Labour's 1997 election victory, Tony Blair, who had made "modernisation" a keyword in the party's vocabulary, attempted to rebrand Britain around "modern" industries such as design, architecture, fashion, film, television and music. Blair argued that the image which British people had of themselves, and others had of them, was that of being "stuck in the past," wonderful at pageantry, "less good at new technology."<sup>14</sup> However, Blair did not declare an all-out war on tradition. He was careful to call for a delicate blend of the two:

When I talk about Britain as a "Young Country," I mean an attitude of mind as much as anything. I mean we should think of ourselves as a country that cherishes its past, its traditions, and its unique cultural inheritance, but does not live in the past. A country that is not resting on past glories, but hungry for future success.<sup>15</sup>

Here is an example of that continual and delicate negotiation between tradition and modernity. Blair does not want to reject tradition but instead he wants to give an expanded role for the modern within conceptions of British national identity. Blair's discourse needs to be understood within the context of corporate strategies and global markets. Kevin Robins has explored the paradoxes of what he terms "enterprise" (modernisation) and "heritage" (tradition) in relation to cultural tourism. Capitalist modernisation requires shearing away from places and images of places those vestiges of tradition that are deemed regressive, outdated, backward and inhibiting to global markets and transnational corporations. Yet the very same processes of capitalist modernisation

also seek to exploit selectively constructed signifiers of heritage as signs of particularity and difference in order to offer, within global markets, something “special” about a place.<sup>16</sup>

Blair’s attempt to readjust the weighting between tradition and modernity, heritage and enterprise, was only one of the more public manifestations of a debate going on within the narrower world of corporate thinking on business and marketing strategies. An example of this debate, which has a direct bearing on the representations of Britishness by filmmakers, was drawn up by an advertising agency, BMP, the British subsidiary of the American company DDB. In addition to the significance of its general findings for cinematic representations, it is also worth noting that during the 1990s DDB Needham did marketing research and analysis for PolyGram films. The report amounted to a critical account of the negative equity of the excessively traditional British brand by exploring perceptions of Britishness held by people outside Britain. Its sample was, of course, professional business people, so it hardly counts as a representative sociological survey, yet it makes for interesting reading and has important implications for thinking about British cinema.

The report found that western Europe had the strongest sense of Britain as a country “with many differentiated characteristics.”<sup>17</sup> While the traditional images of Britain had a strong profile, it was their paradoxical combination with various signifiers of modernity, such as a multi-ethnic population, which fashioned a picture of “contrasts and contradictions.” While perceptions of Britishness varied around the world, the most “limited views of Britishness came from the US, they lacked depth and were single dimensional.”<sup>18</sup> For America, the typical associations of Britishness were: croquet,

teatime, Robin Hood, tweed, castles, Henry VIII, Charles Dickens' London, aristocracy, Shakespeare, Eton, etc. The report notes that often fact and fiction, reality and myth were blurred.<sup>19</sup> The report identifies the centrality of film and television images in shaping the perceptions of Americans: "Britain is admired for its history, its culture, its traditions and its great literature and the visualisation of this in BBC drama has a big and appreciative market abroad."<sup>20</sup> Americans value the green landscape ("a manageable outdoors rather than the mythical outdoors of the US"), the history and the culture; but these positive associations also shade into negatives, even for the Americans.

There is a lack of vitality, excitement and aspiration associated with the British whose reserve and formality indicate a certain lack of warmth and intimacy. Note the importance of the audio-visual industries in constructing this image and conversely, how this image in the international markets must also set the parameters for what is produced by the audio-visual industries. Now, if we add that the American market is the most important for British film and that it is in this market that Britishness is seen in its most one-dimensional, stereotypical version, then we can see that there are powerful commercial pressures determining what images of Britain get produced. This situation also implies that a more diverse space for the production of images set in Britain might be created if the main market was western Europe. Yet that, of course, would require a greater space within the European market for European films, currently dominated by Hollywood.

