

Upstairs, Downstairs: Locating *Gosford Park* within the critical and cultural context of  
British (heritage) cinema

by

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## Abstract

This study looks at *Gosford Park* within the interpretative framework of British heritage cinema and the discourses which have emerged around it. Drawing on questions of class, national and cultural identity, film style, genre, and the representation of the past—all central to any examination of British cinema as a national cinema—it attempts to situate the film within the critical and cultural context of heritage cinema, and, by corollary, British cinema. Treating *Gosford Park* as a vehicle through which these concerns are addressed provides an opportunity to engage with these discourses in a manner that can ultimately lead to a greater understanding not only of the film itself, but the role cinema plays as a national representation and as a cultural commodity.

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## Introduction

This thesis will present a case study of *Gosford Park* (Robert Altman, 2001) within the discursive framework of British heritage cinema. Beyond my personal interest in the film, I have chosen to write about *Gosford Park* for a number of reasons. First, the film provides me the opportunity to contribute to the critical debates that have emerged around the heritage cinema, a mode of filmmaking often charged with conservative nostalgia. By approaching the film in this manner, I wish to engage in a discussion that raises questions about *Gosford Park*'s representation of the past and, more importantly, its capacity for social critique. Secondly, I wish to explore how *Gosford Park* interacts with the themes and discourses that have traditionally played a major role in determining how Britain and 'Britishness' have been understood. I believe that a focus on *Gosford Park* can lead to a broader discussion of the role such nationally-specific references and discourses play in the representation of Britain both at home and abroad. Drawing then on questions of class, national and cultural identity, genre, and film style—all central to any examination of British cinema as a national cinema—this study attempts to situate *Gosford Park* within the critical and cultural context of heritage cinema, and by corollary, British cinema.

Since its emergence alongside the 'new' British cinema of the 80s, heritage cinema has been the subject of polarized debates within British academic and critical circles—on one hand dismissed as reactionary for its controversial aesthetic and historical vision, on the other hand praised as socially-progressive for its incisive critical

rewritings of the past. As I will demonstrate in the first chapter, these critical debates are a key point of reference for my discussion of *Gosford Park*. First, though, it will be necessary to establish the extent and limits of these debates. What are the key characteristics of heritage cinema, in terms of subject-matter, sources, iconography, casting, and style? Why have these films been criticized so frequently for being ideologically conservative? How relevant are these critical discourses today? These are some of the questions I will seek to answer in this study. Through a combination of formal, textual, and contextual analysis, I will address the salient critiques of heritage cinema—with particular emphasis on class—interrogating these claims in relation to *Gosford Park*'s own representation of the past.

Chapter One will provide an overview of the critical literature on the heritage cinema. My approach engages with, and expands upon, British debates about heritage cinema and its developments. In addition to outlining the general characteristics of heritage cinema, the chapter explores the correlation between these films and the cultural and political ethos of Thatcherite Britain. Of particular interest is the emergence of 'post-heritage' cinema in the mid-90s as a means to dissociate certain films from the politically-compromised 'heritage' label. Since *Gosford Park* incorporates elements of both heritage and 'post-heritage', this Chapter seeks to explore what term—if any—best describes *Gosford Park*, and in the process, questions the usefulness of such distinctions in the first place.

Chapter Two develops and expands the initial chapter with particular emphasis on the stylistic and representational strategies of heritage cinema. The Chapter discusses

how *Gosford Park* deploys, and in some cases reworks, these strategies as part of its own critical perspective on class. A powerful social critique of the period, *Gosford Park* stands out among heritage films for its three-dimensional representations of working-class characters. By emphasizing the active presence of domestic servants, I will establish how the film uses the standard aesthetics of heritage cinema to mount a perceptive social analysis—thus countering claims that the narrative form and *mise-en-scène* of heritage films merely present the past and its contents as spectacle in a ‘museum aesthetic.’

Chapter Three examines *Gosford Park* in relation to its British literary genealogy. Drawing on the literary motif of the English country house, this Chapter looks at how *Gosford Park* incorporates both British detective fiction and the English novel under the banner of the heritage film. I will show that its references to these traditions are not gratuitous or simply blank pastiche but are integral to its narrative strategies, and consequently, are integral to its interrogation of the past.

Finally, in Chapter Four I turn my attention to questions of national identity, specifically how appropriate is it to call *Gosford Park* a British film given its hybrid origins and transnational appeal? Central to this Chapter is an empirical investigation of the film’s marketing and promotional campaign, box-office statistics, and critical reception in order to understand how *Gosford Park* has taken up, and self-consciously played on, traditional notions of Britishness. Although the film presents an allegory of a specific national past, *Gosford Park* not only includes references for British audiences, but also projects certain thematic concerns and discourses that are familiar to

international audiences—notably through the recognition of the names and previous roles of the actors in the film.

As this case study of *Gosford Park* will show, the very term heritage film need not be seen as ‘overwhelmingly pejorative and censorious’<sup>1</sup> but as a productive tool for both critical and cultural analysis. While *Gosford Park* certainly calls on received notions of British identity, it does so to present a critical (and often ironic) interpretation of such representations. As such, the heritage cinema framework will be treated as a site through which to explore the broader cultural and economic implications of *Gosford Park* with respect to British cinema.

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<sup>1</sup> Claire Monk, ‘The Heritage Film and Gendered Spectatorship’, *CloseUp: The Electronic Journal of British Cinema*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1997), p. 2.

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### The British heritage film debate and *Gosford Park*

Heritage films constitute a 'genre' only in a loose sense. Except for the presence of period costume, they are neither defined by a unified iconography (unlike the thriller and the western), nor a type of narrative (unlike romance and the musical), nor an affect (unlike the horror, melodrama and comedy). Films referred to as heritage may in fact include elements of other genres, for instance comic moments, musical interludes, as well as gothic, and/or romance features. Despite this variety, heritage cinema has become a meaningful critical term which has elicited important debates.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter will examine *Gosford Park* within the interpretative framework of British heritage cinema and the discourses which have emerged around it. It is not my intention to produce a comprehensive history or taxonomy of British heritage cinema; instead, I will concentrate on those aspects of the heritage film discourse that are relevant to *Gosford Park*. The heritage cinema framework is a productive analytical tool to study the film for several reasons. On one hand, *Gosford Park* exhibits several characteristics commonly associated with the heritage film: a naturalistic framework, consolidated by the sumptuous display of period decor, lavish costumes, and heritage properties (in this case, the ubiquitous country house); an emphasis on *mise-en-scène*; a preoccupation with period authenticity (especially in terms of setting, costumes, and production design); and the recurring use of particular British actors. At the same time, the film engages with subject-matter, particular thematic concerns, and discourses that have traditionally been

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<sup>1</sup> Ginette Vincendeau, 'Introduction', in Ginette Vincendeau (ed.), *Heritage/Literature/Heritage: A Sight & Sound Reader* (London: British Film Institute, 2001), p. xviii.

understood as 'British'. However, in order to examine *Gosford Park* as a heritage text, it is necessary to identify the central issues surrounding the British heritage cinema.

Although attempts to define the parameters of heritage cinema remain problematic, there is, nonetheless, a consensus about the general kind of film to which the term refers. The heritage label emerged in the British media and academic circles in the late 1980s and early 1990s in response to a relatively small group of quality costume dramas, most of them adaptations of canonical English literary texts, produced (or co-produced) in Britain during the 1980s and early 1990s. Characteristic examples included *Chariots of Fire* (Hugh Hudson, 1981), *Another Country* (Marek Kaniévski, 1984), *A Passage to India* (David Lean, 1984), the television serials such as *Brideshead Revisited* (1981) and *The Jewel in the Crown* (1984), *Little Dorrit* (Christine Edzard, 1989), James Sturridge's *A Handful of Dust* (1988) and *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1991), and the exemplars of the heritage film, Merchant-Ivory's E.M. Forster adaptations: *A Room with a View* (1985), *Maurice* (1987), and *Howard's End* (1991). However, the discourse has since expanded to include a heterogeneous range of British costume dramas produced over the last three decades including *Henry V* (Kenneth Branagh, 1989), *Orlando* (Sally Potter, 1992), *The Madness of King George* (Nicholas Hytner, 1995), *Sense and Sensibility* (Ang Lee, 1996), *The Portrait of a Lady* (Jane Campion, 1996), *Wilde* (Brian Gilbert, 1997) and *Elizabeth* (Shekar Kapur, 1999), to name a select few.

The term 'heritage' appeared in film criticism as early as 1986 in Charles Barr's introduction to a collection of essays on British cinema entitled *All of Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema*. Barr applied the term not to 1980s films but to a loose group of

patriotic British films produced during the Second World War that incorporated such aesthetic attributes as ‘realism’ and ‘quality’ with Britain’s “rich historical and cultural heritage.”<sup>2</sup> Andrew Higson furthers Barr’s argument by proposing that the heritage cinema has played a formative role in the construction of a British national cinema (which he dates back to the 1910s). According to Higson, heritage cinema “reinvents and reproduces, and in some cases simply invents, a national heritage for the screen”<sup>3</sup>. However, his critical position (see also Craig 1991 and Wollen 1991) with respect to the representation of heritage (both historical and cultural) reproduced in the heritage films of the 1980s and 1990s departs markedly from Barr’s initial conception of the term.

In contrast to Barr’s affirming and jingoistic usage of the ‘heritage’ label to describe the films of mid-1940s, the term was often used to criticize the period films of the 1980s and 1990s as aesthetically and ideologically conservative and complicit with the ethos of the government of the time. Moreover, the films were linked to the growth of the ‘heritage industry’ in the 1980s which saw the popularization of museums, great houses, and historical sites by the conservative government in an effort to preserve national identity by simply re-enacting the past rather than investigating it.<sup>4</sup>

For critics, the heritage film put the past on display by presenting it as an attractively packaged consumer product. As a result, such films were identified with a

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<sup>2</sup> Barr, Charles, ‘Introduction: amnesia and schizophrenia,’ in Charles Barr (ed.), *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1984), p. 11-12.

<sup>3</sup> ‘The Heritage Film and British Cinema’, in Andrew Higson (ed.) *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema* (London: Cassel, 1996), p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> For the main critical writings on the ‘heritage industry’, see Keith Cannadine, *The Pleasures of the Past* (New York: Norton, 1989); Robert Hewison, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* (London: Methuen, 1987); and Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (London: Verso, 1985)

particular visual style: “a museum aesthetic: apparently meticulous period accuracy, but clean, beautifully lit, and clearly on display.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, several critics complained of the supposed uncinematic nature of the heritage film, for these films strove to produce theatrical adaptations of novels or historical events that stressed a highly pictorial quality “rather than making full use of the *moving* image.”<sup>6</sup>

In his scathing critique of the 1980s E.M. Forster and Evelyn Waugh adaptations, British critic Cairns Craig complains: “the England these films validate is a theme park of the past.”<sup>7</sup> In his view, they fail to engage with contemporary social and political conflicts by retreating into an idealized, counterfeit aristocratic past. For Craig, the heritage films’ spectacular period settings indicate insularity: “We are indulged with a perfection of style designed to deny everything beyond the self-contained world the characters inhabit [...] The issue of affording the room is never questioned, only the quality of its view.”<sup>8</sup> He suggests that despite their apparent cultural openness, in the end, the characters always withdraw into the ‘barricaded room’ of their own English upper-class identities.

In turn, Tana Wollen reads these ‘screen fictions’ as a regressive, nostalgic mobilization of the past where the pastoral ‘South Country’ becomes the nation:

Britain seemed to have been squashed in the south-east  
corner of England and the hearth gods where breezy

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<sup>5</sup>Richard Dyer and Ginette Vincendeau, ‘European “Heritage” Film Workshop Conference’ [leaflet], Coventry, University of Warwick, June 1995. Cited in Claire Monk ‘The British heritage Film Debate Revisited,’ in Claire Monk and Amy Sargeant (eds.), *British Historical Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 178.

<sup>6</sup> Claire Monk ‘The British Heritage Film Debate Revisited’, p. 178.

<sup>7</sup> Cairns Craig, ‘Rooms without a View,’ in Ginette Vincendeau (ed.), *Film/Heritage/Literature: A Sight and Sound Reader* (London: British Film Institute, 2001), p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 10.

middle-classes who languished in sumptuous *ennui*, putting their best feet forward and often (so the scripts would have us believe) straight into their mouths. [...] Their nostalgia yearns for a nation in which social status is known and kept, and where difference constitutes rather than fragments national unity ... British identities have been subsumed under a particular version of Englishness.<sup>9</sup>

The criticism of heritage cinema is developed most cogently in Higson's influential 1993 article "Re-presenting the National Past: Nostalgia and Pastiche in the Heritage Film." Higson dismisses the heritage films of the 1980s for their projection of an imperialist and upper class Englishness as emblematic of British national identity. "The key films in the *national* cinema of the 1980s," he writes, "are fascinated by the private property, the culture and values of a particular class...[thus] transform[ing] the heritage of the upper class into the national heritage: private interest becomes naturalized as public interest."<sup>10</sup> In his view, although these films may chronicle the corrupt decadence and moral decline of the upper classes, their splendid and loving reconstructions of the past end up celebrating their privileged way of life. Higson's central argument is precisely "that the past is displayed as visually spectacular pastiche, inviting a nostalgic gaze that resists the ironies and social critiques so often suggested narratively by these films."<sup>11</sup> Through its display of visual splendors, the heritage film evokes an unattainable but thoroughly appealing past which supplants potentially

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<sup>9</sup> Tana Wollen, 'Over our Shoulders: Nostalgic Screen Fictions of the Eighties,' in Corner, John, and Sylvia Harvey (eds), *Enterprise and Heritage: Crosscurrents of National Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 182.

