Ever since her MA dissertation on the sexual politics and critical reception of Merchant Ivory Productions’ 1980s-1990s ‘greatest hits’ in relation to the concurrent rise of the critique of ‘heritage cinema’, Claire Monk, Reader in Film & Film Culture at De Montfort University, Leicester, has been a key voice in debates about British heritage film. Having recently joined the “Screening European Heritage”-network, she discusses the origins of the notion of the ‘heritage film’ in 1980s Britain as well as the 21st-century emergence of online fan cultures around period films, the topic of her current research.

The success of British period films since the 1980s, and the rise of their vehement critique, are developments which Claire Monk observed as they were occurring. “The British film renaissance of the mid-1980s encompassed both new, hybrid forms of social realist film set in the present, as in My Beautiful Laundrette (1985), and films set in the past like A Room With A View (1985) or Prick Up Your Ears (1987) – the latter part of a strand of ‘retro’ rather than ‘heritage’ cinema – alongside them. And so I lived first-hand through how the dominant critical discourse in Britain around films like A Room With A View arose: what I call the ‘anti-heritage-film critique’; a particular, othering and self-distancing, way of talking about these films that expressed discomfort with them and began to critique them negatively in politicised terms that were actually quite different from the original positive critical reception of, say, A Room With A View in both the UK and USA.

Monk emphasizes how important the context of Thatcherite Britain is for understanding how charged the term “heritage film” has been from the start. “I saw how this discourse from the Left started to arise that began to denounce films set in the past that had been popular export successes – but, to my mind, were not necessarily conservative films nor necessarily watched for nostalgic reasons. And I could see that this critique grew out of the wider, very combative, cultural-political climate that we had in Britain in the 1980s. I think that if the Thatcher government had not been attacking left-wing cinema, critical cinema, pro-gay cinema, multicultural cinema set in the present, then we would not have necessarily had this reactive attack from the Left against the films set in the past. What I have always tried to argue against is the idea that there is a binary split between the supposedly progressive left-wing, multicultural, pro-working class films set in the present and the – by inference – ‘conservative’ films set in the past that were made in Britain in the 1980s. This is what led me eventually to want to do an audience study. Not to necessarily prove my own position, more to see what could be substantiated on either side – or whether audiences’ responses to the films were more diverse than either position.”

According to Monk, the critique launched against “heritage cinema” made strong assumptions about audience reactions, derived from generalised readings of clusters of film (and sometimes television drama) texts. “It was clear to me that we were dealing with an account of the audience that was inducted from generalisations about the text and in some cases textual determinism. It is fine to give an account of heritage style, but I think the mistake arises, firstly, when you overgeneralise too much about that style rather than acknowledging differentiation and, secondly, when you start to attribute ideological effect to it. For example, the idea that because crane shots are divorced from character point-of-view that means we are being invited into a heritage mode of consumption of, or gaze upon, the architecture of a Cambridge college or a country house – one simply does not know if that is what audiences are doing. What I found in my monograph Heritage Film Audiences is that there is one section of the audience that was more conservative than anyone like Andrew
Higson or Cairns Craig ever dreamt. But also a left-wing or liberal, generally younger, degree-educated and quite cinephilic audience that enjoys these films but feels self-conscious guilt about it because of their awareness of the debate.”

In the British context, the discussion about heritage film immediately became a political and ideological one, a fact which makes it problematic to talk about heritage film as if it were a neutral genre category. “The term ‘heritage film’ was coined explicitly as a left-wing critical term for films that were being construed to be conservative. The term does not emerge as a genre label; it emerges as a critical label from the get-go. The question is how it has become a textbook term. And the difficulty is that sometimes it is used descriptively and yet if you go into textbooks you will find that the same generalisations are made as with the politicised model of what the term means.”

Another aspect to consider is how definitions of heritage, and of what since the 1980s has been funded under the umbrella of heritage film, have changed. In a recent interview with “Screening European Heritage”, Bill Lawrence stresses the importance of regional heritage for film funding. Lawrence describes how during his time on the board of Screen Yorkshire, funding applications tended to refer to a certain set of regional themes: the Brontës, Yorkshire’s Asian community, the Yorkshire Ripper murders and the 1984-5 Miners’ Strike. This reflects an idea of heritage that is substantially broadened from the earlier negative definition of the term, as Monk explains: “A key charge made against the heritage film in the original 1990s British critiques was that the ‘national’ past it constructed was bourgeois and Southern, the ‘England’ of the Home Counties and the financial City of London. This original definition expressly excluded films that were about regional heritage, or working class heritage. We do now have these understandings of regional and working class heritage which an agency like Screen Yorkshire will have worked with. But the left-wing anti-heritage-film critique of the 1980s-1990s would have viewed at least three of the key subjects Lawrence cites as diametrically opposed to the ‘heritage film’. A film about the miners’ strike would by definition fall outside that understanding of ‘heritage’ as bourgeois and conservative.”