The report notes that the traditional version of Britishness "has achieved a near mythical status abroad and has pervaded all perceptions of Britain."<sup>21</sup> This image has been "sold hard," and while it benefits certain companies and products, it also narrows

the British brand. “By only projecting a sense of tradition and letting nothing else through, Britain is failing to associate itself with progress.”<sup>22</sup> This failure to modernise means Britishness is increasingly linked with the negative associations of conservatism: decline, elitism, hierarchy, male dominated, white and class-ridden. The report calls for restoring the balance between tradition and modernity and concludes that:

British media output is like a national advertising campaign. If the parent brand is to be kept strong, healthy and relevant so that it can provide unique umbrella support to a broader range of brands and product categories, it is critical that Britain plays to new-found strengths which are rooted in the reality of the country today.<sup>23</sup>

### **The Politics of the Historical Drama.**

Representations of British history have been dominated by what came to be known in the 1980s as the heritage film. While these films may not represent the majority of the type of British films that are made, they do, as we have seen, have a disproportionate impact on perceptions of Britishness. The heritage film has attracted plenty of critical attention. Tana Wollen provided an early analysis of the genre (and it can fairly be labelled a genre, with its consistent iconography, cluster of themes, and even a familiar repertoire of British actors and actresses). Wollen criticises the taken-for-granted wealth which is on display in the films and the exclusive and hierarchical society which they tacitly uphold.<sup>24</sup> Wollen notes that there are “hints of something rotten” in the nostalgic representations of the past, but generally she calls for “old ghosts” to be left behind and for contemporary stories to be told. Yet while contemporary stories are important, the past, tradition, should not be left to the political right to define. There are stories and perspectives buried in the past which have to be redeemed, as Walter Benjamin argued,

by the present, just as urgently as articulating marginalised voices in the present. Indeed the two are intimately linked. Andrew Higson has argued that there is a tension within the heritage genre between a nostalgic image constructed at the level of *mise-en-scène*, with its “reassurance of apparent continuity with the past,” and narratives which suggest this past is already in decline.<sup>25</sup> However, Higson has argued that, in general, “the satire or ironic social critique” evident in the source novels of these films, such as Forster’s, are blunted by the “pictorial qualities” of a lovingly recreated *mise-en-scène* of the past.<sup>26</sup> Sarah Street by contrast argues that the social critique does sometimes come through from the source novels. In *Howards End* (James Ivory, 1991), for example, adapted from Forster’s novel, Leonard Bast’s fate “highlights the hypocritical norms of the upper-middle class.”<sup>27</sup> We could put this a little more strongly, I think. What comes into view in *Howards End* is the capricious nature of the capitalist economy, with Bast losing his income after he swaps banking jobs on the advice of the upper-middle-class characters he has befriended. In another analysis of the genre, Claire Monk’s empirical study of audiences has called into question the assumption that heritage films are peculiarly or exclusively films watched by the middle classes.<sup>28</sup>

Nevertheless, while we can find tensions and contradictions within these films and even moments of disgust, as Street notes, at the class nature of British society, critics should not let the dominance of these films inhibit us from imagining and indeed pointing to alternative modes of representing history. The domination of the aristocracy and the landed bourgeoisie in these films, the at-best muted criticism of these social strata, the virtual exclusion of the labouring classes whose exploitation the wealthy depend on, and the resistance to acknowledging the forces of change and modernity that

exist *within* the past, are all characteristic of the British heritage film. Where the British film, *The Madness of King George* (Nicholas Hytner, 1994), focuses sympathetically on the ailing monarch, the French film, *Ridicule* (Patrice Leconte, 1996), also set in the 1780s, indicts the irrational madness of the entire French aristocratic and feudal class. Clearly, then, there is a history which is internal to the nation which has seen the contours of social and cultural dominance entrench itself and then be magnified, via British film (and television), by the international image-markets.