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Higson, 'Re-presenting the National Past: Nostalgia and Pastiche in the Heritage Film', in Lester Friedman (ed.) *Fires were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism* (London: UCL Press, 1993), p. 114.

<sup>11</sup> Higson 'Re-presenting the National Past', p. 109.

subversive narratives. Although Higson acknowledges the heritage films' ambivalence, he ultimately argues that "even those films that develop an ironic narrative of the past end up celebrating and legitimating the *spectacle* of one class and one cultural tradition and identity at the expense of others through the discourse of authenticity, and obsession with the visual splendors of period detail."<sup>12</sup>

In response to the critical (and dogmatic) dismissal of heritage cinema as intrinsically conservative, anglo-centric, and overly-nostalgic, other commentators have argued persuasively that these films are responsive to contemporary social and cultural issues. In a letter responding to Cairns Craig's disparaging assessment of the heritage film, Alison Light condemns what she sees as his "killjoy dismissal of the viewer as the simple dupe of bourgeois ideology" and that we should read "the return to Edwardian England in the 80s as much a rejection of Thatcherism and its ethics as a crude reflection of it."<sup>13</sup> Jeffrey Richards agrees, arguing that these films are "profoundly subversive" insofar as they challenge the conservative version of national identity. Such films, he suggests, provide a "comprehensive critique of the ethic, restraint, repression and stiff upper lip, of surrender of personal happiness to higher notions and self-sacrifice, hitherto key elements of the national character."<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Amy Sargeant has taken issue with the notion that the heritage films' interest in historical representation and authenticity reduces the films to marketing a false and elitist past. While she acknowledges the negative possibility of "the fetishising of documents and facts" and "the frequency with

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<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>13</sup> Alison Light, 'Englishness' [letter], *Sight & Sound*, July 1991, p. 63.

<sup>14</sup> Jeffrey Richards, *Films and National Identity: From Dickens to Dad's Army* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 169.

which certain houses and sites appear on screen and hence appear to corroborate ideas of cultural value,” Sargeant nonetheless sees the heritage film as democratizing history for larger audiences where “more voices are heard and a wider range of experiences are acknowledged.”<sup>15</sup>

The defense of heritage cinema is represented most explicitly in the work of Claire Monk. Monk criticizes the national/ideological underpinnings of the critiques as simplistic and reductive arguing that they not only ignore the hybrid origins and transnational appeal of such films, but also underestimate their subversive possibilities.<sup>16</sup> Instead, she points to the heritage cinema’s ability to confront contemporary anxieties towards issues of national identity, gender and sexuality, claiming the films create “spaces in which identities (national or otherwise) are shifting and heterogeneous.”<sup>17</sup>

Other arguments sought to reclaim the heritage films’ visual aesthetics. Contrary to arguments that the sumptuous *mise-en-scène* celebrates consumption and conservatism through the fetishistic display of period detail, others contend that such criticisms underestimate the films’ expressive use of visual style. Richard Dyer argues that the heritage films’ “sensuousness” and attention to “fixtures and fittings” may be seen to possess an “iconographic expressivity.”<sup>18</sup> Along the same lines, Monk likens the heritage film to melodrama in terms of how character desire is often sublimated into *mise-en-*

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<sup>15</sup> Amy Sargeant, “The Making and Selling of Heritage Culture: Style and Authenticity in Historical Fictions on Film and Television,” in Justine Ashby and Andrew Higson (eds.), *British Cinema, Past and Present* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 304.

<sup>16</sup> See Monk, ‘The British Heritage Film Debate Revisited’.

<sup>17</sup> Monk, ‘The British Heritage Film and its Critics,’ *Critical Survey*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1995, p. 122.

<sup>18</sup> Dyer, ‘Heritage Cinema in Europe,’ in Ginette Vincendeau (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of European Cinema* (London: British Film Institute and Cassell, 1995), p. 205.

*scène*<sup>19</sup>. From this perspective, instead of overriding the social criticisms imbedded in the narrative, the heritage *mise-en-scène* can be read as signifying narrative concerns. Consequently, Monk, along with Richard Dyer and Mark Finch and Richard Kwietniowski, see the heritage film as a contemporary development of the traditional ‘woman’s film’, characterized by melodramatic plot devices, narratives that emphasize romance, emotion and desire, and an expressive *mise-en-scène*.<sup>20</sup> In summarizing this alternative strain of criticism, John Hill comments that

The criticism of these films, it is suggested, has been too cognitive in orientation and has therefore neglected the sensuous appeal of these films and their appeal to a specifically ‘feminine’ reading competence.<sup>21</sup>

If these counterarguments regarding heritage film, national identity, gender and sexuality undercut the dismissal of the films, the debate is complicated still further by the speculation in the 1990s as to whether a distinction can be made between the Merchant-Ivory ‘era’, considered traditional heritage, and a so-called ‘post-heritage’ phase which dates from *Orlando* and includes such films as *Carrington* (Christopher Hampton, 1995), *Wilde*, (Brian Gilbert, 1997), *The Wings of the Dove* (Iain Softely, 1997), *Elizabeth*, and *Mansfield Park* (Patricia Rozema, 1999). In her article “Sexuality and Heritage” Claire Monk loosely characterizes ‘post-heritage’ films by their “plentiful postmodern pleasures: of the performative, of self-referentiality and irony” and an overt concern with

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<sup>19</sup> See Monk, ‘The Heritage film and Gendered Spectatorship,’ *CloseUp: The Electronic Journal of British Cinema*, vol. 1, no 1 (1997).

<sup>20</sup> Sheldon Hall, ‘The Wrong Sort of Cinema: Refashioning the Heritage Film Debate,’ in Robert Murphy (ed.) *The British Cinema Book* 2nd ed. (London: BFI Publishing, 2002), p. 196. See Dyer ‘Feeling English’; and Mark Finch and Richard Kwietniowski, ‘Melodrama and Maurice: Homo is where the Het is’, *Screen*, vol. 29, no. 3 (Summer 1988).

<sup>21</sup> Hill, ‘The Heritage Cinema: Issues and Debates,’ in John Hill (eds), *British Cinema in the 1980s: Issues and Themes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), p. 97.

“transgressive sexual politics,”<sup>22</sup> all presumably lacking in the traditional productions. At the same time, however, she questions the very capacity of ‘post-heritage’ films to significantly detach themselves from the visuals and thematic motifs of traditional heritage: “But, paradoxically, the post-heritage films revel in the visual pleasures of heritage, even as they seem to distance themselves.”<sup>23</sup>

Other contributions to the discussion of ‘post-heritage’ cinema have attempted to isolate an alternative ‘auteurist discourse’ within the heritage film’s standard mode of operation. For instance, Stella Bruzzi cites the heritage films of Jane Campion (*The Piano*, *The Portrait of a Lady*), Sally Potter (*Orlando*), and Martin Scorsese (*The Age of Innocence*) as examples of auteurist resistance to the heritage tradition by exhibiting a higher degree of self-awareness in recreating the past, which apparently saves them from the “stifling daintiness of the Merchant-Ivory canon.”<sup>24</sup> Along the same lines, Belén Vidal Villasur singles out such “auteurist adaptations” as *The Age of Innocence* and Terence Davies’s *The House of Mirth* (2000) as films which “in the last decade [...] have brought a different quality to a film practice often dismissed as conventional or conservative,” noting that, “their distinctive *mise-en-scène* makes [the auteurist films] complex artifacts and visually very sophisticated.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Monk, ‘Sexuality and the Heritage Film,’ in Ginette Vincendeau (ed.), *Film/Heritage/Literature: A Sight and Sound Reader* (London: British Film Institute, 2001), p. 9.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>24</sup> Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema: Clothing and Identity in the Movies* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 36.

<sup>25</sup> Villasur, ‘Classic Adaptations, Modern Reinventions: Reading the Image in the Contemporary Literary Film’, *Screen* vol. 43, no. 1, Spring 2002, p. 5.

Writing on the British heritage cinema at the end of the 1990s, Pamela Church Gibson offers a different angle on ‘post-heritage’ arguments by suggesting that “there has been a heterogeneity in form and content, a fissuring and fracturing in the monolith of heritage.”<sup>26</sup> Calling *Howards End* the “swansong” of traditional heritage, she observes a number of important stylistic developments in the nineties that have deliberately sought to undermine heritage cinema “while conspicuously deploying its conventions and simultaneously drawing on other generic traditions.”<sup>27</sup> For instance, she notes how *Persuasion* (Roger Michell, 1995) manages to translate the social critique from the Jane Austen novel (on which it is based) into a visual style that strips the past from its conventional heritage glamour, rendering it “oppressive.” Likewise, the film adaptation of Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* (*Jude*, Michael Winterbottom, 1996) differentiates itself from other, more lyrical heritage productions due to its excessively stark and uncompromising depiction of the past while the purposefully mannerist *The Wings of the Dove* intermixes lavish period spectacle with the stylistic elements of film noir.<sup>28</sup>

For Church Gibson, the main criteria separating conventional and ‘post-heritage’ films is the greater propensity toward ‘intertextuality’ and ‘extra-diegetic information’ that characterizes the latter. This is especially the case with *Elizabeth* and *Shakespeare in Love* (John Madden, 1998), films she regards as both innovative and radical in their approach to heritage cinema. She notes how *Elizabeth* incorporates a number of different generic elements (the thriller, historical biography/epic) with a hybrid aesthetic that

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<sup>26</sup> Church Gibson, ‘Fewer Weddings and more Funerals: Changes in the Heritage Film,’ in Robert Murphy (ed.), *British Cinema of the 90s* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), p. 116.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p. 117-122.

references *The Godfather* and Bollywood cinema while *Shakespeare in Love* combines numerous high-cultural, historical and televisual allusions with a playful cinematic self-referentiality.

Ultimately, Church Gibson sees the heritage films of the nineties as offering a far more self-conscious and irreverent representation of the past than the predominantly genteel offerings of the British heritage tradition. “Certainly” she concludes “the films have been transformed, in the past ten years, from those naturalistic depictions of Edwardian manners and mores. [The heritage cinema] is wider and more experimental and now has an element of pastiche.”<sup>29</sup>

The British heritage cinema debates are a key point of reference in my analysis of *Gosford Park*. My primary purpose in outlining them here is to emphasize the highly contested, complex, and often contradictory terrain of the heritage cinema. However, my aim is not to situate *Gosford Park* within the divisive critical framework of these debates. Rather, by approaching *Gosford Park* as a heritage film, this chapter will examine the value and limitations of these discourses in relation to the film.

At first glance, *Gosford Park* would seem to have much in common with the British heritage cinema as described by Higson—the ‘culturally British’ subject-matter, sumptuous *mise-en-scène*, heritage iconography, and careful attention to period detail. In his monograph *English Heritage, English Cinema* (2003), Higson suggests that *Gosford Park* is guilty of the charge he initially levels against the heritage film: that the lushness of film’s heritage setting and period detail of the film undercut its narrative concerns.

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<sup>29</sup> Church Gibson, p.124.

Thus, “narratively”, he argues, “England is in flux. Visually, though, it looks splendid [...] the heritage iconography is all in place, the dressing of the sets and the costumes of the characters is thoroughly picturesque. And the shooting style is languid, affording plenty of opportunities to display the cast, their costumes, and the production design.”<sup>30</sup> Indeed, much of Higson’s analysis of *Gosford Park* centers on how the film’s narrative form and *mise-en-scène* are characteristic of the heritage cinema, particularly its organization of the spectacle of the past and its contents in an ‘aesthetic of display’. As a result, he downplays director Robert Altman’s incursion into the British heritage cinema by asserting that his “preferred shooting style perfectly matches the standard aesthetics of the heritage film.”<sup>31</sup> However, by subsuming *Gosford Park* under the ‘standard aesthetics’ of the heritage film, Higson not only ignores the particularities of *Gosford Park*’s text (and significantly, what Altman brings to the film), but the distinctions between and diversity among heritage films in general. In such a context, Higson’s insistence on interpreting the films within his overly-narrow and monolithic concept of heritage cinema tends to trample significant differences between films at a textual level.<sup>32</sup>

This is particularly clear when one compares *Gosford Park* to a key heritage film of the 1990s, Merchant-Ivory’s *The Remains of the Day* (1993). Both are set in the upstairs/downstairs environment of an English country-house and are framed through the experience of the domestic servants, yet the two films exhibit highly diverse genre

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<sup>30</sup> Higson, *English Heritage, English Cinema: Costume Drama since 1980* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 257.

