

BEATA PIĄTEK _____

A Case of Amnesia in British Heritage Cinema: *Ladies in Lavender*

This paper was inspired by some work I have started on history, memory and identity combined with my interest in film, which I have been trying to smuggle into our very literary English Department. For someone working on history and identity, heritage cinema is a special treat because it uses carefully selected and stylized images of the past in order to create a sense of identity in the present-day audiences.

Heritage is a development in British culture which started in late 1970s with a set of government policies, when the Conservatives under the leadership of Mrs. Thatcher embarked on a campaign to make culture, as they understood it, more accessible to the public, and therefore more profitable (Weight 2002: 577). In 1983 the National Heritage Act established the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission for England, an executive public body commonly known as English Heritage. The Commission defines its goals in the website as follows:

- to conserve and enhance the historic environment,
- to broaden public access to the heritage,
- to increase people's understanding of the past.

The Commission have taken it upon themselves to turn history in its various forms into a tourist attraction, hence the reconstructed Viking villages in York, Roman soldiers in the streets of Chester, but also the preservation of country houses and other historic buildings. As a result of

their activities and substantial government funding, during the 1980s the number of listed buildings and museums increased more than ever before. Hewinson quotes the Museums and Galleries Commission, which estimates that towards the end of the decade “a new museum opened in the UK every 14 days” (1987: 165). Cultural historians commented on the popularity of Sunday museum visits by saying that a new culture, “museum culture,” came into being, “filling a gap left in people’s lives by the loss of a religious dimension” (Storry and Childs 1997: 306).

The enemies of Mrs. Thatcher complained that more emphasis was placed on Britain’s heritage than on contemporary culture. The past was packaged, marketed and sold to the dismay of some – mostly left-wing – historians, such as Neal Ascherson, who argued that commerce debased culture, that the product of the heritage industry was vulgar in tone and reactionary in content, because it sanitized the past, celebrating the glory, preserving the country houses, but concealing the real conditions in which most people lived. They argued that the heritage industry demonstrated that in the midst of economic decline and facing a crisis of national identity, Britain could only turn to the past, and wallow in nostalgia for the glory of the days gone by.

For the British, the past was not a foreign country but a dominion offering safe passage for anyone who preferred not to confront the nation’s failure to discover a post-imperial identity. In particular, the heritage boom was a testament to a confused England; a country beset by troublesome Celts, blacks and Europeans, seeking solace in vanished glories which were “bent a bit” to make them more appealing. (Weight 2002: 581)

There are, however, voices, even on the political left, which defend heritage culture as a postmodern mingling of high and low culture and a democratic presentation of “history from below.” Raphael Samuel uses the phrase in his *Theatres of Memory* (1994), where he accuses the opponents of heritage of snobbery and conservatism. He points out that even the leftist critics adopt a patronising stance to the public, denigrating heritage on the basis of the conservative assumption that popular culture is low and therefore inferior to high culture, that the spectacle is always inferior to the printed word, and that “knowledge” is the privilege of the academic elite (263–70). Samuel claims that:

The new version of the national past, notwithstanding the efforts of the National Trust to promote a country-house version of "Englishness" is inconceivably more democratic than earlier ones, offering more points of access to "ordinary people," and a wider form of belonging. Indeed even in the case of the country house, a new attention is now lavished on life "below stairs" (the servants' kitchen) . . . (160)

He goes on to claim that the heritage version of history is not only more democratic, but also more feminine, as it focuses more on the family and domestic life.

Heritage cinema is probably the best-known product of the heritage industry worldwide; it is most famously represented by the so called Merchant-Ivory films. These are films produced by Ismail Merchant and directed by James Ivory, and frequently written by their scriptwriter, Ruth Praver Jhabwala. Early Merchant-Ivory films were finely detailed costume dramas and adaptations of literary classics such as E.M. Forster's *Room with a View*, *Howard's End* and *Maurice*. What they had in common was that they lovingly recreated Edwardian England. In the 1990s James Ivory reached for contemporary literature set in the past and successfully adapted Kazuo Ishiguro's *Remains of the Day*, while heritage actors started presenting their own readings of the classics (e.g. Emma Thompson's *Sense and Sensibility*).

Aristocracy, venerable buildings, pastoral landscape, English eccentrics occur over and over again in heritage films offering a picture of quaint, gentle England. These films usually are large budget productions, which enables them to compete with Hollywood films at the box office. Interestingly enough, they use film stars in a manner very similar to that of Hollywood. Emma Thompson, Helena Bonham-Carter, and Hugh Grant are not only film stars acting in costume dramas; they have become part of heritage themselves.

