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European heritage and television

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European heritage and television

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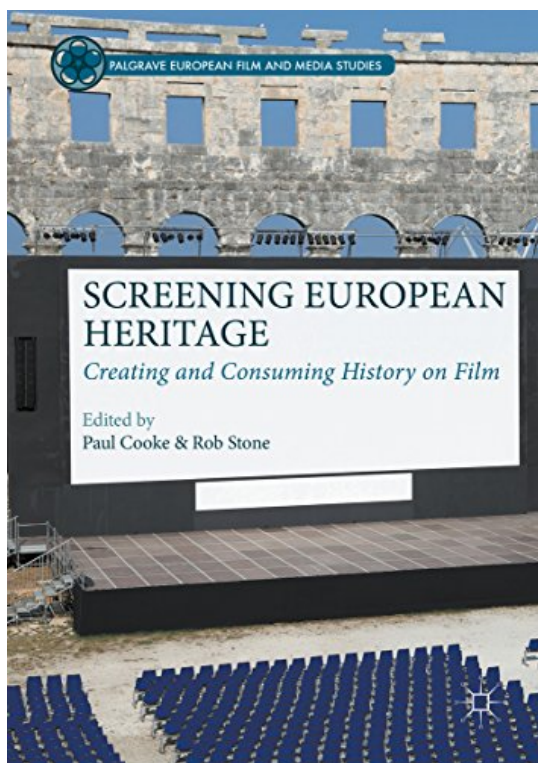
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Both *Screening European Heritage: Creating and Consuming History on Film*, edited by Paul Cooke & Rob Stone (London: Palgrave European Film and Media Studies, 2016), and *Docudrama on European Television: A Selective Survey*, edited by Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann and Derek Paget (London: Palgrave European Film and Media Studies, 2016) offer well-edited collections of specialised scholarly texts through which to gain a critical understanding of the status of heritage cinema and the television docudrama today. By opening up questions on forms of representation of a national cultural past within a globalised European market, they provide complementary perspectives, and further scope for thought on ‘heritage’, cultural memory, and ‘asserted veridical representation’.[1] While the academic disciplines in which their research is based may be considered as separate, in our ever-shifting social and geo-political terrains they share the topical criticality of key categories: ‘post-heritage’ and ‘docudrama’.

The term ‘heritage’ has more than a ring of prestige; it is a conduit of traditional values. *Screening European Heritage* consolidates these views of cinema’s ongoing engagement with national cultural heritage through analyses of spectacular historical biopics and the celebration of national cultural memory. While heralding the past, in the age of post-cinema, renewal, and contemporaneity, its contributors also foster the idea that ‘heritage’ promotes innovation: some explore its sustainability as a critical approach to representations of history, others as a genre in its own right. Cooke and Stone’s volume further enriches previous notable studies on European heritage film such as Ginette Vincendau’s *Film/Literature/Heritage: Sight and Sound Reader* (2001), and Belén Vidal’s *Heritage Film: Nation, Genre, and Representation* (2012). Vincendau’s edited collection critically examines the legacy of the past and the close link between heritage film and literary adaptations, which are studied by many of this volume’s essays in relation to costume

dramas. Furthermore, much of this book's interest resonates with what Vidal defined as a 'post-heritage aesthetic', which is meant to be understood in reference to 'the changes in our affective relation with the past'.^[2] Thus, 'heritage' as a film genre is approached and deployed as a critical construct, and flags up a generic shift whose re-defined parameters emphasise the heterogeneous and self-questioning cultural identity of Europe.



A plurality of complementary perspectives on creative enterprises and critical debates on a globalised national heritage identity animate *Screening European Heritage*. Its tripartite structure, 'Contexts of Production', 'Limits of Representation', and 'Modes of Consumption' organises the essays thematically. It successfully sediments interconnected geo-cultural morphologies, and is generative of further stratified studies in national cultural memory.