<sup>31</sup> Higson, ‘English Heritage’, p. 256.

<sup>32</sup> See Monk, ‘The British Heritage-film Debate Revisited’, p. 183.

characteristics: *Gosford Park* is a sprawling comedy of manners-cum-murder mystery that dissects class relations; by contrast, *Remains* is an intimate drama of thwarted romance and emotional repression set against the events leading up to the Second World War. Although both films feature a servant's point of view—*Gosford Park* features Mary, an inexperienced maid just starting her career in service while *Remains* follows the aging butler Stevens (Anthony Hopkins) at the twilight of his—*Gosford Park* is set apart by a narrative that is *centrally* organized around class. *Remains* on the other hand displaces the problem of class conflict with a narrative of emotional repression.<sup>33</sup>

Nonetheless, the two films share a fascination with the ritual of the servants' tasks and, in different ways, use the upstairs/downstairs topography of the country-house (*Gosford Park* and *Darlington Hall*, respectively) to investigate their respective social worlds. But whereas *Gosford Park* is resolutely lacking in nostalgia, openly depicting the hidden injuries and casual cruelties of class (see Chapter 2), *Remains* takes the form of an elegiac memoir of country-house life, told through flashback by its lead character, Stevens. As a result, the film was widely criticized upon its release for its 'prevailing mood' of nostalgia. In his telling review of *Remains* in *Sight & Sound*, Geoffrey Macnab comments on the "embalmed feel" of the film, arguing that it "seems more a lament for lost grandeur than an indictment of aristocratic folly."<sup>34</sup> Not surprisingly, Macnab's argument (written in 1993, at the height of the critical backlash against the heritage

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<sup>33</sup> Julianne Pidduck, *Contemporary Costume Drama* (London: British Film Institute, 2004), p. 126. For a discussion of how *Gosford Park* represents and deals with emotional repression, see Chapter 4.

<sup>34</sup> See Geoffrey Macnab, 'The Remains of the Day' (review), in Vincendeau (ed.) *Film/Literature/Heritage: A Sight and Sound Reader* (London: British Film Institute, 2001), p. 159-61.

cinema) mirrors the line of thinking initially put forth by Higson on the heritage cinema: that the nostalgia of the film is a guarantee of its conservativeness, its lavish *mise-en-scène* short circuiting the narrative's criticism of the past. Macnab thus writes, "On the page, perhaps, Darlington Hall may seem a vast mausoleum of a house which keeps servants and toffs alike manacled by propriety. On screen, however, the sheer visual relish with which the place is depicted can't help but undermine the mordant irony of Ruth Praver-Jhabvala's script."<sup>35</sup>

Other commentators, however, have come to view *Remains'* visual style as integral to its criticism of the past. John Orr, for example, finds that the film's "fascination with the ritual and the decorum of the country house [...] lends itself to an aesthetic of restraint" which leads to a compelling quality of "complete emptiness."<sup>36</sup> Significantly, Orr's comments, written several years after Macnab's review, also reflect the developments in heritage film criticism that occurred during the latter half of the 90s. This shift from the early-90s conceptualization of the heritage cinema—defined by a very specific link between the films and the Thatcherite heritage culture of the 80s—to a less ideologically-inclined framework later in the decade can largely be attributed to two key factors: first, the loss of the historically specific cultural context of the early 90s critique; and secondly, the influx of 'auteur' directors and, by corollary, the emergence of the so-called 'post-heritage' films during the latter half of the decade which deliberately sought to distance themselves from their heritage predecessors.

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<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, p. 160.

<sup>36</sup> John Orr, 'Beyond Heritage: 1990s England and the Cinematic Novel', *Film West* no. 39, February 2000, quoted in Pidduck, *Contemporary Costume Drama*, p. 127.

Evidence of these developments can be found when one compares Macnab's review of *Remains* to his review of *Gosford Park*, written almost a decade later. In contrast to his disparaging assessment of *Remains* as yet another 'stately brand of adaptation' by the Merchant Ivory team (a name, for many, synonymous with the wrong sort of heritage) his response to *Gosford Park* is quite positive, praising Altman for injecting 'new life to that most ossified of genres—the country house costume drama (i.e. the conventional notion of the heritage film).<sup>37</sup> In particular, Macnab complements Altman's 'freewheeling approach' for saving the film from the 'museum aesthetics' of the British heritage tradition: he writes, "this exacting approach to period detail can, in certain costume pictures, have a deadening effect on performance. But here Altman brings an improvisatory approach to dialogue and narrative, his camera flitting from character to character as if in search of the most memorable snatch of conversation."<sup>38</sup> More importantly though, Macnab's comments highlight the tendency within (post) heritage criticism to separate 'auteur' films from their heritage predecessors in terms of their resistance to the alleged conservatism that characterizes the latter. As a result, privileging the *auteur* leads to a certain bias in evaluation of films that share similar 'heritage' characteristics. For example, Macnab calls *Gosford Park* "a quintessentially British movie, but one which only an outsider with Altman's energy could have made,"<sup>39</sup> yet dismisses *Remains*—another quintessentially 'British' film directed by a noted outsider (the American James Ivory)—as 'a film anybody will be able to go and see with

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<sup>37</sup> Geoffrey Macnab, 'Gosford Park', *Sight and Sound*, February 2002, 46.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, p. 46

their mother.”<sup>40</sup> Thus, in his desire to distinguish *Gosford Park* as an *auteur* film, Macnab merely inverts the reductive and binaristic framework of the early 90s critique—praising Altman for the same lush *mise-en-scène* and meticulous attention to period detail that he censured Merchant-Ivory for ten years earlier.

The propensity among *auteur* critics to rescue certain productions from the heritage category is symptomatic of how the pejorative connotations of the early-90s critiques continue to shape the critical discourses around the heritage film. In such a context, it is not surprising that many critics regarded *Gosford Park* as ‘a Robert Altman film’ rather than a heritage film.<sup>41</sup> By doing so, they not only avoid engaging with the film as a heritage text—despite its obvious stylistic and thematic similarities—but leave intact and unchallenged traditional claims against heritage cinema. As a result, the desire to isolate ‘*auteur*’ films from the heritage tradition seems rather arbitrary, determined more by the critical aversion towards the latter than by close analysis of the films themselves.

Another way heritage film criticism makes questionable distinctions between heritage productions is through drawing temporal barriers between traditional and ‘post-heritage’ films. This is not, of course, to say that the changes in the heritage film in the late 1990s and 2000s are insignificant, or to deny that many of these films exhibit a heightened self-awareness in recreating the past. But I would argue that the theoretical

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<sup>40</sup> Macnab, ‘The Remains of the Day’, p. 161.

<sup>41</sup> Besides Macnab’s glowing review of the film, see also Graham Fuller, ‘Altman’s Latest Return to Form’, *Film Comment*, Nov./Dec. 2001, no. 6, p. 10-11; and George Rafael, ‘Gosford Park’, *Cineaste*, Summer 2002, no.3, p. 30-31.

separation between heritage and ‘post-heritage’ films is overstated. This is particularly evident when examining *Gosford Park* in the context of ‘post-heritage’ discourses.

Certainly, *Gosford Park* is aware of its ‘post-heritage’ forebearers such as *The Wings of the Dove*, *Elizabeth*, and *Shakespeare in Love*, all of which share with *Gosford Park* a deep self-consciousness about how the past is represented. A clear sign of this is its unequivocal self-reflexiveness, with its film-within-a-film subplot involving a Hollywood producer planning to shoot a murder mystery located at an English country estate into a film about a murder mystery at a country estate. Moreover, by drawing on—and playfully calling attention to—the generic tradition of the murder mystery (discussed in Chapter 3), *Gosford Park* shares the ‘post-heritage’ tendency for generic hybridity and use of intertextual reference. Indeed, the film knowingly evokes the playful intrigue of an Agatha Christie-style murder mystery with the upstairs/downstairs social dynamics of Jean Renoir’s *Rules of the Game* (1939).<sup>42</sup> However, neither *Gosford Park*’s self-referentiality, nor its marked intertextuality, nor the film’s juxtaposition of different generic elements, are consistent enough criteria to differentiate the film from the overriding visual and thematic concerns of the heritage tradition.

In this respect, it is worth noting just how much else is conventional about *Gosford Park*: the fascination with the past; the showcasing of period properties; the emphasis on period authenticity; the overall sumptuousness and visual splendour; the fine period costumes, décor, and architecture; the seductive performances; and a narrative exploring particular ‘British’ themes and discourses. To thus label *Gosford Park* an

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<sup>42</sup> In his written introduction to *Gosford Park*’s shooting script, Altman states his intention was to remake *Rules of the Game* as if it were *Ten Little Indians*.

‘auteur’ or ‘post-heritage’ film only limits our understanding of how the film operates within the broader tradition of British heritage cinema. This does not mean that we should downplay Altman’s role in the film (as Andrew Higson suggests), or its ‘post-heritage’ qualities, but it is equally important to acknowledge how much remains familiar in the heritage films of the late 1990s and 2000s.

In formulating the critical construct of the heritage film, Andrew Higson and others seized upon the significance of a certain group of films as representations of a nostalgically-positioned, anglo-centric past reconstructed from the objects and iconography of the ruling elites. However, dependent as it was on a narrowly-defined notion of leftist cultural critics in response to Thatcherite politics, the concept was criticized for its limited cultural and historical context and ideologically reductive conclusions. This led to the emergence of ‘auteur’ and/or ‘post-heritage’ discourses in the 1990s as a means to distance later films from the initial (and largely pejorative) conceptualization of heritage cinema. This approach responded to justified charges of ideological reductive interpretations by instead focusing on the differences in the heritage films of the 1990s and 2000s. But in doing so, heritage critics often overlooked the substantial aesthetic and thematic continuities between these films and their ‘conventional’ heritage predecessors.

Although this chapter has been as much about the critical literature on the British heritage film as about *Gosford Park*, the discourses circulating around the heritage film are an important starting point for analyzing the film. In order to move beyond the binaristic frame of the British heritage film debate while still retaining the concept of the

heritage film, the following chapters will examine the extent to which *Gosford Park* draws on and reworks these discourses as part of its own self-conscious interrogation of the past.

-2-

**A Museum Aesthetic?**  
*Mise-en-scène, period detail, and the representation of class*

In the previous chapter I established British heritage cinema as a context for understanding *Gosford Park*. In chapter two I will examine how *Gosford Park* mobilizes the oft-criticized ‘aesthetics of display’ of the heritage film to present a trenchant social examination of class. Drawing on the aesthetic and formal style of the film, my argument here will respond to the heritage critics’ accusations that the *mise-en-scène* of these films promotes an idealized past where characters and diegesis becomes secondary to what Andrew Higson calls ‘the cinema of heritage attractions.’<sup>1</sup>

Critics have seized upon several characteristics that seem to define heritage *mise-en-scène*. Following Higson, most critics use the term ‘pictorial’ to describe the general ‘look’ of these films. “All and all”, Higson observes, “the camera style is pictorialist, with all the connotations the term brings of art photography, aesthetic refinement, and set piece images.”<sup>2</sup> Seen as a blatant attempt at historic ‘realism’ in the nostalgic recreation of the past, the pictorialism characterizing heritage *mise-en-scène* has been unfavorably associated with a ‘museum aesthetic’. This can be attributed largely to the central strategies of heritage *mise-en-scène*: the display of ‘heritage space’—that is, a space for

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<sup>1</sup> Higson equates the heritage film aesthetic to something akin to that mode of early-filmmaking that Tom Gunning calls the cinema of attractions: that is, a cinema not of storytelling but of spectacle. See *English Heritage, English Cinema* p. 39; and Tom Gunning, ‘The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, its Spectators and the Avant-Garde’, in Thomas Elsaesser and Adam Barker (eds.), *Early Cinema: Space-Frame-Narrative* (London: British Film Institute, 1990), p. 56-62.

<sup>2</sup> Higson, “Re-presenting the National Past”, p. 117.

the display of heritage properties which, in the term's broadest usage, includes natural landscapes or man-made structures deemed significant by heritage bodies like the National Trust and English Heritage.<sup>3</sup> In addition to these historical spaces, the heritage film is distinguished by its painstaking attention to detail on a more intimate level, with critics noting the importance of 'period detail' such as costumes, furnishings and décor, and manners and behaviour.

We are thus presented with two patterns of representation: the display of heritage iconography/spaces, and the display of detail—the former earns criticism for its association with the tourist industry (and hence a backwards and commercially-motivated projection of the past), while the latter is criticized for its fetishization of visual detail that reduces the *mise-en-scène* to nothing more than an agent for the display of period detail. For Higson, the effect transforms historical narrative into spectacle where “heritage becomes excess, not functional *mise-en-scène*, not something to be used narratively, but something to be admired”<sup>4</sup>.

