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The Struggles of an Empiricist

Past and Present: National Identity and the British Historical Film by James Chapman (London: IB Tauris, 2005)

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Past and Present: National Identity and the British Historical Film is James Chapman's third book in the 'Cinema and Society Series' spearheaded by Jeffrey Richards at I. B. Tauris Press. Compared to his previous volumes – the earlier engaged with British WWII cinematic propaganda, and the latter with the cultural historical approach of James Bond films – the scope of this work is uncharacteristically wide, extending over a period of almost 70 years. A quick look at the contents page reveals the close intellectual kinship between Chapman and Richards in approaching issues relates to national identity, heritage and cultural memory, the popular image of history and the representation of social progress. It may be their affiliation with The Open University (one of the most flourishing educational initiatives of the second half of the last century) or the insistent backing of IB Tauris (the publisher of numerous books on history, politics and cinema) that the series is characterised by an avid empirical approach with a high priority placed on contextual analysis. Since these features permeate most titles published in the series there is very little methodologically that distinguishes one from the other: each book relies on exhaustive survey of films, written documents, conducted interviews. These archivally based research projects play a lion's part in initiating the systematic investigation of the social, cultural, political and economic contents of British cinema in general and individual films in specific.

Having adopted Richards' avid empiricism as a film historian, film-analyses for Chapman is complete only after (1) the roles and responsibilities of the crew behind the project have been mapped out, (2) the industrial, political and social aspects of the film's production history have been discussed (3) and the details of both its critical and popular reception have been explained. With the contextual bases analyses of production and reception he hopes to arrive at snapshots of the relationship between British cinema and society, images that expose both national identity and the national past.

In my view the contextual approach undertaken by Chapman to get a better understanding of the cinematic sense of history is only partially successful. It becomes an aim instead of a means: the reader is hardly offered anything about the reasons why historical films reflect 'the burning questions of the age' in the way they do. The films offer great opportunities to overview the cinema of the given period, yet for those – like me – who hoped to learn about the function of historical understanding as conceptualised by cinema Chapman has little to offer. He cannot be accused of committing factual errors, he is objective, impartial and dispassionate: an empiricist of the second class. Moreover in his very accurate reconstruction of events linked to the production and reception of the film, he sometimes loses sight of the wider context of national identity and historical film, in other words the interrelatedness of present and past.

As I have already mentioned Chapman's book contains analyses of individual films, fourteen canonical and less-known titles. These case studies, or exemplary readings into the cinematic representation of the past rely on a choice of films that not only reflects upon the passing cinematic and social trends and cults, but the changing cultural role of cinema as well: half of the films analysed were made in the first twenty years of the 65 year period studied by the book. The unbalanced attention is only partly justified. There might have been fewer films made for a smaller audience in the second half of the century, yet the importance of historical film did not fade in post-imperial Britain. There is no decline as Chapman implicitly suggests but transformation. It is also true that the loss of imperial aspirations had a significant influence on the view of history and national identity in postcolonial Britain. Unfortunately we do not get a refined image of this transformation. Decolonization may have been identified as a dividing line, the start of a new paradigm, the films belonging to which could have easily been compared to the image of the past and the use of cultural memory in the colonial cinema of the 30' and 40's. Had Chapman decided to undertake such a comparative reading and chosen to present his arguments along well-defined dichotomies, the evolution of the cinematic sense of history could have been better drawn. A research of such scope would be quite different from Chapman's own, turning different films (not solely from the historical film category) into case studies.

As Chapman intended *Past and Present: National Identity and the British Historical Film* places genre into focus. Although with different words Chapman in his introduction describes both national identity and historical film[1] as a social phenomenon of adjustment. An array of fast-changing social, political, economic and moral environments relying on attitudes, belief- and value-systems of their

[1] I would identify both as vehicles of cultural memory understood by Maurice Halbwachs and Jan Assman as a connective structure that enframes individual and collective forms of memory.

own have shaped the twentieth century, a period of unique and constant transition during which the capability to adjust became a question of survival or annihilation for certain national, ethnic and social groups. Chapman is unquestionably right to suggest that the popularity enjoyed by cinema puts films (more than anything else) in direct contact with the dynamics of history. He adds right away that not any kind of film is capable of the active production (or what in this case is almost the same, the representation) of adjustment strategies. Historical film – the central concept of Chapman's research project – is an extremely effective vehicle to study the ways in which the past is used to take control over the present. But what is historical film?

Chapman defines historical film in generic terms, as "a narrower category than the costume or the period film both of which are terms that denote narratives set in the past but that are not necessarily in themselves 'historical'."(2). He does not define however what this "historical" is (concept) and what it is used for (label). Whereas "historical" as a concept may refer to the relationship between the cinematic memory of the past and history, "historical" as a label introduces an authoritative discourse, introduces a subgenre which is regarded more serious and more authentic than costume melodramas. This hierarchy results from the popular notion of history Chapman himself identifies with in the introductory chapter: "In this book I am taking history to mean 'the recorded past' or 'the past that we know'" (2). According to such a definition "historical" is a kind of communal knowledge, the truth of records and facts: a higher form of truth we attribute to certain narratives and in the case of cinema to certain *misè-en-scene*s, costumes, sets and styles of acting. Those who identify with this view attached a special cultural prestige to historical film, and use "historical" as a sign of authority, a symbol of authenticity. Used in this sense "historical" expresses the superiority of the archive of facts predominating historical film over the archive of sensations as found in costume melodramas or period films. Such hierarchy clearly exists in the popular imagination, yet it should not intrude into scientific research. Most of the films Chapman discusses are full of acknowledged inaccuracies, misrepresentations, populism even demagoguery. They seem to reinforce the view according to which facts in historical films are themselves dramatic devices while historical authenticity is a rhetorical formula. From a strictly theoretical point of view both are 'camouflaged discourses' hiding behind a surface of facts, obscuring their role in the misrepresentation of history and the exploitation of the past.