'Contexts of Production' is a particularly useful synthetic survey of the heritage cinema industry. The focus of its chapters ranges from the political to the sociological, from the regional to the transnational perspective. This section also deals with the contemporary politics of heritage and memory,

and the involvement of national cultural policies in the pragmatic challenges posed by international heritage film and television co-productions. It traces the contours of a 'European heritage' by addressing questions on the quintessentially national heritage film. Thus, it highlights the problematic status of this genre, particularly when examined from the standpoint of 'anti-heritage'. This notion generates a seamless thematic transition into the second section of the book, 'Limits of Representation', which basically begins with the idea that: '[t]o speak of "heritage cinema" is to start from the negative' (p. 63), that is from a critical understanding of, for example, Margaret Thatcher's conservative politics in the UK, and stereotypical cultural assumptions of 'Englishness'. 'Anti-heritage' is also explored in relation to world heritage cinema, which in promoting the ideal landscapes of a foreign country as feminine and exotic it may raise the issue with aestheticising spectacles of history, thus re-casting identification and desire as 'unnecessary pasts' (p. 81). Alternatively, diasporic communities re-write their collective histories and memories, by also integrating archival film footage drawn from home movies, in order to shape a cohesive community identity. They generate a postcolonial 'counter-heritage cinema' (p. 88), and create 'diasporic post-memory films' (p. 93).[3]

Of particular interest is Axel Bangert's concept of 'dark heritage', which denotes the study of trauma and the representation of Germany's Nazi past and the Holocaust, especially as opposed to contemporary escapist cinema and ideas of conservation. When the latter involves nostalgia for the past, this becomes problematic for Spanish cinema, too. As Paul Mitchell suggests in his chapter, it becomes a contested filmic 'traumascapes' (p. 136), the rural land of memory, which bears the traces of a national identity haunted by the fascist suppression of multicultural diversity. Thus, spectral flecks of the past rove around Spanish cultural memory, however mobilising critical and constructive 'post-heritage' aesthetics. This approach to heritage is present in French historical film adaptations too, which may adopt an often strategic ironic detachment by interweaving 'heritage gore' with romantic drama.

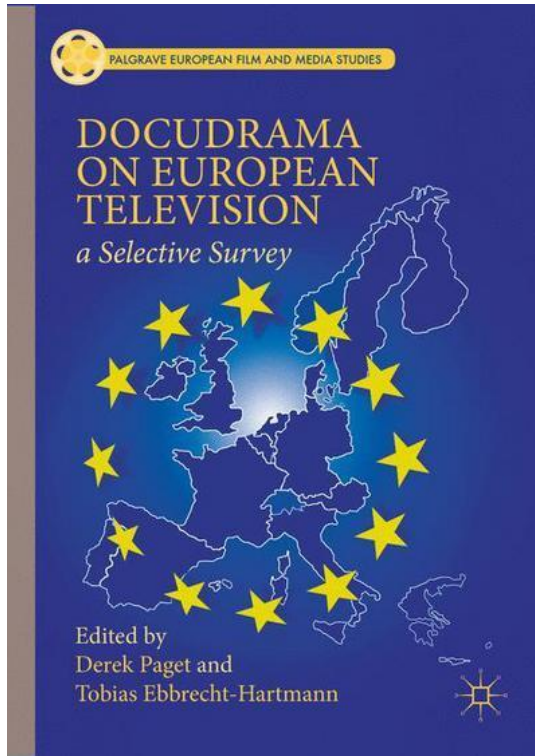
As its subtitle suggests, 'creating and consuming history' permeates this entire book. Some of its chapters present a particularly different way of appreciating heritage. They explore the navigation of historical locations as new digital spaces and online sites, hence suggest innovative ideas about the meaning of cultural heritage in our present digital epoch. As the geo-physical embodiment of precise world locations is associated with global branding, heritage also rings of a cinematic 'tourist gaze' (p. 165),[4] of contemplative

escapism into timeless, idyllic pastoral landscapes. Discussing the representation of pre-modern Ireland in Irish Heritage Cinema, Ruth Barton speaks of an ironic ‘tourist gaze’. This gaze is recognised as both intradiegetic – due to a film re-creating period authenticity – and extra-diegetic – for enticing audiences’ imagination and desire to visit the natural marvels of the advertised world heritage sites, now also lucrative shooting locations. Thus, heritage cinema is not only postmodern, ‘in the sense of “knowing and playful”’ (p. 64), but also an idealised space for post-tourism; it ‘recognizes that tourism is always performative’ (p. 66). The ‘ironic gaze’ at heritage constitutes an important conceptual shift into the next and final section.

