

Acknowledging Hybridity

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Oliete-Aldea, Elena. *Hybrid Heritage on Screen: The “Raj Revival” in the Thatcher Era*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. ix + 227 pages. ISBN 978-1-137-46396-8. \$95.00.

The term “heritage film” was coined by Charles Barr in 1986 in his book, *All Our Yesterdays*. Barr used the term in a broad sense, and applied it primarily to the films made in the 1940s. Cinema critics in the mid-1980s borrowed the expression “heritage film” from the then soaring heritage industry to label the immensely popular period pieces of the decade. The concept finally entered academic discourse in 1995, thanks to Andrew Higson’s influential essay, “Heritage Film in British Cinema,” published in *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema*. Ever since the mid-1980s, heritage film has yielded much debate and discussion, and even more writings. Therefore, when a book on heritage cinema comes out in 2015, the question arises whether there is still anything left to say about a handful of films made predominantly in the 1980s-90s. Elena Oliete-Aldea offers a new perspective in *Hybrid Heritage On Screen: The “Raj Revival” in the Thatcher Era* by centering her discussion on the word “hybridity,” a concept which has only surfaced in the most recent writings on heritage cinema. Heritage films were mostly seen as a genre portraying or, rather, celebrating white, protestant, upper-middle class Englishness and Victorian values, and thus were mostly associated with homogeneity both in terms of themes and representation. It was only after a decade of debate and discourse when such authors as, for example, Higson (*English Heritage, English Cinema: Costume Drama since 1980* [2003]) started to question the assumed homogeneity of the heritage films. Oliete-Aldea follows in the footsteps of Higson and Belén Vidal (*Heritage Film: Nation, Genre and Representation* [2012]), and embarks on a journey to discover the hybrid heritage of the “Raj Revival,” a relatively lesser-visited territory of heritage cinema.

The book starts with mapping the broader field of Cultural Studies and politics in Britain, as they provide the backdrop to the cinema of the 1980s and aid a deeper understanding of heritage films and the “Raj Revival.” Diversity and hybridity regarding national identity entered Cultural Studies and, consequently, Cinema Studies in the last quarter of the twentieth century mostly due to the immense socio-economic and socio-cultural changes in Britain. It was the era when the two schools of revisionist film history

writing—the empiricist and the theory-led—brought such concepts as identity, nation, and, accordingly, national identity to the fore, whereby they soon became the center of cinematic, literary, and cultural investigations. In the first chapter, Oliete-Aldea examines the porosity of identity boundaries. She quotes several renowned authors, such as Stuart Hall, Benedict Anderson, and Laurence Grossberg, just to mention a few, from the broad fields of psychology, philosophy, sociology, history, cultural studies, and various cross-disciplines to define the often used but rarely specified term “identity.” She accepts the arguments of Anderson and Laclau, among others, that identity is an artificially constructed, empty category—like the concept of nation itself—therefore, it is always subject to various power games. As cultural concepts, both “identity” and, later, the definition of “nation” are built on binary oppositions entailing “demarcations of inclusion and exclusion” (Hall 5, 7). The assumption of the existence of the “Other” derives from the definition of identity, and from drawing the lines of identity boundaries that are often enforced by politics and power relations which establish who the dominant group is. This “us” versus “them” thinking entails that cultures are hybrid by nature. It is only the essentialist notion of identity that leaves no room for hybridity. Identity, as Oliete-Aldea argues, is a social construct enforced by laws and ideologies, therefore “race” and “ethnicity” can be regarded as political categories and the springs of all nationalist feelings, biases, and racist attitudes (11). The binary opposition is present in most discourses created by the West, in which the world is divided into the West and the peoples of the rest of the world, the latter described as the “Other.” It is just as important for her later arguments as Homi Bhabha’s “third space,” Avtar Brah’s “diaspora space,” and Hall’s concept of hybridity in the realm of “diaspora identities.” “Diaspora space as a site of hybridity includes not only migrants and their descendants, but also those constructed as ‘indigenous’ or ‘natives’” (123). The fact that identity structures have always been constructed by means of separation, exclusion, and the definition of the “other” almost inevitably implies a certain degree of hostility towards the “Other.” Moreover, the emerging scientific thinking and the demand for scientific classifications from Newton’s times onward have further enforced thinking in terms of classes and races thus laying the scientific foundations for racism (13). A whole sub-chapter, “Globalisation, migration and hybrid societies,” is devoted to exploring the connection between social and racial inequality that characterizes the colonial past and also the postcolonial world order with its most important phenomena of globalization, migration, and hybrid societies.