I sometimes wonder if the historical film really wants to make the past known. It surely does not in a way that would satisfy the trained historian. It is not a vehicle of 'archaeological excavation' but propagation. In similar terms the "historical" is more of an ideological than a generic formula. Historical knowledge only seemingly comes from the past, actually it is a product of the present. What cinema does especially effectively is making modern knowledge

look archaic. The real questions are not those inquiring about the reliability and authenticity of films, but about the source and worth of historical interpretation: the forces and the wills (mis)understanding the past serves and expresses. These are the questions Friedrich Nietzsche poses when speculating about the tectonics of history. Although Chapman proposes a kind of genealogical research when he writes that

> [t]he historical film raises questions such as whose history is being represented, by whom and for whom? The theme of identity is central to the genre: class, gender and specifically national identities are among its principal concerns. The historical film is not merely offering a representation of the past; in most instances it is offering a representation of a specifically national past. National histories are fiercely protected and contested. (6)

If these lines are to be read as Chapman's promise to write the history of how cinema appropriated historical knowledge, cultural memory and how it became the battle-ground of contesting versions of Britishness than it remains an unfulfilled promise. This process is far too dynamic and more symbolic to be successfully reconstructed within the static contexts of production and reception. Unfortunately (and mysteriously) the empirical approach preferred by Chapman understands the concepts of history, identity and national as universal phenomena and not something permanently constructed. Chapman still manages to establish a relatively good view of this battleground, yet it is far from what the back cover suggests, it falls short of being "groundbreaking".

For me the greatest flaw in Chapman's methodology is its short-sightedness, its lack of determination to look behind the facts and discover the forces that shape them. For example in the first analytical chapter dedicated to Alexander Korda's *The Private Life of Henry VIII* Chapman discusses – like a good antiquarian – all aspects of the work in question. The contextual analysis seems to be complete, all the facts appear to be exposed and yet the reader's understanding of the tectonics of cinematic memory is not advanced significantly. Although in reference to F.D. Klingender Chapman raises the question of the 'private life formula', he fails to make it into a horizon of inquiry that would run through the whole volume. After all *Henry VIII* is the first internationally successful attempt to wed formulaic narratives and the "historical" and establish the cinematic memory of historical figures. The formula was not only influential in 1930's British cinema but ran through the oeuvre of Korda, who was one of the first producer-directors to make cinema a servant of national identity. I believe the nature of his service and the role of historical film in the formation of group identity could have been more accurately determined had the subject been better theorised with groups of

questions as the following example shows: Can the private and public life of national heroes be differentiated? Why is this problematic; how does historical analysis and cinematic representation solve this problem? When films rewrite historical fact, reshape historical figures do they do they also not become the dynamic forces at the core of history? Does each era have its own heroes? Can they be grouped into types? To what extent do the preferences of each period towards its national heroes, finest hours and greatest victories/defeats reflect the changes in popular/historical/cultural memory? Why does a group wishing to adjust to the present have to (first and foremost) fine-tune the memory of the past? Let there be no misunderstanding, I do not have the answers to these questions (some of which point way further than the scope of the present study). I still believe that the speculative answers offered to them would have taken us further than Chapman's "catalogues" of empiricist research.

Interestingly enough the chapter dedicated to *Elizabeth* (1997, dir.: Shekhar Kapur) is the most open to exploration. Chapman is right to assert that the film reflected upon the worsening relations between Charles and Diana and "had acquired an unexpected and entirely accidental significance following the death of the Princess of Wales" (316). I would have extended this line of inquiry and examined the correlation between the film's representation of historic events and the changing popular imagination concerning the prestige of history, tradition and customs in the wake of Princess Diana's death and the royal family's inability to handle the situation. Whereas Elizabeth I had always been identified by popular memory as the female monarch who achieved full confidence of her subjects and was sometimes referred to as having married the nation this was not the case with Elizabeth II. During the shooting of *Elizabeth* there was actually a crisis of confidence in the institution of the monarchy and the royal family. Their image which was battered by their inability to adjust to the present, their hypocritical clinging to customs and could not have been more different from that of the Virgin Queen who – in popular imagination – was always ready to subordinate her personal interests. The situation was unique, the perception of the contemporary Monarchy (as something outmoded cherishing empty traditions and embracing a rather reactionary and Philistine historical heritage) was totally out of tune with how its past was viewed. Two discourses of conservatism emerged with opposing meanings yet closely tied to one another. I wonder if *Elizabeth* had any role in the retrieving of the monarchical honour and restoring the prestige of the Queen. Previously assistance arrived from the opposite direction, when members of the royal family attended premieres of historical films as a kind of marketing tactic. Chapman's skill with archival research could have provided the necessary details to research this hypothetical relationship.

Although *Past and Present* is a book in which the whole is less than the parts, it is a useful book and one I would recommend. In fact I use it both in

teaching and research. Chapman's comprehensive overviews of reviews, unpublished scripts and other hard to acquire material serve as valuable resources. In the classroom, especially in the teaching of British film history, the informative chapters following a uniform structure of analysis, written in a jargon-free language can be used to introduce a period, a director or a film. Thoroughness and accessibility are the unquestionable merits of the book, and so is the insistent argument that historical film offers debates not only in a variety of social, political and ideological issues, but is a form of communal discourse, one that considers contesting versions of cultural memory and national identity. Despite the above mentioned flaw of the empirical approach I am sure that Chapman's books and other (upcoming) titles in the series are going to have a bright future in front of them.