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Pam Cook: Fashioning the Nation. Costume and Identity in British Cinema

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**Pam Cook: Fashioning the Nation.
Costume and Identity in British Cinema**

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£12.99, hbk ISBN 0-85170-469-7, £35.00

Many Europeans reacted with dismay to recent xenophobic comments made in the British press about beef, the German football team, and Europe in general. Those comments said far more about us than those we were complaining about, indicating a deep-rooted inferiority complex, identity crisis or both.

Ideas around British, which usually means English, identity resist the reality of our decline as a world economic power since the end of the Second World War. Much of our contemporary national identity is maintained by investing in the myths that were propagated about our society and the rest of the world at that time.

Many of the current beliefs about British cinema, although they had been in existence for some time, were also refined by the sense of urgency of that period. For those looking for a description of British cinema and the British identity it portrays, Pam Cook's *Fashioning the Nation* may be an interesting place to start but ultimately unsatisfying as Cook concentrates on British films of the 40's. She also sees the quest for unified identities to be fundamentally flawed because for her identity is a „labile amalgam of other identities rather than a fixed entity“ (p.4). With reference to cinema, she sees the loss of self involved with the audience's identification with characters as a kind of travel after which the audience can return home, having tried and tested other identities, with a different perspective. Travel is her central motif in the formation of identity.

This idea is in stark contrast to the orthodox view that the consensus films of the 40's e.g. *Millions like us* (1943), set in contemporary locales, addressing specifically national issues and adopting an aesthetic of restrained realism, as well as the Ealing comedies and the heritage films of the 1980's, represent British cinema: quality, realistic, anti-European, anti-Hollywood. No one would deny the influence of the documentary film on the development of British cinema but Cook suggests that this almost fanatical adherence to the criteria of quality and realism obscures, if not denies, the existence of an equally legitimate fantastic cinema as exemplified by the films of Powell and Pressburger, the Hammer horrors and the Gainsborough costume dramas, in a way which reflects the inner turmoil any debate on national identity produces.

During the tumultuous war years, studios and producers of British cinema, under the directives of the Ministry of Information, were encouraged to show an egalitarian nation working together for the national good. Post war criticism has concentrated on a handful of these relatively unpopular 'consensus' films, ignoring the commercially successful films from the Gainsborough studios e.g. *The Wicked Lady* (1945), which at the time of their release between 1943 and 1950 were greeted with critical outrage because they didn't fit into the narrow establishment view of 'quality' cinema or authentic history. Cook feels the films made at the Gainsborough studios in the 1940's have been undervalued because they allowed issues of sexual and national identity to be played out, in a way the consensus films, which had difficulty showing the new emancipated roles of women in their formations of national identity, were unable to do.

Cook divides her book, somewhat arbitrarily, into five parts. After the introduction there is a very useful overview of revisionist writing on this period since the mid-sixties, and analysis of how the domestication of Britain between the wars, and the masculinisation of women during the Second World War, created a crisis in gender identity.

The third part is a little fragmented. She champions the work of the costume designer and art director by analysing the way fashion functions in forming identity. Fashion is usually defined negatively in terms of elitism, consumerism,

fetishism, voyeurism – all of them obliterating ‘authentic femininity’. She addresses some of these areas in more detail than others. Certain aspects of Mulvey’s polemic that the female form is the passive object of the male’s controlling, voyeuristic gaze is questioned. Cook postulates that display is not necessarily passive, and the voyeur is often waiting to be caught. The concept of fetishism can illuminate the way our obsession with clothes allows us to play transgressively with identity and identification. She sees fashion as a resistance to purity in that it crosses boundaries between different periods and locations and appropriates from them.

She then jumps back to Christian Dior’s New Look, launched in 1947, instrumental in re-feminising women but also arousing fears in men and women about „being swallowed by an overwhelming maternity“ (p.58). Then she briefly touches on dress codes through history and makes the interesting point about sexual difference being effaced in times of national unity. A brief cultural history of clothes might have been useful here. Transvestism as a mode for defying stable social/sexual/ethnic categories through its excess and display, leads us back to her central theme that the clothes you wear permit you to travel between identities.

The fourth part is a robust defense of historical films in general and the Gainsborough costume drama in particular. The tension between surface verisimilitude and the playful use of historically inaccurate detail which transmitted contemporary information about fashion and beauty, as well as the depiction of female excess and desire in austere Britain, caused constant irritation to critics. This anxiety resulted from official sources trying to place women in the home and control the representation of history in film in the 1930’s and 40’s. These films are an anathema to those who hold to the idea that history represents truth, especially truth about the national heritage. Cook believes these melodramas (and the historical adventures written by Daphne Du Maurier) create a space for experimenting with different (foreign and gender) identities, a space for resistance. Cook very much champions the work of the costume designer and art director in providing crucial support so „these narratives of schizophrenia and memory loss“ (p.6), that is, identity crisis, can function.

At the end of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth part Cook describes the European influences at Gainsborough. From its inception, Gainsborough aggressively pursued an international marketing policy. It made co-productions with Germany, used foreign technicians, foreign locales and imported Hollywood stars (and also made a couple in the process: Stewart Granger and James Mason). The art direction and cinematography were influenced by Ufa because many German technicians, such as Alfred Junge, were under contract and had great authority over camera placements and lighting. Writings on the history of British cinema have traditionally failed to acknowledge the technical and aesthetic influences of German and American technicians.

Cook argues these films exorcise the past and look forward to an egalitarian future where the woman's role is crucial. They permit the working through of contemporary anxieties, and invite the audience to identify with foreign elements. However, after the war, Europe once again became a threatening place and the films took on a darker tone. She then analyses the narratives and costume design/art direction of four films to illustrate her points.

In the introduction she explains that each chapter is designed to stand alone, although certain themes, the history of British cinema, the process of identity formation, definitions of femininity, depictions of national identity and gender, fetishism, the subversive natures of fashion and the history film run through all the chapters, and that the book as a whole opens up these areas for further inquiry. This is the book's inherent problem. Certain themes need a more profound treatment. How does audience identification function exactly? How does costume design mitigate against fixed identities in the Gainsborough films but formulates (or obliterates) identity in the consensual films? How is costume design used to (un)fix identity today? The agenda of the book is too wide and her focus on only the Gainsborough costume dramas too narrow.

However, Pam Cook is quite right in saying that the areas of costume and set design have been subsumed by the idea of auteur and her book is a welcome addition to those which analyse other aspects of *mise-en-scène*.

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