This chapter argues against the critical characterization of heritage *mise-en-scène* as a vehicle for the pervasive aesthetics of spectacle. Instead, I will examine how *Gosford Park* acquires significance beyond a mere 'aesthetics of display' by opening up the heritage film to questions of class. Specifically, I will show how *Gosford Park*'s use of heritage space and attention to period detail do not merely stand as markers or documents of the past, but establish and enable narrative possibilities.

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<sup>3</sup> Higson provides a summary of the critics' discussions of the ties between the heritage film, history and British heritage organizations in *English Heritage, English Cinema*, p. 48-63.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 39.

In the opening scene of *Gosford Park*, long-suffering lady's maid Mary Maceachran (Kelly MacDonal) stands by her employer's Rolls-Royce in the pouring rain. Before entering the car, she must wait for her mistress Countess Trentham (Maggie Smith) to be escorted to the car by a butler. Once her mistress is safely ensconced, Mary dutifully takes her place alongside the chauffeur, and as the car departs the camera holds for several seconds on the impassive butler standing on the steps. Emphasizing the enduring presence of the servants within the frame, this scene immediately aligns the audience sympathetically with the servants and establishes a critical perspective by drawing attention to the film's examination of class difference

A class critique framed through the experience of the domestic servants, *Gosford Park* deploys a number of formal strategies to establish the film's 'below stairs' perspective. This is immediately signaled upon Mary's arrival at Gosford Park where she is prohibited from entering the house by the front door, and by corollary, so too is the audience. Instead, we must enter the house with Mary via the servants' entrance. Furthermore, the film's flowing camerawork with its constant movement draws our attention to a wealth of detail and often locates the audience as an unseen observer that parallels the servants' own discreet position. This is dramatized when the first footman, George (Richard E. Grant), accidentally happens upon a private conversation between two 'upstairs' characters, Isobel McCordle (Camilla Rutherford) and Freddie Nesbitt (James Wilby). Startled, Isobel reprimands him: 'You shouldn't sneak up on people like that', to which Freddie thoughtlessly responds, 'Hey don't worry, he's nobody.' As such, we are invited to eavesdrop on the private lives of the characters above stairs—the

camera often peering from behind plant foliage, through lattices, windows and doorways —while still identifying with the characters below stairs. Indeed, Julian Fellowes wrote the screenplay entirely from the servants' point of view, where "the camera can't be on the posh people unless a servant is present. You may hear an argument inside a room, but if a servant enters, it'll stop. If a servant leaves a room, so does the camera. This may not be that evident. . . . But the story is transmitted through downstairs gossip, through what the servants know."<sup>5</sup> In doing so, the film draws attention to details necessary to establish the relationships between characters and the details of the mystery. For example, through a chance piece of information Mary overhears from Lady Sylvia, namely Mrs. Wilson's maiden name, she discerns the identity of the murderer. Although the scene centers on Lady Sylvia's conversation, the camera stays with Mary, emphasizing both her active presence as a servant, and her role as the film's 'surrogate' detective.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, while *Gosford Park* certainly calls attention to its use of heritage property, the film uses this space as more than mere display. By constantly shifting between the upstairs and downstairs worlds of the house, and utilizing a camera that meanders through its vast interiors, the film effectively socializes the space. Thus, far from displaying the house's impressive architecture as mere spectacle (and hence a vehicle for the tourist industry), or as an empty gesture towards historical verisimilitude

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Altman, cited in David Gritten, "You Rang Mr. Altman?", *Daily Telegraph* (Sept. 1, 2001), p. A7.

<sup>6</sup> For further discussion of the murder mystery genre and Mary's role as 'surrogate' detective, see Chapter Three.

(and hence a simulacra of the past), *Gosford Park*'s heritage setting is integral to the film's class critique.

Throughout *Gosford Park* the repressive physical as well as social topography of the house is rendered cinematically, with *mise-en-scène*, framing, and camera movements providing insight into the social relations between character and environment. Thus above stairs the artful compositions, bright lighting, and slow tracking shots enhance architectural spaces that are not only sumptuous, but self-consciously claustrophobic. The ornate interiors and graceful architecture dwarf the characters with their grandeur. This is graphically illustrated in the first scene upstairs, where the *mise-en-scène* is dominated by the imposing staircase and sumptuous décor that seemingly eclipse the characters in the frame. Thus, the so-called 'museum aesthetics' of the heritage film may be on full display, but the effect merely accentuates the characters' estrangement from their posh surroundings.

By contrast, below stairs eschews the visual extravagance above for the bleak quotidianess of the servant quarters. Characterized by sparse furnishings, subdued colours, and claustrophobic *mise-en-scène*, the distinguishing visual feature of the downstairs world is the simplicity of the composition. On a scenic level, the visual economy of these scenes evokes the functionality of the space, with the *mise-en-scène* expressing the austerity of servant life—a point underscored by Mrs. Wilson's candid confession, 'I'm the perfect servant, I have no life'. Furthermore, there is a noticeable rhythmic difference in the shooting style between the upstairs and downstairs. Whereas upstairs the languorous visual style, with its protracted camera movements and

ostentatious *mise-en-scène* mirrors the *ennui* of its occupants, below stairs is depicted as a beehive of activity with the camerawork and *mise-en-scène* conveying the hurried tempo of servant life. By doing so, the film accentuates the contrast between the vitality of the downstairs environment and the more pretentious, or artificial world above. When Mary first arrives below stairs, for instance, the frame bustles with activity—the countercurrent and contrasting trajectory of servants in the frame emphasizing movement. Aping Mary’s tentative steps, the camera navigates the labyrinth below stairs, its crowded and ill-lit corridors conveying the claustrophobia of the space.

Another aspect of *Gosford Park*’s class critique we must consider is the role of period detail. The aesthetic of display and discourses of authenticity for which critics have attacked the heritage film (the so-called ‘museum aesthetic’) often overlooks how these details can carry a social significance within the diegesis. In *Gosford Park*, period details do not merely authenticate the fiction, but help signify and structure social relations in the narrative, with such details as costumes, furnishings and décor, and manners and behaviour used to explicate the social hierarchy.

Stella Bruzzi, for instance, regards the costuming in certain heritage films in terms of a reality effect, arguing that “films such as *Howards End* or *Sense and Sensibility* look through clothes, as a major design effort is to signal the accuracy of the costumes and submit them to the greater framework of historical accuracy and literary authenticity.”<sup>7</sup> However, in films like *The Age of Innocence* (1993), Bruzzi identifies an alternative discourse, one that opts to “look at clothes” to the character underneath which “usually

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<sup>7</sup> Stella Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema: Clothing and Identity in the Movies* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 36.

counters or complicates the ostensible strategy of overriding narrative.”<sup>8</sup> However, *Gosford Park* demonstrates how costumes can function both diegetically and symbolically for the narrative. Besides signaling the period correctly, they play a formative role in establishing class differences. For instance, the relative poverty of Mabel Nesbitt (Claudie Blakley) is signified in part by the fact that she owns only one evening gown, so she has to wear the same dress more than once. As the lone representative of the emerging middle class, her dress becomes a symbol of her tenuous social status and hence an object of scorn both upstairs and downstairs. Below stairs, for example, the dress is ridiculed for its cheapness, prompting one maid to remark ‘What do you expect from a woman without her own maid?’ But it is Countess Trentham who is the most vocal in her contempt for Mabel, chiding her in front of the other guests for wearing the same dress twice: ‘Mabel is so clever to travel light. Why should one wear a different frock every evening? We’re not in a fashion parade.’

Costumes function in a similar manner with respect to the two American characters in the film, Hollywood producer Morris Weissman (Bob Balaban) and his ‘valet’ Henry Denton (Ryan Phillippe). For Weissman, clothes clearly play a part in establishing his cultural otherness. This contrast is dramatized at the pheasant shoot, where his oversized fur coat stands out as a visual affront to the traditional tweed jackets worn by the aristocratic set. As with Mabel, the outfit marks out Weissman as an outsider which, coupled by his refusal to participate in the shoot (an upper class custom), can be read as an extension of his modernity. By contrast, Henry Denton exemplifies how

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<sup>8</sup> Bruzzi, p. 36.

class differences are strictly maintained through clothing. Denton's masquerade as a valet is dependent on a costume that is both literal (it is supplied by the 'Fox Film wardrobe department') and symbolic (to denote class). However, when his ruse is uncovered, he tellingly adopts clothing more suitable to his new social position. Thus, when a servant deliberately upends a cup of coffee on his 'upstairs' clothes, it is a gesture of solidarity that signals the importance of clothes to the establishment of class identity.

Other period details stand out in *Gosford Park*, foremost amongst which are the furnishings. While the film's parade of fixtures and fittings certainly offer a clear index of wealth, they also highlight the stifling opulence of this upstairs social world. During the dining scenes, for example, the furnishings literally overwhelm the image: the frame cluttered with period objects (candelabras and other ornaments) that intervene in the foreground and obstruct our view of the characters, seemingly imprisoning them within their genteel surroundings. As a result, a sense of confinement emerges in these scenes, with the visual excess of the *mise-en-scène* expressing the oppressive atmosphere above stairs.

The grandeur of these formal occasions is further undermined by the film's emphasis on the work that goes into preparing them. Thus, the initial banquet scene may open with a graceful, high-angled tracking shot that showcases the fine china, crystal and silverware that adorn the table, but the image is undercut in an earlier scene which features the servants' meticulous preparation of these objects. Moreover, the scene emphasizes how even the smallest of details is imbued with social significance in the film. For instance, through Henry Denton's innocuous question about the place settings at

the table ('why does this fork go on the right?'), we learn that the upper-classes ate fish with two forks. Although a minor detail, it nonetheless carries with it significant class connotations. According to Fellowes, the practice of using two forks for fish, rather than a knife and fork, was because the latter was considered bourgeois.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, the images of movie stars that adorn the walls of Elsie's (Emily Watson) servant quarters, while emphasizing the period (with pictures of such contemporary film actors such as Ivor Novello and Greta Garbo), also suggests her and her class's connection to the dominant cultural form of the day, the cinema—something not shared by the upper classes.

Perhaps the most extreme example of *Gosford Park*'s use of period detail to examine social relations can be found in the film's meticulous attention to manners and behaviour. Indeed, publicity materials for the film stressed how Altman undertook considerable research into the social practices of the period.<sup>10</sup> According to Fellowes, "[Altman] felt strongly that for the satire to work, he had to get the details right."<sup>11</sup> As such, it is possible to read these details as extensions of the film's class analysis. Thus the practice of calling servants by their employers' surname, while historically accurate, also signals the importance of social customs to the establishment of class identity. The practice also signals a pattern, continued throughout the film, of showing that the rules of rank and precedence were as rigidly enforced below stairs as above. In the Servants'

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<sup>9</sup> On his highly-perceptive commentary track on the *Gosford Park* DVD, Fellowes explains that two forks were used when eating fish because, before the invention of stainless steel utensils, steel knives would leave a taste on fish.

<sup>10</sup> See Sheila Johnston, 'Assembling Stars Below Stairs', *Country Life*, January 2002, 56-59. See also Christina Hardyment, 'The maid, the playwright, and the Prime Minister' *The Times Weekend*, 4 August 2001, p. 1-2. Both articles highlight how the Altman used former servants as technical advisors for the film.

<sup>11</sup> Johnston, p. 57.

Hall, for instance, the seating arrangements at dinner are dictated by the rank of their employers. When a maid assumes the wrong place at the table, for instance, she is castigated by the butler ('and since when does a Baroness outrank a Countess?') who demands she take her proper position.

As period detail, manners and behavior also play a role in what Julianne Pidduck calls the film's "methodical scrutiny of the strange conflictual symbiosis between servants and their masters."<sup>12</sup> This is dramatized through Countess Trentham and Mary in *Gosford Park*'s opening sequence noted earlier, where Mary waits for her mistress in the rain. Emphasizing the duration of Mary's wait, the scene inaugurates the inequity of the master-servant relationship, with the Countess's indifference towards Mary emblematic of the general self-centeredness of her class. On her arrival, for example, the Countess remarks to two ladies seated comfortably in the drawing room: 'I'm breaking in a new maid and I'm simply worn out with it. There's nothing more exhausting, is there?... Honestly, for all the help I give her, she should be paying *me!*'—an ironic statement when juxtaposed to the rigors Mary experiences below stairs. Her selfishness is exemplified on the evening before the shooting party. In the scene, the Countess decides to wear the same blouse the next day and because it is soiled, Mary must wash the shirt later that night. The next morning, however, the Countess announces, 'Mary, I don't think I'll wear that shirt after all'.