Identity constructions discussed in the first chapter bear special relevance to the social and political context of the Thatcher decade, as they help explain the grassroots movements and the mechanisms of hostility towards the “Other” thus providing a better understanding of racial tensions prevalent in the era concerned. In “Britain in the 1980s: The Thatcher Decade,” Oliete-Aldea considers the Iron Lady’s decade-long governing to be a watershed in the recent history of Great Britain, which justifies the need for a close examination of Britain under Conservative rule. The author focuses mostly on the economic crisis, the propagation of Victorian/conservative values, and the growing hostility towards immigrants. The overview of the 1980s is quite comprehensive and to the point. However, the author—with a few exceptions, such as Enoch Powell’s infamous speeches and the oil crisis—fails to mention that most of the tensions experienced in the Thatcher era had their roots in the 1970s, labeled as the period of economic decline and social despair, as well as in the Labor Party’s inability to meet the challenges of the decade. It was, in fact, the failure of the Left in the 1970s that aided the Iron Lady’s rise to power, led to the proliferation of conservative values, and white, Protestant Englishness manifested in many aspects of society, including cinema.

From the overview of the politics in the 1980s, in Chapter 3 (“British Cinema and the Raj Revival”), Oliete-Aldea moves on to describe the situation of British cinema of the same decade and explains the phenomenon of heritage cinema. She points out most of its characteristic features—such as representation of the past, nostalgia, female-centered narrative, and the tension between narrative vs. visual representation/reconstruction of the past (83)—and all related issues essential to a comprehensive understanding of the topic, including the heritage debate and the question whether heritage can be considered a genre, a sub-genre, or a cycle. The author also touches upon the heritage films’ attachment to the middlebrow—while ignoring their attachment to the middle class—and their in-between nature, that is, they are usually positioned half-way between art house and mainstream cinema (67). The chapter provides an overview, yet displays no novelty, except for “Cinematic Representations of the Colonial Venture: From a Male Enterprise to a Feminisation of the Empire,” which is devoted to the history of the empire films, highlighting the differences between the “empire films” of the 1930-40s and the “Raj Revival” of the 1980s. Oliete-Aldea prefers to classify them as “*Raj films* or *productions*” (81) of the 1980s, and regards them as a cycle as opposed to other classificatory approaches, such as genres or sub-genres, a theme already touched upon earlier (see “The heritage film ‘genre’” 63-64).

She also emphasizes that, like each genre or cycle, the “Raj films” have strong links to the society and times they are conceived in.

Through the case studies of Richard Attenborough’s *Gandhi* (1982) and James Ivory’s *Heat and Dust* (1983), and with frequent references to David Lean’s *A Passage to India* (1984), the author highlights the hybrid and contingent nature of the identity constructions of Raj films which more truthfully reflected the past and the contemporary state of the Thatcher era than most heritage films. Oliete-Aldea’s examples are rendered to support her statements and draw clear parallels between the colonial past depicted in the above-mentioned films and the Thatcher decade, however, she seems to neglect one key consideration, namely, that *Gandhi*’s production history stretches back almost two entire decades, which inevitably puts certain aspects of the film into different perspectives. It is also worth mentioning that the adverse and long-lasting consequences of Thatcher’s politics, especially of her domestic policies, mostly became apparent in her second term as prime minister, a few years after *Gandhi* hit the cinemas.

Reflecting a more recent tendency of incorporating television into Film Studies, the author devotes equal attention to small screen representations of the Raj, which makes *Hybrid Heritage on Screen* a comprehensive and progressive writing. In Chapter 6, “The Raj on TV,” she closely examines two of the most outstanding TV serials—and clarifies why she prefers the term “serial” instead of “series” (153)—*Far Pavilions* (1984) and *The Jewel in the Crown* (1984) from the same aspects that she analyzes the Raj features, and makes comparisons with them highlighting similarities and differences in the representation of colonial times.

The novelty and relevance of Oliete-Aldea’s book lies in the examination of the role of women, and how topics hitherto considered taboo, such as inter-racial relationships, for instance, were tackled in the “Raj Revival,” which is telling of the experience of the decade-long rule of the Iron Lady, and continues to be relevant in the post 9/11 world, especially in the most recent migration crisis and Brexit atmosphere.

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Work Cited

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