### **PolyGram: Economic and Cultural Strategies**

During the 1990s, the Dutch-owned but British-based PolyGram Films were particularly active in attempting to plug into joint ventures with British based talent, to lift embedded cultural material into the international market, or give cultural material already well established at international level a modernising make-over. PolyGram hoped to exploit the global domination of the English language and Anglo-American cultural links to access Hollywood's domestic market while still exploiting the different cultural tastes within European markets. PolyGram Films is another example of a great hope for European cinema to compete with Hollywood. But in 1998 it was sold, along with PolyGram music, to the Canadian company Seagram who own Universal. PolyGram's parent company, Philips, the electronics giant, had decided that it needed to streamline its operations and increase shareholder returns.

Thus the profit motive claimed another interesting, if not unproblematic, cultural experiment. PolyGram had made a disastrous foray into Hollywood in the late 1970s, but their 1990s film strategy sensibly did not involve pouring money into the pockets of

Hollywood moguls. Instead PolyGram films adopted the model of the PolyGram music division which was to work through production subsidiaries or 'labels'.<sup>29</sup> PolyGram purchased Working Title for their UK production base in 1991. Phillips, which owned 75% of PolyGram, invested over \$1 billion in film production over the decade, much of which included the setting up of a US distribution arm (Gramercy). Thus it was PolyGram's ambition to become the first European investor to succeed over the long term in Hollywood. Although PolyGram had distribution arms in the UK, France, Germany, Spain, the Netherlands and Australia, the colossal investment in US distribution meant two things: firstly, they needed to make around fifteen films a year to supply the distribution arm, up to four of which would be "wide releases" on more than two thousand screens;<sup>30</sup> secondly, the films had to be geared towards success in the American market as an absolute prerequisite for financial viability.

PolyGram invested in the Scotland-set football film *The Match*, which was clearly intended to have some Atlantic cross-over appeal (it starred the American actor Tom Sizemore), but they were more successful in bankrolling and disembedding *Bean: The Ultimate Disaster Movie* (Mel Smith, 1997). At \$15 million, *Bean* was clearly intended to do well in the international market. This meant translating Rowan Atkinson's television character into cultural material with blockbuster appeal. In part the film could use the international profile which the *television* series had achieved in some territories (Australia, for example, but not America) as a profitable launching pad (the film was first released in Australia where it took \$5 million in its first week).<sup>31</sup> *Bean* eventually grossed \$235 million worldwide.<sup>32</sup> PolyGram's most successful film of the 1990s was a kind of heritage movie in contemporary guise. *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Mike Newell,

1993), starring the American actress Andie Macdowell alongside a then fairly unknown Hugh Grant, took more than \$250 million worldwide. PolyGram's *Plunkett & Macleane* (Jake Scott, 1999) tried to hybridise the heritage film, fusing it with the crime-caper movie and slotting in the Hollywood actress Liv Tyler as a co-star for the American market. *Trainspotting* (Danny Boyle, 1995) is a more complex case of cultural bricolage as Murray Smith has explored. It was funded by Channel Four but marketed and distributed by PolyGram to the tune of £850,000, almost half as much again as the film's production budget.<sup>33</sup> Drawing on PolyGram's connections and experience with the music business, the film was marketed through "outlets and sites connected with the pop and rock music culture."<sup>34</sup> The film went on to take \$75 million worldwide.<sup>35</sup> Smith shows the way *Trainspotting* draws its cultural reference points from every geographical scale, from the very local, to the regional, up through the national and then onto the global, in both the direction of the American market (the film draws on international American and British popular music culture) as well as to European and art cinema markets around the world (Smith describes the film's aesthetic as "Black magic realism").

PolyGram's cultural strategy bears a remarkable resemblance to the debates that I discussed earlier, where a one-sided over-reliance on traditional images of Britishness was beginning to be seen as a potential liability, but where a simple assertion of the modern and the cosmopolitan was also, as British Airways found out, problematic. The solution for British capital (and, by extension, transnational capital using/selling images of Britishness) was to try and negotiate some blending or reconciliation between the traditional and the modern. The advantage for PolyGram of this strategy is that it would diversify the brand they were using to try and crack the American market whilst also



hopefully proving popular in European and other world markets, which, as the BMP DDB Needham report found, had already a more diverse sense of Britishness in circulation.

