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Consuming Heritage: Identity, Culture and Heritage

Daniel Clarke

On 30 September 2016, the University of Leeds hosted a one-day conference entitled "Consuming Heritage: Identity, Culture and Heritage", organised by Michael Samuel, a television studies PhD candidate in the University's School of Languages, Cultures and Societies. The conference received financial support from the White Rose College of the Arts and Humanities. The keynote speaker was Professor Andrew Higson (York). Speakers were invited to consider issues of identity and heritage, arising from artistic reinterpretations of the past. In the call for papers, the organiser drew upon the work of Jerome de Groot. Writing in *Remaking History: The Past in Contemporary Historical Fictions*, de Groot argues that:

> It is necessary to look on novels, or films, or plays, or games, or TV series, not as poor versions of history, nor within a binary wherein they are at the margins of centrifugal historical culture, nor as parasites on "proper" historical knowledge and practice, but as establishing modes of historical awareness, engagement, narrativization, and comprehension. (6)

This statement by de Groot was used to provoke an interdisciplinary dialogue on history as product for consumption in contemporary culture. The stated focus was on how popular visual and oral media can be used to present contentious historical narratives. The organisers welcomed contributions from a range of media, including film, television, radio, pageantry and re-enactment, tourism, storytelling, propaganda, photography, painting, sculpture and poetry. The organiser completed his call with an ostensibly simple question, designed to encapsulate the aim of the day: "how do these cultural experiences inform notions of heritage, and (re-)construct identities of both the past and their respective present?" As I would later discover, a seemingly straightforward question can inspire a cornucopia of creative responses and intellectually provocative discussion.

Paul Cooke and Alan O'Leary, both from the University of Leeds, opened proceedings. Cooke presented a video outlining his AHRC-funded project entitled: "Using Digital Tools to Challenge Xenophobia and Support International Development in South Africa". The video comprised of a series of interviews with the citizens of South African communities, exploring their experiences of xenophobia. The footage was accompanied by commentary and critical analysis from Cooke and his colleagues. By confronting social issues through community filmmaking, Cooke and his team adhered to the central aims of their project: "to consider film as a tool for generating Soft Power in developing nations with emergent economies" (Cooke, 2017). The focus on xenophobia is highly salient in an emergent economy such as South Africa. Industrial growth begets increased migration and community restructuring and, thus, awareness of the outsider, the cultural and ethnic Other,

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gains primacy in these rapidly changing societies. Cooke and his team aim to replicate this project, with filming in Germany and Eastern Europe forthcoming.

O'Leary built upon his essay "Towards World Heritage Cinema (Starting from the Negative)". His response was rooted in the structuralist tradition, proposing that there is an iconographic sense of world heritage sites used in film, including monuments such as The Great Wall of China or Egypt's Valley of the Kings as backdrops or establishing shots. O'Leary's pitch is encapsulated in a wonderfully direct epigraph taken from Philip Lutgendorf's comments on the Indian historical adventure *Jodhaa Akbar* (Ashutosh Gowariker, 2008). Of the film, Lutgendorf remarked: "It's a bit like taking a vacation in 16th century North India, without the risk of contracting plague or being decapitated by a warlord" (qtd. in O'Leary 63). For O'Leary, a movement towards world heritage cinema is facilitated by the dissemination of such sites for promotion by UNESCO and the international tourism industry. O'Leary's paper provoked numerous considerations for further research, such as the role of CGI-constructed or reconstructed spaces, those lost or ruined and thus modified or "touched-up" for the screen. The fusion of the real and the computer generated is a thought-provoking concept, demonstrated in recent historical adventure films, such as the Hollywood-Chinese coproduction *The Great Wall* (Zhang Yimou, 2017). Further research could be framed by Jean Baudrillard's work on the hyperreal, informed by structuralist and postmodern approaches to conceptualisations of space. Furthermore, the paper instigated a discussion of "world heritage" in relation to more obscure sites listed by UNESCO. It was considered whether more well-known sites were privileged over less recognisable ones, and whether the concept of a visual-based world heritage can lead to an essentialism, an appropriation of space and place.

The subsequent panel focused on European identity in historical and heritage film and TV. Firstly, I, Daniel Clarke (Sheffield) presented a paper on the problematic, yet perennial issue of race in casting actors for historical costume drama. I argued that film and television producers are unable to overcome the issue of authenticity when casting actors in historical film and television drama. A desire for historical fidelity continues to be privileged over a requirement for greater diversity and representation through characters and acting talent that better reflects contemporary society. Drawing upon Idris Elba's evidence to the UK parliament, as well as the 2016 #OscarsSoWhite controversy, I made the point that often there needs to be an excuse, a point of exceptionalism to cast black actors in costume dramas. For example, Amma Asante's 2014 film *Belle* tells the tale of Dido Elizabeth Belle, a mixed-race woman in Regency Era high society. I made the point that Hispanic actors in the US market have been more successful in breaking into historical drama, potentially due to perceived norms of their racial fluidity. The integration of all BAME talent into historical costume dramas—and, more broadly, all genres of film and TV—relies on a similar level of acceptance, whereby producers and audiences alike must reject obsessions with historical fidelity and instead promote the socially significant issues of representation and diversity.

Martina Lovascio (York) discussed cinema attendance in Italian audiences. Supported by graphs and charts, she traced the quantitative trends of sixties and seventies audiences in relation to historical trends. Michael Samuel, the conference organiser, discussed the relationship between nonfiction, lifestyle television in the UK and the British heritage industry. Samuel approached heritage from an experiential angle, considering how people engage with tangible heritage assets, and the ways in which they choose to participate, capture, and broadcast these experiences—from taking part in activities like afternoon tea or visiting a museum, to cooking a traditional national or regional dish—via social media

(Twitter, Instagram and Facebook). Samuel considered the role of status updates, location "check-ins", and tagged photographs across social media platforms. These were interpreted in relation to the interactive culture that exists online around the popular series *The Great British Bake Off* (2010–), which, he argued, serves as a prominent example of nonfiction heritage television.