If the onscreen nostalgia for the past bequeaths a collective fetishism for audiovisual pleasures and unspoilt lands, the idealised past studied as a post-modern and packaged-for-consumption object through self-awareness and irony is the central topic of the final section on ‘Modes of Consumption’. By extension, this compilation of essays considers practices of consumerism and branding, generated by fandom culture and participatory performances, through which audiences may open up spaces for reflection. These envisage the possibility of a reboot of the heritage film canon, and thus mobilise creative modes of consumption generated by less homogenised digital users and platforms. In Paul Cooke’s chapter, the theory of ‘the consumption of heritage as spectacle’ (p. 253) reveals instead a critical tension between the experience and consumption, either real or metaphysical, of the globally recognised brand name ‘Auschwitz-land’ (p. 235), and of the Holocaust as a historical product.[5] Themes such as heritage fandom and cinematic pilgrimage imaginatively conclude this well-informed scholarly volume by reflecting on the self-conscious experience of heritage.

Docudrama on European Television also constitutes an extremely well-edited and solid contribution to its academic field with its invaluable collection of essays each of which explores a variety of case studies pertinent to a European country. Arguably, all chapters share a fundamental, philosophical – even ‘Hamletic’ – question: what is fact, and what is fiction? Editors Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann and Derek Paget set out this selective survey within the framework of a ‘New Europe’. In a similar vein to *Screening European Heritage*, this volume also reveals a heterogeneous and polyphonic approach to a genre which self-consciously engages with the national past, also through heritage television dramas. *Docudrama on European Television* reveals the challenges involved in researching a history of hybrid aesthetics, in probing the often invisible confine between documentary and drama conventions. It has a far-

reaching scope: bringing together cohesive and complementary perspectives on the contemporary status of the docudrama, by re-constructing its lineage based on changing representations of a national cultural memory. This is a shared objective with Cooke and Stone's book on heritage film, when a genre is also posited through its critical and affective forms, hence refracting the problematic landscape of our present era seething in vast uncertainties concerning not only a national, but also a European identity.



Ebbrecht-Hartmann and Paget's book draws on existing key studies in the television docudrama, and follows on from their previous research regarding public memory and contemporary media events. As Paget argues, while since the 1990s into the new millennium the docudrama might have been influenced by the impulse for fact-based drama, perhaps triggered by Francis Fukuyama's provocative concept 'End of History?' (p. 1), the television docudrama as a contemporary response to the dramatised documentary has revealed reflexive modes of address. As Jonathan Bignell found in his research

on the changing British television ecology, these modes interact with one another. While they ossify the hybrid form of the docudrama, through them the docudrama can recognise ‘the structuring and creative work that made the material visible’.[6] During the course of re-enactment, for example, performance may problematise the modes of address of the docudrama; thus, the resulting aesthetic tensions between the search for accuracy and authenticity and storytelling conventions surface. Indeed, some of the contributions in this volume also owe their research to, amongst many others, Steven Lipkin’s studies on the performative character of the docudrama as a mode of storytelling, and as a persuasive practice of its ‘real emotional logic’.[7]

The postmodern and reflexive practices that characterise ‘the post-documentary turn and the docudrama’ (p. 2) introduce us to insightful studies, which are often testimony to an ongoing interest in a wish to recover, discover, and restore for the present the collective national memory as seen on television. Arguably, these histories of the docudrama engage with ontological questions regarding the veridical representations of documentaries, the integration of creative practices into these modes of storytelling, and the fragmentary nature of the short narrative format for television, often a drawback for the popularity of these narratives. One example is Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann and ‘historical event television’ in Germany (p. 31), and recent tendencies in the re-deployment of the docudrama through video installations of archival footage. This form of creative output is considered as a form of performative and symbolic re-enactment of history, a way of re-memorialising the past, and generating interpretative patterns that enable the access and transmission of historical networked images and documents. This speaks to the cinematic ‘dark heritage’ of German cinema explored in Cooke and Stone’s volume.

The re-enactment of history is central to David Rolinson’s study of the British docudrama and its new directions in reflexivity. On the one hand, it reveals the influential role played by the BBC ‘model’, especially John Reith’s *dictum* that the drive of television cultural values is to ‘educate, inform and entertain’ (p. 199). On the other hand, reflexive, postmodern practices with fictional and factual television conventions characterise contemporary modes of address, the ‘What If?’ nodal question, or the ‘conditional tense’ of much British docudrama. Forms of reflexivity can be found in re-enactments of original television series, which eliminate the illusion of fantasy. In this

sense, its aesthetic remains closer to factual rather than to fictional storytelling, and may draw the spectator closer to a sense of collective memory and shared popular culture.