Monk is sceptical about the directness of the relationship between heritage film and the heritage industry in 1980s Britain. Of course, the Thatcher Government became known for the official promotion of the heritage industry through the National Heritage Acts of 1980 and especially 1983, activating policies and an ideology that were criticised for favouring a conservative, upper-class version of the past. “This bias was perceived as working to disavow the socio-political conflicts that characterised Thatcherite Britain at the time: the economic and social shock therapy, riots, class war, the political polarisation and mutual hatred. Secondly, the Thatcherite model of the heritage industry was disliked because it connected an upper-class version of national heritage with commodification and the Thatcherite profit motive: the commodification of the country house visit, and so on.” On the film policy, side, however, the 1980s Thatcher Government notably removed the established financial support structures for British film: tax rules were tightened, the quota system (instigated in the Cinematograph Films Act of 1927) was ended in 1983, and the Film Act of 1985 abolished both the National Film Finance Corporation and the Eady Levy on box-office receipts (in place since 1949 and 1950 respectively). “So at the same political moment when national heritage is being promoted through an enterprise model, the links between the British state, the film industry and funding – which always were a bit weak and jumpy in the UK – get broken further.”

So can one see any point of contact between heritage industry and heritage cinema in the British context? “I think that the relationship is largely sought by the heritage sites, which
want to harness the glamour of cinema to gain visitors, more than the films being made particularly to support the heritage industry. If one looks at the National Trust, it is not really until the 1990s that we see the launch of a glossy membership magazine and, within that, the overt promotion of the Trust’s properties via their use as film or TV locations. And these features foster excitement around any production filmed at a National Trust property, whether it’s a Hollywood film or a British one – the discourse is not purely about Britishness.”

Ironically, while Merchant Ivory films like Maurice or A Room With A View are commonly accused of capitalising on an imposing display of heritage sites, some of their most memorable filming locations are not visitable by the public. “Merchant and Ivory were sufficiently well-connected that in some cases they were able to film in the private homes of friends. In A Room With A View, for example, Foxwold in Kent, the house of the film critic and former Sight & Sound associate editor John Pym, was used as the home of the upper-middle-class Honeychurch family at Windy Corner. Similarly in Maurice, the country house used as the home of the upper-class Clive Durham was the privately owned Wilbury Park in Wiltshire – home of the late, Russian-born, actress Maria St Just, the executor of Tennessee Williams’ literary estate (who had inherited the house through marriage). So we are talking here about connections between gay filmmakers and gay literary culture.”

However, films set in the past have certainly had a strong influence on how heritage sites have come to present themselves. Monk cites “not just heritage films, but the 21st-century trend of blockbuster-ish, CGI-heavy, hybrid and hyper-sexualised historical television drama series – like The Tudors (2007-2010), the historical/fantasy crossover Game of Thrones (2011-), or currently The White Queen (2013-) – made with big co-production budgets for a transnational market. To give one specific example, The Tudors has fed directly into how the Henry VIII story is now being told at Hampton Court Palace, where the ‘Young Henry’ exhibition – in conscious response to the appeal of The Tudors (and Jonathan Rhys Meyers!) – reinvents the figure of Henry VIII as the young sexual prince rather than the fat older tyrant and wife-killer. Research informed by practice is already taking place within the heritage industry itself, including theorisation of the visitor cycle or encounter. In ‘Young Henry’, those insights feed back into innovations in heritage-interpretation practice that draw strongly on new-media technologies: using wall projection, film, and sound installations – the rooms of the ancient palace thus operate more as theatrical space than ‘heritage space’ in the old sense – and at times drawing the visitor into encounters with costumed warders; all with the effect of making the heritage property-visiting experience increasingly immersive, multi-sensory and multi-mediated.

While ‘Young Henry’’s strategies create a revisionist opportunity to challenge old narratives, it’s clear that they’re also about capitalising on series like The Tudors to capture new audiences: the younger, demographically broadened visitor base that is a high priority for 21st-century heritage attractions. So, with reference to the “Screening European Heritage” project’s research questions, the direction of the relationship appears to be that today’s heritage visitor attractions need the reflected appeal – and increasingly young audience-base – of ‘heritage’ films and TV dramas more than these productions need (or are conceived or made centrally to serve) the heritage industry.