### ***Elizabeth and the reinvention of tradition***

*Elizabeth* (1998), directed by the Indian filmmaker Shekhar Kapur, who made *Bandit Queen* (1994), was funded jointly by Film Four and PolyGram and had a budget of over £9 million. Film Four, of course, operates within Channel Four's government-enforced public broadcaster remit and thus has a long tradition of funding low-budget, radical, alternative or just plain quirky filmmaking. PolyGram, as we have seen, developed a cultural strategy for tapping into marginal aspects of Britishness (*Trainspotting*) for the international market and combining them with more internationally established cultural signifiers (music in this case) or giving already established traditional cultural material a new "modernising" twist. With such backing it is hardly surprising that *Elizabeth* was considered to be a little "different" from the standard heritage fare. *Time Out* declared that the "costume drama escapes its mothballs in this labyrinthine conspiracy movie."<sup>36</sup> The film's prowling camerawork, rapid cutting and disorientating camera angles (particularly the overhead shot) certainly graft a very modern sensibility of intrigue and politicking onto its historical content. My argument is that while the film is certainly different, both stylistically and thematically from other heritage films, it is still operating well within the national myth of monarchy generally and Elizabeth specifically.

In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes defines myth as the process whereby signs are lifted out of a complex of social and historical determinants. For Barthes, myth is a form of “language-robbery” in that it operates by turning a sign (say a rural landscape) into the vehicle of another sign.<sup>37</sup> This new sign is filled with the connotations of bourgeois ideology. In the case of the rural landscape, myth turns it into a terrain outside history, production, industry and conflict populating it with a certain class and ethnic exclusivity.

There are three interwoven mythical strands in *Elizabeth*. Firstly, the film purports to be the “backstory” to the mythical figure we have of Elizabeth; that is, the film is about the process by which the young Queen is transformed into the mythic Virgin Queen. The terms of this process, however, are themselves highly mythical. Secondly, the film represents Catholicism as foreign and alien to the country and the Protestant Elizabeth’s ascension to the throne as a deliverance from dark times and the authentic expression of national and religious identity. Thirdly, the film completely excludes the common people from the frame, a move which is typical of British cinema and which facilitates the disavowal of class conflict between the Tudor regime and the peasant masses.

The religious conflict at the centre of the film is certainly unusual, not only for the heritage film but for British cinema generally. The 16th-century break with the Catholic Church and the Pope and the establishment of the Church of England and Protestantism as the state-sanctioned religion has been little dwelt upon in British cinema not least, one suspects, because of the conflict within Northern Ireland. At one level, *Elizabeth* is a film that comes out of the context of the peace process in Northern Ireland for perhaps only now is it possible to explore the historical roots of British Protestantism.

However, the strategies which the film deploys to tell its story fully dehistoricises those roots and so pulls the film towards myth. The myths surrounding Elizabeth were often constructed contemporaneously to her reign. She ascended the throne in 1558 and in 1563 John Foxe's *Actes and Monuments* was published. According to Roy Strong this book was familiar to every Englishman for three centuries. Copies were placed in every Parish church. The book:

not only narrated the sufferings of Protestants under Mary but went on to cast England and the English into an heroic role, that of the chosen nation of God...English history was cast into a dramatic story in which light overcame darkness, Protestantism Catholicism, and the valiant kings of England the wicked popes of Rome.<sup>38</sup>

This is a fair description of the film's representation of Mary's rule and Elizabeth's ascension to the throne. Queen Mary's chamber is a noirish cavern, dark with shards of light coming through the windows. She herself is dressed in black and cared for by a dwarf. The film opens with an overhead shot of the persecution and burning of three Protestants. The martyrs call upon the common people to throw more wood on the fire for the flames are not sufficiently fierce to ensure a relatively quick death. The crowd respond, braving the soldiers. This is the only time that we see the common people and it serves to establish the cruelty of Mary's reign and the resistance of the people to her.