Especially since 2008, Spanish popular culture also comprises docudramas focused on biopics, as Victoria Pastor-Gonzalez finds. While also rooted in the documentary tradition and the cultural standards of British television, and influenced by the conventions of film and television drama and the melodrama, the representation of noteworthy individuals and social events in Spanish biopics has a tone which is largely sensationalist (p. 141). This may explain how prestige can also be constructed through narratives about popular performers and celebrities, which are a part of the 'media heritage' tradition and 'tabloid television', and do not disguise the promotional impetus of the product (p. 147). Docudrama is a consumer-product for French television as well. Georges Fournier writes that, while mostly private channels in France deal with politically and socially sensitive matters through fiction, the docudrama 'fulfils the public remit of state-owned channels': information and complementary education (p. 111). His research also finds that 'heritage television' is mostly concerned with ideologically conservative historical biopics dedicated to emblematic historical figures in the construction of a national identity.

However, Åsa Bergström's historical survey on the Swedish television docudrama follows the path of philosophical uncertainty, as in studying what has determined the success of the genre, and in attempting to locate a stable standardised definition it treads 'the Swedish borderlines of fact and fiction' (p. 168). By following the line of inquiry on what distinguishes a fiction from a documentary film, Carl Plantinga's theory of 'asserted veridical representation' may provide a good philosophical framework for the docudrama. Plantinga argues that the representation is implicitly or directly truthful when based on the filmmaker's 'asserted propositions'. Indeed, the Swedish research turns to the performative aspects and contextual parameters in order to answer: what is a 'docudrama'? It finds that since the 1990s, artistic licence and subjective interpretations have often been privileged over historical accuracy and documentary evidence, despite the deployment of archival footage warranting authenticity. Thus, the affective turn in Swedish docudramas begs the question: 'how can we be sure that what we are seeing is fiction and not true?' (p. 194). An uncertain epistemology and a possible textual porosity also transpire through Milly Buonanno's study of the Italian docu-

drama. The difficulty in tracing a linear genealogy of the term reveals a globalised product on the Italian television market. It suggests that, after an early experimental phase, and after a renewed turn to reality, the Italian television genre was a success also for making use of family archives: it was a ‘well-documented drama’ (p. 87). While drawing on the neorealist legacy, the aesthetics of the Italian docudrama are shaped by its inherent formal hybridity: imbricated by the multifaceted politics of memory and national identity. On the Polish front, despite the lack of a well-documented history before the fall of the wall, and the prevalence of ironic and playful approaches to the documentary, the docudrama started to be treated more seriously after 1998, Wiesław Godzic writes. The historical documentary genre transformed Polish television, and its format impacted the docudrama’s more hybrid language and structure; ‘it played an important social role’, and made television audiences ‘more conscious of the ways in which historical facts can be disputed’ (p. 67).

In conclusion, both *Screening European Heritage* and *Docudrama on European Television* can be considered as stemming from general concerns over the politics of representation of cultural memory from the standpoint of not only a national but also a European identity. In our digital streaming habitat, contemporary forms of commodification, reflexivity, and performativity in participatory productions of cultural memory for and by moving-image literate audiences often reveal a common ground in ‘post-heritage’. For all these reasons, both volumes, like communicating vessels, offer convincing and fascinating contributions to their respective academic fields of study.

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Notes

- [1] 'When a filmmaker presents a film as a documentary, he or she not only intends that the audience come to form certain beliefs, but also implicitly asserts something about the use of the medium itself – [...] that communicates some phenomenological aspect of the subject, from which the spectator might reasonably be expected to form a sense of that phenomenological aspect and/or form true beliefs about that subject.' Plantinga, 2005, p. 111.
- [2] Vidal 2012, p. 104.
- [3] The notion of 'counter-heritage film' was coined by Will Higbee, which for D. Berghan 'aptly describes the alternative or oppositional memorialisations of the past these films articulate'. Berghan in Cooke & Stone 2016, p. 88.
- [4] The notion of 'the tourist gaze' was pioneered by John Urry in 1990.
- [5] The notion of 'Auschwitz-land' was coined by Tim Cole.
- [6] Bignell 2010, p. 205.
- [7] Lipkin 2002.