The critical opinion on heritage cinema is as divided as the opinion on heritage. Some critics link it to retro fashion, interior decoration and tourism, labelling heritage as the "Laura Ashley school of filmmaking" (Fuller 1987: 40). They point out that heritage cinema celebrates rather than investigates the past (Craig 2001: 5). Andrew Higson argues that "even those films that develop an ironic narrative of the past end up celebrating and legitimating the spectacle of one class and one cultural tra-

dition and identity at the expense of others through the discourse of authenticity, and the obsession with the visual splendours of period detail" (1993: 119). The major line of defence focuses on those films' ability to challenge mainstream representations of gender and sexuality. Richard Dyer notes how heritage has been surprisingly hospitable to gay writers and gay subjects (2001: 43). Emma Thompson in her adaptation of *Sense and Sensibility* reads the novel as a female empowerment text. Women seem to be important to this genre not only as subject matter, actors, directors, but also as the audience.

I would like to focus in this paper on *Ladies in Lavender* (2004) to show how the genre has evolved into a self-parody, which uses a collage of motifs to make the audience feel good. *Ladies in Lavender* is an adaptation of a short story by a minor English writer William J. Locke; Charles Dance, who also wrote the script, directs it. The film is Dance's debut as director, but he is well known as an actor specializing in heritage cinema (*Jewel in the Crown*, *White Mischief*, *Gosford Park*). *Ladies in Lavender* is set in 1936, in a small fishing village in a remote corner of Cornwall. The main characters are two elderly women, Janet and Ursula Widdington, who enjoy a quiet existence in a beautiful house by the sea. The plot is structured like that of a fairy tale. The first ten minutes of the film establish the serene harmony in the house and the village, which is then disrupted when Ursula discovers a young man washed out on their tiny beach. The sisters take him into the house and nurse him with great care and devotion although they can hardly communicate with him and they know nothing about his origins. The boy's communication skills greatly improve when he is given a violin. His talent is fully appreciated only when the other foreigner in the village, Olga Daniloff, hears him play. She turns out to be a sister of a Russian virtuoso and is determined to put the boy in touch with her brother. Her plans are initially sabotaged by the caring old ladies, who find it hard to let go of their find. For a moment it seems that the two strangers have completely upset the ordered world of the village; the old doctor is frustrated by his futile pursuit of Olga; Ursula becomes an embarrassment for her sister when she falls desperately in love with the boy. The conflict is resolved when the two foreigners hastily leave the village without saying goodbye to anyone. Although this is painful for the sisters, the final scenes show the village restored to the original state of equilibrium, when what seems to be the entire popula-

tion gather round the wireless in the Widdingtons' living room to listen to their boy playing with Boris Daniloff at the Royal Albert Hall.

Charles Dance took great care to equip his debut with all the paraphernalia of heritage cinema. The village, and especially the sisters' house, is photographed in soft focus and from such angles that each shot could be used as a British Tourist Authority poster. As one of the reviewers noticed, the combination of plants flowering in the garden is impossible, even in Cornwall. The cars, interiors, furniture and crockery are a meticulous reconstruction of 1930s detail. In a manner characteristic for heritage cinema, the film does not represent, it celebrates a myth of provincial England and the virtues of her people.

The myth is reinforced by casting. As John Ellis says in *Visible Fictions*, "stars have a similar function in the film industry to the creation of 'narrative image'; they provide a foreknowledge of the fiction, an invitation to the cinema" (1982: 238). The greatest assets of *Ladies in Lavender* are the leading actresses, Maggie Smith (cast as Janet) and Judi Dench (as Ursula). Their names are immediately recognizable; they are the Dames of British heritage cinema. Dance casts them in roles in which the fiction mirrors the star image that has been created for them by their previous roles and by the media. Yet by doing so he limits their potential for performance on screen. It is in those roles that contradict the image of the star that we tend to notice the actual performance of the actor. Imagine Arnold Schwarzenegger cast in the role of an intellectual, or more realistically, Nicole Kidman as Virginia Woolf in *The Hours*. If the fiction involves performing the image, then the star is perceived not to perform, but to be herself. This is the case of Smith and Dench in *Ladies in Lavender*; their image undermines the fictionality of their roles. They do not act; they *are* on the screen.

The film falls into a trap of self-parody of heritage; it becomes pseudo-heritage, where the director seems to be ticking off a list of necessary ingredients. One *Sight and Sound* critic rather jokingly pointed to a shot of a steam engine as a must accessory in heritage films; Dance gives us several shots of a steam-powered thresher at harvest time. The machine comes straight from a museum, brightly coloured and spotless; it is operated by a team of healthy, rosy-cheeked peasants, who are clearly enjoying themselves out in the open air. There is no trace of the dust of harvest, or of history in these shots.