When Mary dies of a tumour, the Royal ring is passed on to her sister. Elizabeth receives the ring, the symbol of the transfer of power, in an exterior scene resonant with English iconography and contrasting starkly with Mary's dark interior scenes. A large oak tree dominates the left side of the frame. Elizabeth, right, stands atop a hill overlooking the trees and countryside below. The tree confers to Elizabeth, at this key moment of her ascension, all the qualities associated with the oak: strength, endurance,

nature, rootedness, Englishness. Yet the film itself has told us using titles at the beginning that England is *divided* between Protestantism and Catholicism. At the same time, Elizabeth's pragmatic Protestantism is represented as embodying Englishness. Since the narration never descends amongst the common people, the divisions appear to be between Elizabeth, who embodies Englishness, and a minority of Catholic nobles around her court, allied with foreign powers (France, Spain and the Pope). There is little sense of residual or strong support for Catholicism amongst the broader population, even though, upon Mary's ascension in 1553, "images of the Virgin and saints had immediately reappeared to be displayed in people's windows, having presumably been hoarded in cellars and attics."<sup>39</sup> I am not arguing that the film must be judged against a strict catalogue of facts nor that one cannot make the judgement that Elizabeth's reign laid the foundations for a more moderate role of religion in daily life than a reactionary Catholicism linked to Rome. Yet what we have here is a good example of how myth works. Elizabeth is *naturalised* as the embodiment of Englishness, the complexities of history evaporate and in its place we have a binary opposition:

Elizabeth=good=Protestant=light=England

Mary=bad=Catholicism=dark=foreignness

Nor am I imposing historical evidence on the film which it itself does not recognise. It does recognise (using titles) that England was divided, but its *cinematic* language is in contradiction with this recognition of historical reality.

Elizabeth's transformation into the Virgin Queen turns on familiar heritage territory, indeed it is a classic motif of British cinema: the individual sacrificing her or his desires for social duty, obligation and responsibility. Elizabeth is separated from her one true love by the pressures of state diplomacy and the various factions around her, which try to marry her off to either French or Spanish royalty to shore up England's fragile position. Lord Dudley's access to Elizabeth is increasingly difficult once she becomes Queen. After an assassination attempt on her, for example, Dudley is refused entry to her chamber. This separation from Elizabeth makes him vulnerable to being drawn into the intrigues being spun by the Duke of Norfolk and the Spanish ambassador.

The denouement of the film is strikingly "modern" in conception and has strong intertextual links to *The Godfather* films. In both, the climax of the struggle between contending forces is presented by cross-cutting between the central protagonist (Michael Corleone in *The Godfather* series and Elizabeth) and their enemies being assassinated by their agents (Walsingham, in *Elizabeth*), or (in *Elizabeth*) being arrested before they are officially executed. As in *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1971) the soundtrack to the murders is choral. In Coppola's film, there is an ironic juxtaposition between the religious sanctity of Michael Corleone's marriage ceremony and the murders he has sanctioned, but in *Elizabeth*, the choral music is aligned with the queen because we see her fervently praying. Interestingly, Elizabeth is now in the same dark chamber as Mary was earlier, except now the meaning of the *mise-en-scène* is very different. This is Elizabeth's moment of greatest danger, when she will succeed or fail against the conspirators. Apart from the ever-loyal Walsingham, she is all alone, except for her faith.