At the same time, the film shows the intimacy and understanding that develops between the two. As the film progresses, Mary becomes increasingly protective of her

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<sup>12</sup> Pidduck, *Contemporary Costume Film*, p. 122.

employer—she lies to the police on her behalf and, in the end, calms her fears over the prospect of a murder trial, asking ‘what purpose could it possibly serve?’ But the relationship is revealed to be rather superficial, determined more by social codes than any authentic sense of camaraderie. After the shooting luncheon, for example, Mary and the Countess casually exchange inter-class gossip: however, as soon as Sylvia enters the room, their conversation is abruptly halted and Mary dutifully recedes to the background. Indeed, throughout the film she does not question, but rather endorses, the hierarchy that keeps her below stairs.

In this light, *Gosford Park* depicts not only the strict divide between the upstairs and downstairs, but their respective complicity. Hence Denton’s transgression of the social order is met with scorn from both sides, just as Elsie immediately understands that she is fired when she speaks out of turn upstairs. Other servants are shown to adopt the prejudices of their employers. A maid despises the Countess Trentham for not having any money while another derides Mabel Nesbitt for not having a Lady’s maid—in both cases parroting their employer’s own class-based attitudes. Others are extremely loyal and sympathetic to their masters. After McCordle’s death, for instance, his valet Probert (Derek Jacobi) dutifully continues to serve his master by trying to make his corpse comfortable, while Elsie complains that Lady Sylvia’s chambermaid, Lewis (Meg Wyn Owen), ‘is more concerned about Lady Sylvia’ farts than if her own mother had a heart attack.’ Even those servants who are most critical of their masters are shown to endorse the status quo in one way or another. Thus, Roberts Parks (Clive Owen) may dismiss his

master, Lord Stockbridge (Charles Dance) with the words ‘He thinks he’s God almighty. They all do’, but he is shown to be just as dedicated to his employer as the other servants.

What makes *Gosford Park*’s attention to period detail significant, however, is how character behaviour exposes issues of class and social hierarchy. Consider William McCordle, whose vulgarity is used to accentuate his status as a *parvenu*. A self-made industrialist with a bought title, there is a noticeable disconnect between McCordle’s nouveau-riche identity and the upper-class world he inhabits—an awkwardness brought to the fore through his slovenly eating habits, lousy shooting ability ( a sign of his ‘lowly’ upbringing), and his disregard for social customs—at one point telling his wife, ‘I don’t give a shit about precedence!’ McCordle is clearly unaccustomed to his social position—his lack of prestige, dignity, and manners are a constant source of irritation to his patrician wife whose repeated humiliation of him in front of their guests—insulting his courage during the war (‘Well you made a lot of money but its not quite the same as charging in to the cannon’s mouth, is it?’) and his lowly interests (‘I know you’re interested in money and fiddling with your guns, but when it comes to anything else, I’m stumped’)—betrays her own class position. He thus has the wealth, power and privileges of an English gentleman, yet he is resentful of the other aristocrats who refuse to accept him as one of their own: ‘You always complain that people look down on you,’ his wife remarks, ‘and then you behave like a peasant.’

Indeed, *Gosford Park* reveals not only the differences between the upstairs and downstairs, but the discrimination within the social hierarchy above stairs. This is tellingly illustrated through the marriages of the upstairs characters. In the film, the three

sisters Lady Sylvia, Louisa Stockbridge (Geraldine Sommerville) and Lavinia Meredith (Natasha Wightman) represent the different attitudes towards marriage held by the upper classes: Sylvia married for money, Louisa for rank, and Lavinia for love. Both Sylvia and Louisa are unhappy in their marriages—Sylvia is contemptuous of her husband and Louisa is bored with hers — but it is Lavinia, who has married for love, who is viewed as the unfortunate one. Marriage is used as a tool to advance or maintain one's position within the aristocracy. Who they marry is unimportant, as long as it maintains their social caste—evidenced by the Countess's revelation that Sylvia and Louisa cut cards over who would marry McCordle. As a result, Lavinia's decision to marry beneath herself for love is met with sympathy by her sisters, but her appeal for them to help with her husband's dire financial predicament is summarily dismissed. By marrying outside her social set, an act contrary to the rules of behavior for her class, she is denied their assistance. Even though the Merediths are the only happily married couple upstairs, they are looked down upon within the family. It is only when her husband, Anthony Meredith (Tom Hollander), goes below stairs—and outside of his class—does he realize that he and his wife are the only couple upstairs who have a strong and loving relationship: told by a servant 'I think as long as you can love somebody, whether or not they love you, then it's worth it.'

But it is Freddie Nesbitt's marriage to Mabel that exemplifies the skewed values of their class. Freddie, the feckless son of a peer, has married beneath himself for money only to discover that his wife has none. As a result, Mabel is a source of embarrassment to him. She is flattered by the life her husband's status gives her, but oppressed by her constant sense of inadequacy because of her 'lowly' status (evidenced by the Countess's

callous remark ‘why has Freddie Nesbitt brought that awful, common wife of his?’). Yet the morally dubious Freddie Nesbitt, who schemes to get a job from McCordle by blackmailing his daughter, is treated courteously by his peers because of his status among them.

By contrast, William’s cousin Ivor Novello uses his manners and appearance to refashion upper-class identity. Through his suave demeanor and fine clothes Novello successfully adopts an aristocratic façade even though, as a celebrity, he clearly transcends class boundaries. This is dramatized in the film’s centerpiece scene where Novello sings a medley of his own popular songs at the piano. As he performs, the guests listlessly sit about playing cards and talk over his singing while their servants gather reverently in the wings, transfixed by his music. Unsurprisingly, the only guest who is genuinely delighted by Novello’s singing is Mabel, the lone member of the middle class who is not pre-conditioned to their values. However, while Novello possesses the mannerisms and wealth of an aristocrat, it is made clear that he is not a legitimate member of their class. Hence, when Lord Stockbridge (Charles Dance) learns that Novello was a teacher’s son, he sneers ‘that’s just marvelous’—his wife later telling William ‘he’s only comfortable with his own kind.’ Likewise, although Lady Sylvia enjoys Novello’s presence, she makes it clear that he is expected to provide entertainment, asking ‘would it be awful of me if I asked you to play a little something?’ Thus, when he is asked by Weissman ‘how do you put up with these people?’, Novello’s response ‘I earn my living by impersonating them’ not only signals the importance of manners and appearances in establishing class, but anticipates the displacement of the

high culture identified with the aristocracy by popular culture as the dominant cultural force in society.<sup>13</sup>

However, while the British-born Novello understands his tenuous place in the social order, his American counterpart Morris Weissman is completely unaccustomed to the rules of this tightly-regulated society. He is the only member of the party who is a total outsider—not a semi-outsider like Novello, William, or Mabel who have, to a degree, learned the rules of behaviour. As a result, he is constantly reminded that he is not one of them: from the Countess recoiling from Weissman's roadside greeting 'Are you OK?' 'Am I *what?*'; Lord Stockbridge's awkward reception of his name 'Weissman, eh?'; Louisa's patronizing 'who's the funny little American?'; to Lady Sylvia's dismissal of him to Inspector Thompson (Stephen Fry), 'Oh, don't mind him. He's just an American who's staying with us.' Throughout the film nobody befriends him or warms to him. His behaviour is viewed as willfully bizarre by the aristocrats—his unfamiliarity with their customs, his incessant use of the telephone, his profanity, and most of all, his livelihood, are all seen as an affront to their way of life.

*Gosford Park* emphasizes the insular attitudes and values of the upper classes through their disdain for outsiders. In the film, their imperviousness, even hostility, to the outside world is personified by the Countess. On her first arrival, for instance, irritated by Mabel's awe in the presence of Novello, the Countess deliberately makes it clear that she despises his lifestyle and profession when remarking about his latest film: 'It must be so disappointing when something just *flops* like that.' Later, when he sings at

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<sup>13</sup> For further discussion on the relationship between the upper-classes and popular culture in the film, see Chapter 3.

the piano, she bemoans his performance and prevents the others from applauding, telling them ‘don’t encourage him’. She similarly dismisses Weissman’s latest film with ‘None of us will see it anyway’. The Countess demonstrates that the values of these outsiders are of no interest to her—just as she is unflinchingly hostile to Mabel and indeed to anyone who is not drawn from her own background.

This disdain for outsiders also surfaces through the upper-class’s treatment of Inspector Thompson. When he first arrives, Lady Sylvia immediately undercuts his authority by rebuffing his attempts at a formal introduction. Instead, he is treated like a visiting servant and is consequently denied his name and relegated to the background. Significantly, however, Thompson believes that he is their social equal. As such, he shares their preoccupation with appearances—emphasized in part through his attention to his dress and ridiculous pipe-smoking. By contrast, Thompson’s humble working-class assistant, Constable Dexter (Ron Webster), is readily accepted below stairs. As such, Thompson and Dexter’s relationship parallels that of the master/servant dynamic of the narrative: Thompson’s vanity coupled with his investigative ineptitude mirrors the ignorance of the upper-classes—evidenced by his ironic remark, ‘I’m not interested in the servants. Only the people who had a connection with the dead man’—while Dexter, like a servant, is shown to be far more capable and sympathetic than his superior.

Conceived in this light, *Gosford Park* thus invites us to interrogate class differences through its use of heritage space and period detail. In setting the film at an historic county house, the film does not merely display a pristinely preserved heritage property, but establishes the visual tension between the upstairs/downstairs spaces of the

house. Both narratively and stylistically, *Gosford Park* illustrates the extraordinary social rites and domestic duties of country house living along with an incisive commentary on the inequities that underlie its period finery. Here period details are not merely spectacular markers of period authenticity, but carry with them a referential weight that is socially significant by underlining the hypocrisy of social rules and customs made to preserve the class structure.

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**Agatha Christie meets Jane Austen:  
*Gosford Park* and British literary traditions**

In the previous chapter I argued that *Gosford Park*'s visual splendor and emphasis on period detail are integral to the film's social commentary. In this chapter I expand upon this argument by examining *Gosford Park* in relation to British literary traditions. Although *Gosford Park* is not a literary adaptation in the strict sense, the film incorporates several characteristics from detective fiction and the English novel by deploying a familiar setting in English fiction: the traditional country house. Indeed, by basing the title of *Gosford Park* on its ubiquitous country house setting, the film follows a characteristic convention of both literary traditions, as may be seen by such detective fiction titles as *The Red House Mystery*, *Crooked House*, *Peril at End House*, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, *The Scandal at High Chimneys*, *The House at Satan's Elbow*, and such notable novels as *Mansfield Park*, *Bleak House*, *Howards End*, *Crome Yellow* and *Brideshead Revisited*. As such, this chapter contends that *Gosford Park*'s literary genealogy is central to the film's interrogation of the past—its country house setting not only serving as an ornate backdrop for murder, but as an index of social change.

However, before examining *Gosford Park*'s literary influences, it is necessary to establish the connection between detective fiction and the heritage film. In particular, I will show that the film and television adaptations of Agatha Christie's murder mysteries fit very well into the aesthetic framework of the British heritage cinema. Indeed, as one of the most well-known and prolific writers of detective fiction, Christie's work has

often received the same high-budget production treatment reserved for the heritage adaptations of the canonical English novels of Jane Austen, E.M. Forster, Henry James, and Thomas Hardy. In 1974, for instance, Sidney Lumet directed a film version of *Murder on the Orient Express*, a quality adaptation of Christie's 1934 novel *Murder on the Calais Coach*. Four years later, British director John Guillerman successfully adapted Christie's 1932 novel *Death on the Nile*. In both cases, their elegant visual style, meticulous attention to period costumes and settings, and use of well-known (British) acting talent clearly anticipates heritage cinema.<sup>1</sup> But the best example seems to be offered by the popular BBC adaptation of Christie's *Poirot* mysteries starring David Suchet as the titular detective. Shot on location during the 1980s and 1990s, these adaptations are as carefully researched and visually splendid as any heritage production. Yet despite their 'culturally British' subject-matter and striking visual and thematic similarities, these productions are conspicuously absent from all the critical discussions of British heritage cinema—an oversight that can be attributed largely to the disdain among heritage critics towards the popular status of Christie's novels. As such, this chapter suggests that *Gosford Park* marks the convergence of popular and high-brow British fiction under the banner of the British heritage film.

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<sup>1</sup> *Murder on the Orient Express* starred Lauren Bacall, Anthony Perkins, Richard Widmark, Sean Connery, and Ingrid Bergman and such British 'theatrical' actors such as Albert Finney, Vanessa Redgrave, Michael York, and John Gielgud; while the cast of *Death on the Nile* included Peter Ustinov, Peter Niven, Bette Davis, Angela Lansbury, Mia Farrow, Jon Finch, and heritage film regular, Maggie Smith. Moreover *Death on the Nile*, in a move that foreshadows the heritage cinema, actively strove for historical authenticity: shooting on location in both England and Egypt. See the making of featurette on the 2001 DVD release of *Death on the Nile*.