Judging from her recent work on online fan cultures, how has the World Wide Web changed the consumption and appreciation of heritage film? “What I see is that, for 21st-century transnational fans, the context of consumption – and, importantly, also fan productivity – typically has little to do with old notions of the heritage film as a genre. On the one hand, there are bloggers who are very into what we might call the ‘enchanted serenity of period
frequently American, sometimes self-identified Anglophiles, and who often seem more interested in a ‘pretty’ aesthetic and pretty pictures than in the specifics of the productions. I’m not sure this form of ‘appreciation’ has much in common with the more literary, nuanced, appreciative heritage-film audiences whose tastes and attitudes I explore in my book. The *Maurice* fans, on the other hand, are often surprisingly young and tapped into large 21st-century media fandoms, anything from BBC’s *Sherlock* (2010-) to *Game of Thrones* or *Harry Potter* (2001-2011). The latter is a characteristic pattern, or route, among people who write or have written *Maurice* fan fiction. It is a formerly tiny fandom that gains size from its intertextualities (of casting, especially) with larger media fandoms. People can be very passionately engaged with *Maurice*, but at the same time it is too small for them to sustain as their main fandom; so that in terms of their wider pattern of fan activity or productivity, it looks like a bolt-on.”

The attraction of a film like *Maurice* for enthusiasts online – at odds with the appeals presumed by its critical reception as a ‘heritage film’ – is above all a romantic, emotional, erotic and homoerotic one. “Many young women really enjoy *Maurice* as slash, that is, for the homoerotic love story aspect. That is undoubtedly one of the main draws with that film. It’s certainly where much of its established Japanese following comes from. While *Maurice* remains an important, formative film for generations of gay men too, there is also a strong female component to this fandom. For me, it raises many questions about the value of earlier critical framings of the ‘heritage film’ if 21st-century audiences and fans are consuming these films as love stories, romances, but also – very definitely – as queer texts – and all of this, typically, within the context of convergence culture, social media and transmedia fandoms. From the responses I see in this new reception context, I’m not convinced that these films are being consumed as ‘heritage’. The transnational dimension adds a further complication: the young American self-designated Anglophiles I observe online are not predominantly fans of period films or dramas; rather, their Anglophilia is more strongly directed at TV series like *Doctor Who* (revived 2005-) or *Sherlock*, British actors, the BBC brand, and the ‘British’ values attached to these as perceived from the USA.”

“By contrast, the *Maurice* fans I know of online are both more international than that, and less discernibly Anglophile or concerned with the film’s ‘Britishness’. They include fans from Latin America, Japan, Hong Kong and Europe as well as North Americans. These fans express an incredibly intense engagement with Maurice’s central characters, love story, and the protagonist’s personal journey, focusing on nuances of performance, gesture, and the beauty of the actors. It’s common for fans to obsessively screen-cap scenes from the film – as well as making animated GIFs or (less often) liveblogging *Maurice* – but they are not primarily screen-capping the houses or period settings. Rather, they seek to capture subtleties and shifts in facial expression, interactions and chemistry between the actors, intensities of emotion, a distillation of key moments. This is fascinating to me because I had always thought, in relation to the heritage-film debate: if you wanted to look at a country house, why would you go to the cinema and sit through a ninety minute or two hour or two and a half hour film to do it? There has to be character or story or actor engagement for people to sit through a film – or, with domestic and digital modes of viewing, to watch it again and again and again, as these fans do.”

“In keeping with this, the sites from *Maurice* that fans – including international fans – respond to very powerfully, and even visit, do not tie in with upper-class, ‘country house’ conceptions of the heritage industry at all. The beach at Rye in Sussex featured in the film’s title sequence is one example. But the main site from *Maurice* that some fans like to visit is the Assyrian Saloon at the British Museum, where the crisis between the cross-class lovers
Maurice and Alec is transformed into mutually acknowledged – and permanent – love in front of a pair of giant matching statues of five-legged Assyrian bull-men (Lamassus). The scene, first written by E. M. Forster in 1913-14 with no expectation of publication, even alludes to the possibility of same-sex marriage. And you have fans – including female fans, Americans, people from all over the place – visiting to see, touch, and photograph the bulls at a site that holds deep emotional, even erotic, resonance in the film.”

“At the date of our interview (April 2013), I identified the Assyrian bull-men as an ‘unofficial’, fan-led, heritage site and said I doubted that the British Museum promoted them officially in relation to Maurice. Since we spoke, however, this has changed. A new British Museum book, A Little Gay History (written by British Museum Egyptian specialist Richard Parkinson) and related audio trail, both launched in June 2013, now expressly highlight the Assyrian Saloon scene in Maurice and celebrate the queer historical significance and plot function of the museum setting in the film. These initiatives are, I’m told, a first for a major world museum. A Little Gay History even features previously unseen stills from Maurice provided by its director James Ivory, as does a forthcoming (Autumn 2013) tie-in feature in the British Museum Magazine.”

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