The only figure to escape the meticulous attentions of Walsingham is Lord Dudley. Elizabeth keeps him alive and free, despite his involvement with the conspirators, as a constant memory of how close love brought her to danger. Her repudiation of sexual intimacy as compromising her independence and power, her repression of feeling and desire, lays the basis for her visual transformation into the mythic figure of the Virgin Queen. In a key exchange between Elizabeth and Walsingham under a statue of the Virgin Mary, Walsingham advises her that in effect she too must be made of stone in order to reign supreme. Elizabeth notes that the Madonna had such power to move men's hearts. Walsingham suggests that men must be able to "touch the divine here on Earth" and that Elizabeth must replace, in men's hearts, the Catholic worship of idols with the profane worship of rulers. In the next scene we see the process by which Elizabeth is transformed into the myth of the Virgin Queen. The long flowing hair of her youth is cut off by her tearful lady-in-waiting. This emotion already contrasts with Elizabeth's stony facial expression. The displacement of emotion to the lady-in-waiting marks the passage Elizabeth is already making from desire to duty, from self to social obligation. This is the archetypal self-legitimising myth of Britain's social elites. We see the preparation of the distinctive white face paint that will turn pink flesh into a cold white pallor. "I have become a Virgin," Elizabeth intones. When she enters the court her figure is strongly backlit with a blinding white light signifying her transformation and transcendence beyond mere men. "Observe," she instructs one of her trusted advisors, Lord Burleigh, "I am married to England." Now, for the first time we see the iconic representation of Elizabeth that has been handed down in numerous portraits: her hair is now fanned distinctively over the top of her head, decorated with

crowns and jewels, her face has been caked in white make-up and she wears a vast ruff. Elizabeth the young woman has become Elizabeth “the myth;” yet this backstory is itself mythical.

Interestingly, the conversation between Walsingham and Elizabeth draws on a view widely held by historians that representations of Elizabeth attempted to construct her as a Protestant substitute for the Virgin Mary, filling, as Helen Hackett notes, “a post-Reformation gap in the psyche of the masses.”<sup>40</sup> This, of course, is Walsingham’s interpretation and there is nothing in the film to contradict him because the masses have been effectively screened out. That the film draws on this historiographic analysis undercuts one obvious objection to my analysis: that it is a film and not historiography. The two cannot in fact be so cleanly separated. The problem with the historiographic analysis of the historians (and the film), is precisely that it constructs that horizontal comradeship which Anderson noted conceals the vertical power relations between rulers and ruled within the nation. Panegyric paintings, poetry and songs were the propaganda products of the Court, which aimed at securing Elizabeth’s rule at particular moments of weakness or vulnerability.<sup>41</sup> Thus here we are, at the start of the twenty-first century, with the means of advanced mass technological representation at our disposal, recycling myths some four hundred and fifty years old. If the aura of an institution like the monarchy has at times been undermined by exposure to the mass media, *Elizabeth* revives the aura (with its attendant myths of national unity between the ruling and subaltern classes and the ruling elite’s favourite myth that their privileged position is channelled into duty and self-sacrificial social obligation) with a vengeance.<sup>42</sup>

### **Anti-National National Cinema**

None of this is to imply that the dynamics I have been outlining are the only ones operating on British cinema or that there are not other films which are being made which do not fit into this pseudo-modernisation and Atlanticist-orientated model which I have been critiquing. There is a current of what I would call anti-national national films also being made. The films in this category are defined by their critique of the myth of *community* which underpins national identity; the myth, that is, of that deep horizontal comradeship which overlays the actual relations of a divided and fractured society. The myth of unity and shared interests is a powerful means for legitimising the social order. These films are national insofar as they display an acute attunement to the specific social, political and cultural dynamics within the territory of the nation, but they are anti-national insofar as that territory is seen as a conflicted zone of unequal relations of power. The scandalously under-appreciated work (within the UK) of Ken Loach with such films as *Riff Raff* (1991), *Raining Stones* (1993), *Ladybird Ladybird* (1994), would be examples, as would *Brassed Off* (Mark Herman, 1996), *Face* (Antonio Bird, 1997) *Century* (Steven Poliakoff, 1993) and *Mansfield Park* (1999). The latter film radically updates Jane Austen's source novel by, among other things, imaginatively filling in the silences within Austen's text concerning the source of Sir Thomas's wealth (the slave plantation in Antigua). One could make a case for *Trainspotting* as an anti-national national film while British Asian films—such as *Wild West* (1992), *Bhaji On The Beach* (1993), and *East is East* (1999)—also fit into this category insofar as the nation-state has imagined itself as being underpinned by a homogeneous culture which has in turn legitimised racial exclusion or marginality.