Samuel's ideas were explored and expanded upon during the Q&A that followed. O'Leary concurred with Samuel and developed his earlier ideas, observing that the establishing shots and setting of *The Great British Bake-Off* evoked a sense of popular British identity. I disagreed, raising the point that the programme's popularity can be explained through its format. Surely, the show espouses universally popular themes that cannot be directly ascribed to a sense of national heritage, namely food and competition. One delegate raised the point that *Britain's Got Talent* (2007–) may prove conducive to Samuel's future argument; the show's previous series had a penchant for nostalgia. Its winner was magician Richard Jones, a former soldier whose act in the finale utilised an elderly war veteran, complete with regalia, Union Jack flags, and a fanfare to "God Save the Queen". Moreover, runner-up Wayne Woodward was a crooner who sang the nostalgic style of swing music, which was popularised in the 1930s and 1940s. The series evoked popular national memories that readily appropriated the imagery, resilient ethos, and cultural identity associated with Britain during the Second World War.

Louisa Mitchell (Leeds) provided an insight into the portrayal of the Joseon Era in South Korean cinema. Mitchell argued that the period is constantly revisited in Korean cinema, often romantically, as a time when the nation was at its most united and dominant. Kieron Casey (independent scholar) examined the clandestine world of North Korean cinema. Casey argued that iconic and prolific spaces are essential to constructions of identity and heritage in cinema. Building upon the work of Johannes Schönherr, Casey focused on the enduring role of Mount Paektu, a revered holy mountain, in the country's highly nationalist cinema. Shelley Galpin (York) concluded the panel with an introduction to her developing research on historical representation and youth audiences. Galpin drew a juxtaposition between two historical films that would be used to elicit responses from youth audiences: *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (Chris Columbus, 2001) and *Belle* (Amma Asante, 2013). She proposed that the former film's "soft" history—largely relegated to the appropriation of a medieval castle in the form of Hogwarts—blended with fantasy, magic and a popular brand may provoke more of a response from young audiences. Galpin explained how her research would consider responses by the same audiences in relation to Asante's more traditional costume drama.

A presentation by Kirsty Surgey (Sheffield) marked an interesting departure from the style of the other papers. Surgey is a creative practitioner and engages in practice-as-research, so her presentation was a performance piece. She began with a chronicled narration of a trip to Scandinavia by a grandmother she had never met. Her presentation was accompanied by a slide show via retro projector. Surgey asked the audience to imagine the feelings of her grandmother in the photographs; her narration seamlessly dissolved into dramatic monologue. Still clicking at the slides, the performer's voice, her inclination, her facial expressions, and even her posture morphed into a characterisation of the grandmother, experiencing Norway for the first time circa 1960. Surgey's act of "becoming history" through the performance of a deceased relative, part-imagined, part-reconstructed from evidence, provided a meditation on the nature of historiography and the act of narrative composition.

Rachel Johnson (Leeds) provided an overview of her research into psychoanalysis and Italian film festival culture. Johnson's approach was not to look at the form of the text itself, but rather the paratext, the artefact of commercial consumption. In this instance, her examples were synopses composed by Criterion films for *Gomorrah* (*Gomorra*, Matteo Garrone, 2008) and *Rome, Open City* (*Roma città aperta*, Roberto Rossellini, 1945). True to her approach of discourse analysis, Johnson argued that one must deconstruct the processes that are used to form assumptions about historical representation, such as film marketing materials. She engaged with the commentaries through means of hypertextual analysis, whereby she deconstructed the language used by the exhibitors and distributors to sell films. Her scrutiny of the implicit and explicit linguistic devices used in the Criterion synopses was particularly insightful.

Finally, Andrew Higson, the keynote speaker, built upon his well-established work on heritage, such as *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain*, as well as his article "The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema". Higson delivered a highly reflective anecdote about his own experiences of consuming heritage. He recalled a visit to a French Chateau with his Australian nephew, where he contemplated the transnational nature of the act. Here was a British man and his relative, a teenager from another generation, another country, another continent, standing before a French historical monument, a site which, like the continent and nation it sits within, has had its definitions and functions transformed over the centuries. Like O'Leary's argument, Higson's discussion roused questions of a distinction between man-made and natural heritage spaces. Higson also reflected on recent political events, namely the result of Britain's referendum on leaving the European Union. He gave a personal account of what it felt like to be, as he put it, someone who feels an affinity with the transnational and identifies as both British and European, equally. Higson admitted that the result of the referendum and the prevailing tide of nationalism in Western democracies challenged his assumptions about transnational cultural encounters through film and television, certainly with regards to Britain's place within definitions of the European. He concluded with some fitting reflection on the ethos of the day, with a quotation from Alison Richmond at the Institute for Conservation:

> Now, more than ever, we need to promote the social value of cultural heritage in bringing people together, in nurturing healthy communities and individual well-being, as well as making a significant contribution to economic sustainability. Cultural heritage can help us to answer the question "What does it mean to be British?" in a way that can support social cohesion rather than division.

Richmond's statement encapsulates the ethical, socially aware role that film and television scholarship must play in facilitating discourse on pluralistic and nuanced ideas of cultural heritage. The papers throughout the day emphasised the need for history on-screen to serve as shared experience, one that inspires discussion of the marginalised or untold, rather than one that engenders rigid prescriptions of social identity.

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