With this in mind, the first part of this chapter discusses *Gosford Park* in relation to British detective fiction. Framed by an Agatha Christie-style murder mystery, *Gosford Park* embraces the archetypes of the country house detective story. But the film does not orchestrate these conventions in order to undermine them, as some critics suggest.<sup>2</sup> Rather, it assumes the audience has a certain familiarity with these conventions, and it playfully reworks and expands upon this common knowledge by reframing the country house detective story as a social critique. By doing so, both the crime and the past itself become objects of investigation. Nevertheless *Gosford Park* remains a superbly crafted detective story. Although the film self-consciously foregrounds its mystery premise—a subplot involves a Hollywood producer making a film about a murder at a country estate into a film about a murder at a country estate—the characteristic form of the detective story remains. As such, *Gosford Park* may poke fun at the genre but it takes its conventions quite seriously.

In order to understand how *Gosford Park* operates as murder mystery, a brief overview of its conventions is required. Closely associated with the so-called Golden Age of British detective fiction—represented between the two World Wars by the likes of Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers—the detective story emphasizes the detective’s ratiocination of a crime and eventual revelation of the culprit’s identity.<sup>3</sup> Often set in

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<sup>2</sup> In a review of the film for *Cineaste*, George Rafael compares Altman’s approach to the murder mystery in *Gosford Park* with his approach to other genres, noting “Altman proceeds to undermine the whodunit much the way he undermined film noir in *The Long Goodbye* and the Western in *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*.” See *Cineaste*, Summer 2003, no. 3, p. 30. Similarly, Graham Fuller writes “Altman ridicules the Christie setup then abandons it”. *Film Comment*, Nov-Dec. 2001, n.37, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> See Charles Derry, *The Suspense Thriller: Films in the Shadow of Hitchcock* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company Publishers, 1988), p. 57-61. For a more detailed discussion of the

enclosed, upper-class spaces (typically an English country estate, or rural village), the detective story is structured around the eventual answering of the question ‘who committed the crime?’ Central to its structure is the climactic revelation of the identity of the culprit. For this reason, plots are often convoluted, relevant facts are purposely withheld from the narrative, misdirection is allowed through red herrings, and there are often surprising plot twists: the most popular convention being the revelation that the ‘Least Likely Person’ is the murderer. It is only through the sharp analytical mind and logical inferences of the detective figure that the guilty party is apprehended and the social order is restored.

Indeed, the detective story’s rigidly uniform plot, familiar character-types, and the isolated settings are all geared toward one specific function: the facilitation of the mystery and suspense. Thus, regardless of its innumerable variations, the form remains:

The typical detective story presents a group of people assembled at an isolated place – usually an English country house – who discover that one of their number has been murdered. They summon the local constabulary, who are completely baffled; they find either no clues or entirely too many, everyone or no one has the means, motive, and opportunity to commit the crime, and nobody seems to be telling the truth. To the rescue comes an eccentric, intelligent, unofficial investigator who reviews the evidence, questions the suspects, constructs a fabric of proof, and in a dramatic final scene, names the culprit.<sup>4</sup>

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detective fiction see George Grella. ‘Murder and Manners: the Formal Detective Novel’ in *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, vol. 4, no 1 (Autumn 1970), p. 30-48. and John Cawelti *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976).

<sup>4</sup> George Grella, ‘Murder and Manners: The Formal Detective Novel’, p. 30.

*Gosford Park* clearly derives from the detective tradition. The film may self-consciously deploy its conventions, but any suggestion that Robert Altman undermines the murder mystery genre is misleading, for any change to its highly conventionalized structure could compromise the teleological thrust of the ending—a central attraction of its form. To demonstrate, I will examine where most good readers of detective fiction begin—the ending.

Indeed, the film's climactic revelation that Mrs. Wilson is the murderer provides the staple ending of the detective story—the reversal of expectations. Her guilt is a surprise precisely because we have been led to suspect other characters. In this regard, she typifies the 'Least Likely Person' by remaining a marginal figure in the inquiry until she is unmasked at the end. Moreover, she possesses the usual characteristics associated with the culprit: "Usually the culprit is a more acceptable person than his victim," Grella writes, "because [s]he comprehends the elaborate social ritual well enough to pose as an innocent."<sup>5</sup> Unlike her victim William McCordle—who is neither a gentleman nor a true squire but a parvenu—Mrs. Wilson's facade as the 'perfect servant' conceals her involvement in the murder while providing her with both the means and opportunity to commit it: 'What gift do you think a good servant has that marks them apart from the rest?' she asks Mary, "It's the gift of anticipation. And I am a good servant, I am better than good, I am the best, the perfect servant. I know when they will be tired so the bed is made and warm. I know before they know it themselves.' And like the typical culprit, she shares a past with her victim — her motive stemming from an illicit affair with

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 43

McCordle that resulted in the birth of a child, who turns out to be Robert Parks. Of course, there are subtle clues about her guilt—notably her peculiar reactions to Park’s initial introduction (‘The name’s Robert. Robert Parks’), and to the photograph on his nightstand (of herself, it turns out)—but these are eclipsed by the film’s skillful use of ‘most likely suspects’ who misdirect the audience from the identity of the culprit.

A number of characters stand out as potential suspects in *Gosford Park*—the charming but feckless aristocrat Freddie Nesbitt, the impoverished military man Anthony Meredith, and the handsome but secretive valet Robert Parks—who function as red herrings in the narrative. This is dramatized in the scene preceding McCordle’s stabbing in the library. As Ivor Novello entertains on the piano in the drawing room, all three characters are shown to steal away from the other guests and servants. After the stabbing, they conveniently return to their previous activities/duties. But it is Robert Parks who we are purposely led to believe is the culprit. The film repeatedly drops clues about his guilt: besides his marked absence during Novello’s performance, he makes incriminating remarks to Mary (‘Don’t you like surprises?’), and he is shown suspiciously lingering in the background when the kitchen staff notices that a knife is missing. Most tellingly, he later extinguishes a cigarette in the same refuse bin where the ‘murderer’ hid the knife. Only through the revelation that McCordle was poisoned do we learn that our suspicions of him are misplaced (a point also hinted at by the film’s deliberate shots of bottles marked ‘poison’).

Of course, no detective story is complete without a corpse. In *Gosford Park*, William McCordle easily serves as the archetypal murder victim: according to Grella, the

victim “must be an exceptionally murderable man” so that his death “prevents regret and also insures that all characters have sufficient motive”<sup>6</sup>. Indeed, McCordle’s wife visibly resents him, the other guests merely tolerate him because he has money, and the servants could care less about him (save for the lone housemaid Elsie). True to form then, his murder seems to bring little disturbance to the characters’ daily rituals. Hence, on the night of her husband’s murder Lady Sylvia nonchalantly agrees to resume her tryst with Henry Denton (‘Well...after all, I suppose life must go on’, she remarks). Similarly, below stairs when the Inspector seeks to question the head cook Mrs. Croft, he is curtly told, ‘I’ve got no time for this now, I’m doing breakfast.’ His death is more of an inconvenience than a socially despicable act. Nonetheless, it serves an important social function of the murder mystery. Because McCordle has risen from humble beginnings to achieve the wealth and privileges (though not the proper rules of behaviour) of a Gentleman—a position traditionally determined by birth not wealth—he is met with society’s disapproval and thus merits expulsion. It is only through his death that the ‘proper’ class order be restored. In this respect, *Gosford Park* not only follows the conventions of detective fiction but shares the social prejudices of the form itself, where the removal of the socially undesirable character is seen as integral to maintenance of the status quo.

This said, *Gosford Park* arguably departs from murder mystery convention in that the culprit, Mrs. Wilson, is allowed to escape punishment. In the detective story the expulsion of both the victim and the murderer is essential to the restoration of the usual

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<sup>6</sup> Grella, p. 41.

normative state. Like the victim, the culprit has violated society's laws and therefore must be removed in order for normality to return. But it is not unheard of for the criminal in detective fiction to occasionally escape justice—an exception, Grella notes, which “only applies to those with a modicum of social awareness who have done their society a great service.”<sup>7</sup> By the time the identity of the culprit is revealed in *Gosford Park*, the viewers and the few characters to whom it is revealed consider the crime a justifiable act—McCordle's death seen as retribution for his sexual exploitation of the women in his factories and the dumping of his children in orphanages. While Mrs. Wilson escapes ‘official’ punishment for her guilt, it is clear that her own punishment—having to conceal her true identity from her son—is far worse. By killing McCordle, she makes the ultimate sacrifice, risking her own life so that her son's is spared, telling Mary ‘It's not a crime to stab a dead man. They can never touch him. That's what important now, his life.’ And since her actions have done society a service, her fate is of little importance—a point she grimly acknowledges in her chilling self-assessment ‘I'm the perfect servant, I have no life.’

Where *Gosford Park* noticeably departs from convention is by foregrounding the presence of the servants. Nowhere is this more evident than the inclusion of the Countess's lady's maid, Mary Maceachran, as the film's ‘real’ detective. But Mary does not represent the amateur sleuth in the traditional sense of the term since she does not actively undertake to solve the crime. Rather, she discerns the identity of the murderer through a chance piece of information—overhearing that Mrs. Wilson's maiden was

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<sup>7</sup> Grella, p. 44

‘Parks or Parker or Parkinson or something like that’ (thus connecting her to Robert Parks and the murder). Furthermore, her marginal status represents a significant departure from the archetypal detective figure who, although an outsider, generally occupies a similar social position as the other characters. As such, Mary’s role as detective grants her (and the audience) exclusive access to the lives of those below stairs who are normally excluded from the murder mystery. As a result, her role is twofold. It extends the social reach of the detective story below stairs. More importantly, it encourages the spectator to follow Mary in the servants’ quarters as well as upstairs, among the gentry, and thereby observe with her the rigid social customs of the past.

Indeed, *Gosford Park*’s emphasis on social observation can be directly tied into the British detective tradition’s penchant for empirical observation. In detective fiction, it is assumed that the universe can be explained through the superior reasoning of the detective. Thus, even the most perplexing chain of events will have a plausible and rational explanation. This tradition is parodied in *Gosford Park* by the hopeless crime investigator Inspector Thompson who, although resembling a Sherlock Holmes-type detective, ignores every possible clue. Yet Thompson’s failure at unmasking the culprit is not unusual for the murder mystery, for the official representative of the police rarely, if ever, solves the crime. In this respect, Inspector Thompson is more akin to the Captain Hastings character from Agatha Christie’s *Poirot* novels, filling the role of the well-meaning, but blundering comic foil to the detective—a role in *Gosford Park* that falls not only to Mary but Thompson’s adept working class assistant Constable Dexter who, like Mary, sees the evidence but is ignored by his superior. More importantly, by relocating

the detective figure(s) below stairs, the film redirects attention from the detective's traditional emphasis on ratiocination to the social and class criticisms embedded in the text.

*Gosford Park* adds a compelling social dimension to the traditional murder mystery by shifting its perspective below stairs. Nowhere is this more evident than in the film's self-reflexive treatment of the genre itself. Paralleling Altman's role as director, *Gosford Park* includes a subplot about a Hollywood filmmaker, Morris Weissman, planning to shoot a country house detective story (*Charlie Chan in London*, an actual film from the period). As a filmmaker, Weissman's role encourages us to see his character as speaking for Altman himself. Thus when Weissman speaks on the telephone with 'Hollywood' about his film, his comments can also be seen as addressing Altman's own approach to the murder mystery—highlighting both the active presence (and culpability) of servants ('the butlers and the maids they stand, they watch. They serve. They do things', 'the valet easily could have done it') and, more importantly, the film's class-conscious reworking of the traditional murder mystery ('I'm looking for a kind of *realistic* Charlie Chan movie.... It has to be better. We can't do the same old shit over and over again'). From this perspective, *Gosford Park* can thus be read as Altman's attempt to bring realism to the detective story's highly artificial form.

As such, the film connects the invariably hermetic world of detective fiction to broader social and historical changes occurring at that moment in British history. Central to these changing times is the image of the country house. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the film is named after its country house setting. Apart from the opening sequence,

the entire film occurs on the Gosford Park estate. Even before the story is under way or the characters properly introduced, the house is introduced by a sweeping crane shot that establishes it not just as a stage for melodrama, but as an active character in what unfolds. In this respect, Gosford Park can be seen to comprise a microcosm of British society, its physical layout epitomizing the contrasting social topography of its inhabitants.