Nevertheless, in terms of profile and weight, both within Britain and outside it, those films conforming to the dominant dynamics of the international image markets do make it difficult for other voices and representations to come through. Take for example *Century*, which stands in a very different tradition of historical drama from the one that dominates British cinema. It demonstrates that British filmmakers can tackle the past in ways which do not succumb to a cloying nostalgia, to myth and to an affirmation of the social order. Poliakov's film explores how the class, gender and ethnic divisions of late nineteenth-century Britain informed science, eugenics and a social conformity and authoritarianism which eventually led to European fascism. The film *constellates* the *fin de siècle* with our own millennial hopes and anxieties. The concept of the constellation was developed by the Marxist philosopher and historian Walter Benjamin. A constellation is the technique of arranging historical materials from different points of time (and possibly space) in order to construct miniature "flashes" or illuminations of historical truth.<sup>43</sup> Benjamin utterly rejected a historiography which constructed a seamless continuum between past and present. Such a continuum is precisely what myth constructs. Myth turns what is historically transitory into a timeless, a-historical story. For example, *Elizabeth* depicts the Queen's successful consolidation of Protestantism as the embodiment of Englishness, thus retrospectively imposing the closure of Protestant victory onto what was an open-ended and volatile situation.

Yet at the same time, *Century's* fate at the box-office also suggests that while such films can occasionally get made, the wider culture in which audience expectations get formed is hardly conducive to fostering such films and providing them with anything but the most negligible profile in the marketplace. The film, funded by the BBC as part

of a small slate of productions intended for theatrical release, opened in three central London cinemas and took a mere £6,296 in three days.<sup>44</sup> It had a three-week run in central London, but was down to one cinema in the final week. Compare this with a star-driven vehicle such as *The Remains of the Day* (James Ivory 1993) —also, co-incidentally, an examination of fascism—which opened in central London a few weeks earlier in four cinemas, and took £70,196 over the first three days.<sup>45</sup> The different marketing and organisational powers behind the two films (*The Remains of the Day* was distributed by Columbia Pictures) only partly accounts for the films' respective box-office performance. Equally significant is the cultural pattern of expectations as to what constitutes a British historical drama. *The Remains of the Day* fits very comfortably into the traditional iconography of the historical drama, with its country-house setting, rural life, upstairs-downstairs scenario and narrative of sexual repression, albeit with a critique of the link between the repression of emotions and feelings and the conformism of the butler Stevens (Anthony Hopkins) to his fascist-leaning lord (James Fox). However, as a metaphor for investigating fascism, the country-house domain hardly taps into some of the modern dynamics of fascism, not least that it is a political response on the part of the ruling classes to contain the emancipatory desires of the industrial working class. Although it is impossible to prove, my hunch is that if *Century* had been a French film it would have had a more receptive audience in its domestic market and possibly abroad as well.

## Conclusion

In its analysis on national branding, the DDB Needham report called for the reconstruction of “Britishness” rooted in contemporary realities. But the aim of this rebranding was to facilitate the selling of commodities trading in Britishness. The strategy of PolyGram, for whom DDB Needham worked, counts as one example of this attempt to rebrand Britishness. The failure of PolyGram reflects the massively unequal power structures within a film industry dominated globally by Hollywood. This dominance is the result of the market reinforcing already built-in advantages. What the market does at an economic level it also does at a cultural level, reinforcing the built-in advantages which a certain already established cultural and ideological field has already obtained. “Modernisation,” then, is essentially the word used for indicating some updating of these economic and cultural skews. But this updating takes place well within the parameters of power and inequality already established. It is the grafting of innovation onto the old; it is the line of least resistance. This is the route followed by PolyGram’s attempts to modernise traditional British cultural material, hence it is a pseudo-modernisation. PolyGram’s cultural ambitions were limited because their project was driven by powerful commodifying forces, making huge capital investments to achieve global mass market success in order to amortise costs and reap profits (PolyGram Films in fact never broke even). If the ideological skews in the cinematic representation of Britishness are to be addressed more successfully, they are likely to need a different set of institutional arrangements and cultural ambitions, one in which the American market is almost certainly *not* the primary one.