Another subplot that seems to be ticked off the list is Ursula's infatuation with the much younger man, which serves as the subversive element, breaking the taboos and broadening the horizons of gender. The audience are invited to revise their assumptions about erotic fascination; the film points out how paradoxically our culture condones the relationships between highly mature men and much younger women, but not between elderly women and much younger men. However, once this is pointed out, the subject is dropped, Ursula recovers from her infatuation and the young man turns to a suitably younger woman.

I admit that it would be unfair to dismiss the film on the grounds that the director managed to hire a couple of great stars, or that the machinery is too shiny. My reservation is not so much about the presence of the Dames, as about the object of their attention, the character of the young Polish violinist whom they nurse back to health. This is the piece of information that I have been holding back from those readers who had not seen the film: the young shipwrecked man is Polish. From the point of view of the narrative structure his function is that of an intruder who disrupts the harmony of the local community. He is alien, a foreigner who speaks a language impossible to identify at first. Although incomprehensible, he is young, beautiful and innocent; therefore he becomes a mystery, rather than a threat. What is more, he turns out to be courteous and to have musical education, which enables the director to define his class identity without mentioning his past or his country's history.

Paradoxically, the film which celebrates the past by lingering lovingly on the details of English furniture and the floral pattern on the china denies the foreigner any right to history. Although his injury is a broken ankle, not a skull fracture, he strikes the audience as someone suffering from amnesia. There is no mention of how and where he has come from; Poland does not exist, he does not even have a personal past. We do not know what he is migrating from; all we know is that he is on his way to America. I understand that the director is thus constructing a figure of the other, which is yet another must accessory of a heritage film. One could argue that he is the familiar figure of the "wandering Jew," if not for the fact that his surname is Marowski. For Dance, Poland means "nowhere" in the same way as it meant "nowhere" for Alfred Jarry when he was writing the play *Ubu Rex*.

What strikes the audience even more is the fact that the pedantic attention to detail seems to have vanished when it came to constructing this character. The Polish violinist is called Andrea, a most unlikely Christian name, though definitely easier to pronounce than Andrzej. He is played by Daniel Brühl, a rising star of the German cinema, best known for his role in *Goodbye Lenin*. Brühl manages to pronounce some of the Polish words, but when Janet plays the piano and he cannot bear the noise, his Polish "Stop it!" ("Przestań!") is very loudly mispronounced. Evidently the foreign character does not deserve as much loving attention to detail as a glass salter.

Liz Lochhead once wrote about another heritage film: "we need to ask what truths about the present we are hiding from ourselves by lying about the past" (2001: 16). As I write these words, the election campaign in Britain is in full swing. The Conservative party leader, Michael Howard, has made immigration policy the centre of his campaign; three days ago, on 19th April 2005, he said on BBC news that Britain could face race riots unless people had confidence in controls on immigration. In the midst of a general hysteria in the media about Islamophobia and the trappings of multiculturalism, it must have been rather comforting for the British audiences to watch two elderly English women fussing over an angelic foreigner, especially that he really wanted to go to America.

REFERENCES

- Craig, Cairns. 2001. "Rooms without a View." *Film/Literature/Heritage*. Ed. Ginette Vincendeau. London: British Film Institute.
- Dyer, Richard. 2001. "Nice Young Men Who Sell Antiques: Gay Men in Heritage Cinema." *Film/Literature/Heritage*. Ed. Ginette Vincendeau. London: British Film Institute.
- Ellis, John. 1982. *Visible Fictions*. London: Routledge.
- Fuller, Graham. 1992. "Shots in the Dark." *Interview* 22.3 (March): 40.
- Hewinson, Robert. 1987. *The Heritage Industry: Britain in the Climate of Decline*. London: Methuen.

- Higson, Andrew. 1993. "Re-Presenting the National Past: Nostalgia and Pastiche in the Heritage Film." *Fires Were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism*. Ed. Lester Friedman. London: UCL.
- Lochhead, Liz. 2001. "The Shadow." *Film/Literature/Heritage*. Ed. Ginette Vincendeau. London: British Film Institute.
- Samuel, Raphael. 1994. *Theatres of Memory*. London: Verso.
- Storry, Mike, and Peter Childs. 1997. *British Cultural Identities*. London: Routledge.
- Weight, Richard. 2002. *Patriots: National Identity in Britain 1940–2000*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.