From here it is not too difficult to connect *Gosford Park* to the English novel. Like the detective story, the novel tradition also shares a strong affinity with the country house—the setting performing the same function as in the murder mystery by isolating a small (and often elite) group from the rest of the world. In his study of classical British fiction *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams traces the evolution of the country house setting from the novels of Jane Austen, George Eliot and Henry James to the detective novels of Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers. He writes:

But the true fate of the country house novel was its evolution into the middle-class detective story. It was in its very quality of abstraction, and yet superficially impressive survival, that the country-house could be made the place of isolated assembly of a group of people whose immediate and transient relations were decipherable by an abstract mode of detection rather than by the full and connected analysis of any more general understanding. Sometimes the formula is merely instrumental, as in Agatha Christie and others. Sometimes, as in Dorothy Sayers, it is combined with middle-class fantasies about the human nature of the traditional inhabitants. But tradition, elsewhere, is reduced to old architecture, old trees and the occasional ghost.<sup>8</sup>

By doing so, Williams pinpoints a crucial difference between the country house of the detective story and that of English novel. In the detective novel the country house

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<sup>8</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973), p. 249-50.

serves a functional purpose by providing limited and controlled backdrop against which the detective's investigation is silhouetted. Country houses were the perfect setting for a genre that, as Williams demonstrates, reduced the complex web of metropolitan capital to a single determinate cause—murder most foul: “For the country-house was indeed a proper setting for an opaqueness that can be penetrated in only a single dimension: all real questions of social and personal relationship left aside except in their capacity to instigate an instrumental deciphering.”<sup>9</sup> The country house was thus detached from the outside world, moving inwards to present, as Stephen Johnson writes, “a clash of characters and not classes.”<sup>10</sup> In *Gosford Park* however, the use of the country house is much more akin to that of the English novel by serving both a social as well as symbolic purpose. As such, the film may present a murder in an isolated and luxurious country house, but does so by combining the necessities of the detective story with the social and historical dimension of the novel tradition.

For Johnson, *Gosford Park* accomplishes this by borrowing a narrative device which is omnipresent in the English novel: the inheritance plot. He explains:

The inheritance plot was a kind of conceptual glue that helped the novelist connect an increasingly fragmented society, creating an interlinked web of convicts, dashing young urbanites, ancient nobility, factory owners and tenant farmers. It underwent a dazzling array of permutations, but its general shape was a reliable one: By the end of the novel, a long-suppressed familial line is unearthed, linking two different social groups, and usually restoring some sort of misplaced inheritance to its rightful owner. The device could be

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<sup>9</sup> Williams, p. 250.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Johnson, ‘The Ghosts of *Gosford Park*’, *Salon*, Jan 24, 2002. Salon.com. The article provides an excellent historical account of the evolution of the country-house setting and its relationship to *Gosford Park*, to which this chapter is indebted.

hackneyed, to be sure, but it enabled the novel to expand beyond the increasingly isolated worlds of specific social classes.<sup>11</sup>

Through the inheritance plot, *Gosford Park* translates the wider social dynamics of the period into the restricted realm of the detective novel. From this perspective, Mary's unmasking of the murderer's identity provides not only the staple ending of the murder mystery but connects Gosford Park's disparate upstairs/downstairs mix of social classes. As such, the film redirects attention from the detective story's emphasis on restoration of the social order to the underlying social inequities of the period—exposing a sordid tale of class exploitation, sexual abuse, and disguised paternity all under the domestic façade of the country house.

Indeed, while *Gosford Park* certainly employs the archetypes of the detective story, its country house setting is used to symbolize a society in transition. By placing the house in the larger context of Britain's social history, the film depicts a profound moment in British history: the decline of the country house way of life.<sup>12</sup> As screenwriter Julian Fellowes observes, "Of course fragments of it would continue to the present day but, as a nation-wide accepted manner of existence, it was finished by the Second World War."<sup>13</sup> It is also no coincidence that the film is set in the early 1930s: according to Fellowes, "[Altman] didn't want Christmas imagery and neither of us wanted to set a film in the

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<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, *Salon*, Jan 24, 2002.

<sup>12</sup> With the outbreak of the Second World War, the stable supply (and cheap cost) of domestic labour that sustained this way of life for generations would be lost to the war effort, in most cases never to return. Combined with the government's requisition of many of these estates for the war, and their increased burden of taxation, the thirties represented the twilight of this class and its lifestyle.

<sup>13</sup> Julian Fellowes, 'Afterword' in *Gosford Park: The Shooting Script* (New York: Newmarket Press, 2002), p.169

shadow of Hitler. Since the Nazis burnt down the *Reichstag* in January 1933, that meant that November 1932 was the last date which fulfilled all qualifications.’<sup>14</sup> And since the interwar period represented the heyday of the Golden Age of Detective fiction, what better way to analyze this society than by taking the form of the most popular fiction of the day which was the detective novel. From this perspective, it is not surprising that the decline of the country house coincided with its popularity in detective fiction, for its setting furnishes an ideal backdrop not only for an interrogation of human behaviour but of a society on the verge of cataclysm.

The function of the country house in *Gosford Park* finds its parallel in a number of English novels of the period. Consider, for example, the correlations between *Gosford Park* and *Howards End*, which similarly revolves around its country house setting (and coincidentally, was successfully adapted to the screen by the exemplars of heritage filmmaking, Merchant-Ivory). In *Howards End*, Forster deploys the familiar parallel between the English country house and the nation with Howards End, the house, becoming a symbol for England—its plot raising a crisis of inheritance over the question of ‘who shall inherit Howards End?’ and, by corollary, ‘Who shall inherit England?’<sup>15</sup> Like *Howards End*, *Gosford Park* similarly employs the house as the symbolic focus of its theme, its setting integrating nearly every component of the film—its plot, characters, themes, and iconography. As such, the house serves as an emblem of both English tradition and social change.

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<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, p. 169.

<sup>15</sup> See Andrew Higson’s case study of the film version in *English Heritage, English Cinema: Costume Drama since 1980*. (London: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 148-49.

This is dramatized by the fact that the house itself, a quintessential image of upper-class living, is owned by a William McCordle, a self-made industrialist who has acquired the estate not by inheritance, but through money. But the true fate of the country house is betrayed by the fact that those who inhabit Gosford Park are also subject to the changing times. Thus even the upper classes are shown to question their way of life: in one scene, the Countess, tired of the endless social customs, sighs to herself, 'Why does one have to do these things?' In another, Lady Sylvia expresses her, and her class's, attitude towards the country house way of life: asked if she will keep the place on, she replies with casual indifference, 'Does one really want the bother nowadays?' The upper class's disaffection towards this way of life is perhaps best expressed by their views on the British Empire, the economic engine that sustained the country house for generations. When the subject of the Empire arises over dinner, many of the characters seem resigned to the fact, even relieved, that its days are numbered—McCordle joking 'Empire Leicester Square.'

Another indication of the demise of this way of life was the upper classes increasing disconnection from the outside world. This is dramatized in the film by the inclusion of real-life matinee idol Ivor Novello and the Hollywood producer Morris Weissman. As the representatives of popular entertainment, Novello and Weissman connect the country house to the more modern values of the twentieth century. Indeed, it is fitting that an American movie producer is on hand to research an English country house murder mystery, for it underscores the increasing influence of the American-style popular entertainment on British audiences. This is demonstrated by the popularity of American films and their stars on the middle-and-lower-class characters in the film: Hence Elsie's

preference for American films stars, telling Mary ‘I think they’ve got more oomph’; and the star-struck Mabel Nesbitt, the lone representative of the middle-class, asking Novello ‘What’s Greta Garbo really like?’ The magnetic appeal of popular entertainment is exemplified in the scene where Novello entertains the guests with a medley of songs on the piano. Here, the servants gather reverently in the doorways, or sit quietly in the stairways, enraptured by his music. Contrast this reaction to that of the upper classes who seem bored, even irritated by his singing (except Mabel of course, who watches Novello in awe). The scene highlights the opposing class attitudes towards ‘popular’ culture. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the Countess’s disdain for Novello and Weissman.<sup>16</sup> In the film, she functions as the unashamed elitist guardian of British culture—her attitude expressing the English prejudice against the ‘popular’ entertainment. Thus, while Novello’s celebrity, his classlessness, and his urbanity may appeal to those below stairs, above stairs she makes it abundantly clear that he does not belong to her class. She similarly dismisses Weissman, whose gauche behavior and unabashed ignorance of British tradition is viewed with equal contempt as the films he produces. More importantly, though, the Countess’s rejection of popular culture also signals the upper class’s estrangement from modern life. As Fellowes observes:

One of the signs that the upper classes were losing their grip on public life in Britain between the wars was that they started to lose any connection with the popular culture of the day. In the nineteenth century when the theatre and opera had provided the great stars of the day, the aristocracy had been a willing audience and enthusiastic patrons. But the twentieth century started throwing up forms, moving pictures, and popular music

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<sup>16</sup> For further discussion of Weissman’s and Novello’s role in the film, see Chapter 2.

which seemed to have more connection with the working man than with them.<sup>17</sup>

Because popular entertainment catered to popular tastes rather than to traditionally defined (and innately exclusive) aesthetic and social standards, it denied the upper classes a determining role in the formation of popular culture. Consequently, their cultural authority was replaced by the more egalitarian forces of popular culture—their class and way of life, like the country house itself, consigned to a literary afterlife in the pages of detective fiction.

Though based on an original screenplay, *Gosford Park* clearly draws from British detective fiction and the novel tradition. Through its use of the English country house setting, the film brings together both traditions as part of its own self-conscious representation of the past. As such, the film openly re-interprets the murder mystery genre by incorporating the social reach of the English novel. In the process its country house becomes much more than a literal setting, but a metaphor for British society itself—its physical topography essential to the film's plot. Through its re-working of British literary tradition, the film is at once a skillfully crafted country house detective story and a pointed social satire on the way of life it depicts.

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<sup>17</sup> Fellowes, p. 172.

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### The idea of Britain

In his study of British heritage cinema since 1980, Andrew Higson asks “does it still make sense in the global cultural economy to describe a film as ‘British’ or ‘English’?”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, with the vast majority of British heritage productions financed by transnational companies, and comprised of increasingly international production personnel, settings and subject-matter, the national specificity of such films becomes problematic. *Gosford Park* is no different: the film has an established American director, and was backed by American, British, Italian, and German finance.<sup>2</sup> But does this make *Gosford Park* any less ‘British’ or ‘English’? With this in mind, this chapter argues that the film’s subject matter and discourses, although ‘culturally’ British, contain a range of attractions that appeal to audiences both at home and abroad. By examining the marketing and distribution strategy, as well as where it was successful both financially and critically, this chapter contends that *Gosford Park* offers a satirical perspective on and analysis of received notions of ‘Britishness’ that intersect with a number concerns that are not only central to its own ironic critique, but a more general critique of the representations of Britain that have been successfully marketed abroad.

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<sup>1</sup> Higson, *English Heritage, English Cinema* (London: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> The film was budgeted at \$19.8 million, with U.K.-based Capitol films financing the bulk of the film, with the Government-backed body the Film Council contributing \$2.8 million in lottery money from its Premiere fund (set-up to support commercially-oriented films), and USA Films which bought the North American distribution rights. Additional money came from Italy and Germany. See Adam Dawtrey, ‘Brits ignite “Gosford” spark: 9 BAFTA noms.’ *Variety* (18-24 Feb. 2002) at Variety.com

Thomas Elsaesser observes that the use of ‘nationally specific’ but ‘internationally recognizable’ referents is often of critical importance to the marketing and international success of a film.<sup>3</sup> In *Images for Sale* Elsaesser extends this argument to the context of 80s British cinema, writing “at issue is what kind of Britishness ‘we’ could sell to ‘them,’ that balances an appeal for ‘insider knowledge’ about England and Britain with what the world knows, or think it knows, of Britain.”<sup>4</sup> As a result, he goes on to identify a number of enduring ‘myths’ and ‘countermyths’ of Britain that are employed by the cinema:

On one side: home counties, country house, public school, sports, white flannel, and games; Edwardian England, Decline of Empire, Privilege, and Treason; male bonding, female hysteria. On the side of countermyth: Scotland, Liverpool, London; dockland, clubland, and disco, football, punk, race riots, National Front; working class males, violent and articulate; working class women, sexy and self-confident.<sup>5</sup>

However, besides underlining the obvious constructed nature of representations of Britain, he points to how these representations are increasingly tailored to international (read American) tastes. “Like the natives of Third World countries”, concludes Elsaesser, “who impersonate themselves for the sake of the tourists, Britain appears to be the victim of its own sophisticated media-making, the materialization of its own imaginary,” and, in doing so, has succeeded in constructing an abstract image of ‘Britishness’ that could be packaged and marketed internationally.<sup>6</sup> As a result, critics have raised a number of important questions regarding the legitimacy of such

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, *New German Cinema: A History* (Basingstroke: Macmillan/British Film Institute, 1989), p. 322.

<sup>4</sup> Elsaesser, ‘Images for Sale: The ‘New’ British Cinema,’ in Lester Friedman (ed.) *Fires Were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 59.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 65-7.