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**Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> P. Schlesinger, "The Sociological Scope of 'National Cinema,'" in M. Hjort and S. Mackenzie, eds., *Cinema and Nation* (London: Routledge, 2000), 22-23.
- <sup>2</sup> B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1986), 15.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.
- <sup>5</sup> E. Gellner, *Nationalism* (London: Phoenix, 1997), 3.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.
- <sup>7</sup> B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 16.
- <sup>8</sup> A. Higson, 'The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema,' in Hjort, 66.
- <sup>9</sup> E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
- <sup>10</sup> S. Hall, "The Local and The Global: Globalization and Ethnicity," in A. D. King, ed., *Culture, Globalization and the World System* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991) 20-21.
- <sup>11</sup> T. H. Guback, "Hollywood's Foreign Markets," in Tino Balio, ed., *The American Film Industry* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 466.
- <sup>12</sup> N. Klein, *No Logo* (London: Flamingo Press, 2000), 195-229.
- <sup>13</sup> J. Finch, *The Guardian*, 14 June 1997, 30.
- <sup>14</sup> J. Meikle, *The Guardian*, 18 September 1997, 3.
- <sup>15</sup> T. Blair, *The Guardian*, 22 July 1997, 17.
- <sup>16</sup> K. Robins, "Tradition and translation: national culture in its global context," in John Corner and Sylvia Harvey, eds., *Enterprise and Heritage, Crosscurrents of National Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991), 38.
- <sup>17</sup> A. Elwes, *Nations For Sale*, BMP DDB Needham, 1994, 19.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.
- <sup>24</sup> T. Wollen, "Over our shoulders: Nostalgic screen fictions for the 1980s," in Corner, 181.
- <sup>25</sup> A. Higson, "Re-presenting the National Past: Nostalgia and Pastiche in the Heritage Film," in L. Friedman, ed., *British Cinema and Thatcherism* (London: University College Press, 1993), 128.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.
- <sup>27</sup> S. Street, *British National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1997), 105.
- <sup>28</sup> C. Monk, "Heritage films and the British cinema audience in the 1990s," *Journal of Popular British Cinema*, 2, 1999, 22-38.
- <sup>29</sup> A. Rawsthorn, *Financial Times*, 30 August 1997, 7.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>33</sup> M. Smith, "Transnational Trainspotting," in J. Stokes and A. Reading, eds., *The Media In Britain* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), 219.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.
- <sup>35</sup> A. Rawsthorn, *Financial Times*, 26 July 1997, 7.
- <sup>36</sup> John Pym, ed., *Time Out* (London: Penguin, 1999), 304.
- <sup>37</sup> R. Barthes, *Mythologies* [Paris, 1957], trans. Annette Lavers (London: Paladin, 1986), 131.
- <sup>38</sup> R. Strong, *The Story Of Britain* (London: Hutchinson, 1996), 197.
- <sup>39</sup> H. Hackett, *Virgin Mother, Maiden Queen: Elizabeth I and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1995), 63.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 7
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

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<sup>42</sup> M. Wayne, "Constellating Walter Benjamin and British Cinema: a Study of *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933)," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 19.2, 2002.

<sup>43</sup> S. Buck-Morss, *Walter Benjamin and The Arcades Project* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1989).

<sup>44</sup> *Screen International* 939, 7-14 January 1994, 32.

<sup>45</sup> *Screen International* 934, 19-25 November 1993, 22.