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The Re-invention of Tradition:

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.[1] 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

often locked into a relationship whereby perceptions of the nation that are held by *other*s 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

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."[8]

What gets ev

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.[10] 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.[11] 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.[12]

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 me
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.

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."[14] 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.[15]

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.[16]

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."[17] 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."[18] For America, the typical associations of Britishness were: croquet,

the British brand. “By only projecting a sense of tradition and letting nothing else through, Britain is failing to associate itself with progress.”[22] This failure to modernise me

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.[25] 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.[26] 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."[27] 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.[28]

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

Hollywood moguls. Instead PolyGram films adopted the model of the PolyGram music division which was to work through production subsidiaries or 'labels'.[29] 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;[30] 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

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.[33] 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."[34] The film went on to take $75 million worldwide.[35] Smith shows the way *Trainspotting* draws its cultural reference points from every geographical scale, from t0(u)-14 .4r

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 mi

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.[38]

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

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 ferverently 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

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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

Anti-National National Cinema

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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 psuedo-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.

Notes

[1] P. Schlesinger, "The Sociological Scope of 'National Cinema,'" in M. Hjort and S. Mackenzie, eds., *Cinema and Nation* (London: Routledge, 2000), 22-23.
[2] B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1986), 15.
[3] Ibid., 25.
[4] Ibid., 16.
[5] E. Gellner, *Nationalism* (London: Phoenix, 1997), 3.
[6] Ibid., 6-7.
[7] B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 16.
[8] A. Higson, 'The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema,' in Hjort, 66.
[9] E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
[10] 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.
[11] T. H. Guback, "Hollywood's Foreign Markets," in Tino Balio, ed., *The American Film Industry* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 466.
[12] N. Klein, *No Logo* (London: Flamingo Press, 2000), 195-229.
[13] J. Finch, *The Guardian*, 14 June 1997, 30.
[14] J. Meikle, *The Guardian*, 18 September 1997, 3.
[15] T. Blair, *The Guardian*, 22 July 1997, 17.
[16] 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.
[17] A. Elwes, *Nations For Sale*, BMP DDB Needham, 1994, 19.
[18] Ibid., 23.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid., 27.
[21] Ibid., 29.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid., 31.
[24] T. Wollen, "Over our shoulders: Nostalgic screen fictions for the 1980s," in Corner, 181.
[25] 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.
[26] Ibid.,119.
[27] S. Strtr 164 0 TD 0.0029 Tc -0.0029 Tw [(B)6.8(r)-1(itish C)9.2(i)-4.8(nem)10.6(a)2.9( )]TJ 6.6071 0 TD 0.0022 Tc -0.ecm

[42] 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.
[43] S. Buck-Morss, *Walter Benjamin and The Arcades Project* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1989).
[44] *Screen International* 939, 7-14 January 1994, 32.
[45] *Screen International* 934, 19-25 November 1993, 22.