<sup>6</sup> Elsaesser, ‘Images for Sale,’ p. 68

representations, especially their perceived ideological implications. A central aspect of this debate concerns the British heritage cinema and its representation of Britain both at home and abroad.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, since the emergence of the British heritage film coincided with and was crucial to the revival of British cinema in the 80s, these films have become synonymous with ‘Britishness’ or more appropriately, ‘Englishness’. As such, the heritage cinema often served as a bell weather of sorts for arguments about the role of British film and television production in the global cultural economy. Writing on the production of British period drama for international audiences, John Caughie observes “this is where the relationship between national cultures and markets becomes clear, and where we can see most sharply the dangers of reading national identity out of images which function both as cultural representations *and* as tradable goods” [his emphasis].<sup>8</sup> It is in this context that Andrew Higson suggests that ‘Britishness’ is merely a brand to distinguish such films from Hollywood, prompting him to ask “should we not accept that what may seem to be an national representation is in reality an international mythology—that is, a story and characters that are assumed to have meaning, significance, and poignancy for international audiences?”<sup>9</sup>

*Gosford Park* provides a perfect illustration of how an ostentatiously ‘British’ film can achieve critical and commercial success both at home and abroad.<sup>10</sup> Central to this success was its release strategy and promotional campaign. The film was first released

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<sup>7</sup>For an extensive overview of the heritage film debate, see Chapter 1.

<sup>8</sup> John Caughie, *Television Drama: Realism, Modernism, and British Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2000), p. 209.

<sup>9</sup> Higson, *English heritage, English Cinema*, p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> The film grossed an estimated \$17.3 million in Britain, \$41.3 million in North America, and \$28 million internationally. Box office figures from *Variety*.

on the festival circuit, making its world premiere on the opening night of the London Film Festival. The festival served as a springboard for its release, generating both international and critical awareness on the circuit while showcasing its 'British' cultural credentials, especially the artistic and financial contribution made by the British film industry. Another boost came at the Berlin International Film Festival where it was screened out-of-competition to coincide with director Robert Altman's lifetime achievement award, in a move that further cemented the film's critical recognition through its association with its established director.<sup>11</sup> For its theatrical release, *Gosford Park* debuted in North America in late December 2001 in a deliberate strategy that saw the timing of its release in relation to the following year's lucrative awards season. Opening initially on nine screens in New York City and Los Angeles, the film took in \$395,162 and landed at number twenty-two in the box-office charts.<sup>12</sup> The next weekend, it widened to 131 screens and grossed \$1.6 million, breaking the top twenty on the North American markets. By week three it expanded to 518 screens and managed to break the top ten. This trend continued and by mid February, after receiving seven Academy Awards nominations including Best Picture, it was on 837 screens (eventually peaking at 918), having grossed a cumulative \$28 million.<sup>13</sup> Its North American distributor USA Films ascribed the success of the film to demographics: "The film illustrates the ever-growing, ever-evolving tastes of baby boomers," its president of distribution told *Variety*.

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<sup>11</sup> The film also screened at the Hong Kong International Film Festival, the Cineteca Nacional in Mexico, and the Moscow International Film Festival.

<sup>12</sup> Dade Hayes, 'Pix take slow road to B.O. success', *Variety* (Jan. 29, 2002), [Variety.com](#).

<sup>13</sup> See weekly box-office charts in *Variety* for Jan. and Feb. 2002.

“They're who is going to the movie.”<sup>14</sup> Yet from the outset the goal had been to establish *Gosford Park* as a crossover film by appealing to both the specialized and mainstream markets.<sup>15</sup> “As opposed to hiding it or keeping it under wraps,” one executive recalled, “we decided we love this thing and we're going to put it out there.”<sup>16</sup> The crossover potential of the film was immediately perceived by the American trade magazine *Variety*, which listed the film both on the mainstream and independent charts—a point addressed in the film's review:

Combination of Yank spontaneity and Brit pedigree will be pleasing to discerning, quality-seeking audiences on both sides of the pond, resulting in robust specialized circuit B.O. [Box Office] that could, with the help of aggressive marketing and strong reviews, cross it over into reasonable general payoff.<sup>17</sup>

Coming off the strength of its North American release, *Gosford Park's* debut in the UK was equally impressive. The film was given a wider release, opening in 156 theaters and earning \$1.2 million for the highest per screen average of any film released that weekend, taking fourth place at the box office.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, in an important indication of the type of audience the film attracted, the film took an impressive \$373, 433 in London's West End alone.<sup>19</sup> As the British trade paper *Screen International* put it: “The primary

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<sup>14</sup> Jack Foley, quoted by Dade Hayes, ‘Gosford Gooses USA’, *Variety* (Jan. 22, 2002), Variety.com.

<sup>15</sup> For an exhaustive account of the ‘crossover’ film in relation to the British heritage cinema, see chapters 3 and 4 of Higson's *English Heritage, English Cinema*.

<sup>16</sup> Scott Greenstein, chairman of USA Films, quoted in Dade Hayes, ‘Pix take slow road to B.O. success’, *Variety* (Jan 29, 2002), Variety.com.

<sup>17</sup> Todd McCarthy, ‘Gosford Park’ (review), *Variety* (Nov. 7, 2001), Variety.com.

<sup>18</sup> The highest new opener was the Gwyneth Paltrow comedy *Shallow Hal* which opened in 284 sites and took \$1.8 million, a per screen average of \$6,361 compared to *Gosford Park's* \$7,594. See box-office statistics in *Screen International* for the first week of Feb.2002.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Mitchell, ‘Gosford Park charms at box office’, *Screen International* (Feb. 5, 2002), Screendaily.com.

target audience for this elegantly classy entertainment will be the arthouse crowd, although strong critical support may broaden the film's appeal and attract a larger constituency of intelligent viewers"<sup>20</sup> In a further sign that *Gosford Park* reached its intended audience—that is, the core patrons of the costume drama—on the same night 9 million people tuned in to watch ITV's lavish adaptation of John Galworthy's *The Forsyth Saga* on April 7 2002, the takings of *Gosford Park* dropped 65 per cent, finally pushing the film out of the U.K. top ten.<sup>21</sup> Even so, it is clear that the film's appeal extended well beyond the costume drama crowd by remaining in the U.K. top ten for nearly three months, often holding 200-plus screens and grossing \$18 million (17<sup>th</sup> overall at the U.K. box office in 2002), a remarkable feat for a specialty release. Indeed, for one commentator, the film was “a lesson to jaded British film execs. It proves that there's an underserved market for the kind of decorous period drama that has fallen out of fashion within the industry.”<sup>22</sup>

The film also did well in other European markets. It was in the box-office top ten for four weeks in France, Germany, and Spain, and for five weeks in Italy. It grossed the highest per screen average of any release for its opening weekend in France, Spain, and Italy, and came a close second in Germany behind the Hollywood blockbuster *Spiderman* which was showing on almost 900 more screens.<sup>23</sup> In a further sign that the film reached its intended audience, *Variety* attributed the film's success in Italy to its “British

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<sup>20</sup> Emmanuel Levy, 'Gosford Park', *Screen International* (Nov. 12, 2001), Screendaily.com.

<sup>21</sup> Adam Dawtrey, 'UK distribs reconsider after 'Gosford' success', *Variety* (April 22, 2002), Variety.com.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> see weekly box-office charts in *Variety* for 2002.

pedigree, cast, and director Robert Altman,” all of which “resonated with upscale viewers.”<sup>24</sup> It was equally successful in other territories. In Australia, for instance, the film stayed in the box-office top-ten for six weeks while in Argentina it remained in the top ten for three weeks.<sup>25</sup>

These box-office statistics attest to the marketability of ‘British’ subject-matter in the global entertainment industry, where Britishness not only ascribes national identity, but is a profitable transnational commodity. This is reflected in the diverse awards the film received: indeed, besides being nominated for a Best Picture Oscar, it won Best Picture in Britain, Best European Union Film in France and Spain, and was nominated for Best American Film in Germany.

Integral to this success was the marketing and publicity strategy for the film. Pitched as a cross between Jean Renoir’s *Rules of the Game* (1939) and Agatha Christie’s *Ten Little Indians*, the film was sold on both its ‘best of British’ cast and its established American director. In addition, specific attractions of the film were foregrounded in the film’s commercial intertext through its promotional material and press coverage. For instance, in a deliberate effort to appeal to its core heritage audience, the British publicity strategy included an article in the upmarket magazine *Country Life*. The article highlighted the film’s meticulous attention to period detail, noting how Altman drew on the knowledge of experts to ensure the film’s historical authenticity: “Altman was determined to make a film more accurate than most BBC dramas”, the film’s screenwriter was quoted as saying. “He felt strongly that, for the satire to work, he had to get the

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<sup>24</sup> Dan Groves, ‘Mind’ matters in Oz’, *Variety* (Mar. 17, 2002), Variety.com.

<sup>25</sup> see weekly box-office charts in *Variety* for 2002.

details right.”<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, in a move clearly designed to tap into the culture of heritage tourism, the article also included a brief section entitled ‘Where Exactly is Gosford Park?’ which listed the iconic British locations where the film was shot.<sup>27</sup>

In North America, a feature article about the film appeared in the *New York Times* in the fall of 2001 which chronicled Altman’s foray into British period drama.<sup>28</sup> Evocatively titled ‘Altman on the Loose in Merchant Ivory Territory’, the piece highlighted the film’s British acting talent, authentic period setting, and its very British subject matter—all typical ingredients of Merchant Ivory films. However, the article also suggested a certain incongruity between Altman and Merchant Ivory: the former known for his satirical take on American society, the latter a producer and director team known (and often derided) for their genteel costume dramas about English manners and mores.

This ambivalence was capitalized on by the film’s marketing strategy. On one hand, the film’s promotional materials were designed to maximize the appeal of the film to its core ‘heritage’ audience by emphasizing its venerable British cast, heritage iconography, and period detail. On the other hand, the film was distanced from the typical ‘Merchant Ivory’ fare by emphasizing its iconoclastic American director’s take on a quintessentially British genre, the country house murder mystery. This attempt to appeal to both audiences is readily apparent in the design of the film’s poster which

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<sup>26</sup> Sheila Johnston , ‘Assembling Stars Below Stairs’, *Country Life*, n.196 (Jan 24, 2002), p. 58.

<sup>27</sup> The majority of the upstairs scenes were filmed at Wrotham Park in Hertfordshire, with additional scenes shot at Syon House in Middlesex. For the downstairs scenes, a set was constructed at Shepperton Studios that was loosely based on the servant quarters at Lanhydrock in Cornwall. See Johnston, p. 59

<sup>28</sup> see Kristin Hohendal, ‘Altman on the Loose in Merchant Ivory Territory’, *New York Times* (Sept. 9, 2001) p. AR52.

foregrounds both its impressive British ensemble cast (listing sixteen of its players), its director ('A Robert Altman Film'), and signals its generic credentials with the irreverent tagline 'Tea at Four. Dinner at Eight. Murder at Midnight.' Yet the marketing also made it clear that this was not your typical murder mystery, but one by a director known for his particular take on established genres (for instance, the Western in *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, and the hard-boiled detective tradition in *The Long Goodbye*). To highlight this, the film's murder mystery plot was foregrounded in the theatrical trailer with telling snippets of dialogue ('it's a detective story' and 'perhaps the butler did it?') and shots of an archetypal pipe-smoking detective. Indeed, the film's press kit even included a board game akin to *Clue*, complete with a package of 'suspect cards' with details about the characters and cast.

Positioning the film as both a traditional costume drama and as an 'Altmanesque' murder mystery proved not only a commercial but critical success, with most reviewers in turn singling out its very 'British' subject-matter and its American director. Most critics praised the film in terms of its differences from the traditional costume drama, seeing it as "a welcome change from the usual period trifles such as Alan Brook's *The Shooting Party*, the frilly Laura Ashley productions of Merchant Ivory [...], Agatha Christie adaptations and, of course, *Upstairs Downstairs*."<sup>29</sup> Some critics saw this as a deliberate strategy: "*Gosford Park* is only just short of being a reverent recreation. Merchant Ivory conventions are carefully avoided."<sup>30</sup> While others were less emphatic:

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<sup>29</sup> George Rafael, 'Gosford Park' (review), *Cineaste*, no.3, (Summer 2002), p. 30.

<sup>30</sup> Lindsay Duguid, 'Spot of bother in the Library', *Times Literary Supplement* (Feb. 8, 2002), p. 18.

“Whether or not Robert Altman’s *Gosford Park* was expressly conceived as a snipe at the cut glass decorum of the Merchant-Ivory school, many of whose alumni it stars, you’ll never see a gracious-living melodrama in quite the same way again.”<sup>31</sup>

For others, the ‘Merchant Ivory’ quality of the film was to be lauded: “Anglophiles will gleefully wallow in the baronial splendor of the setting and in the movie’s canny eye for period detail,” the *New York Times* wrote, “[...] it will appeal to anyone who feels a nostalgic pang for the long-running British television series ‘Upstairs Downstairs,’ or the cozy whodunits of Agatha Christie.”<sup>32</sup> It was “an exemplary exercise in Anglophilia, a British-heritage movie [where] class differences and concealed passions and hatreds are on display with the fine china and linens.”<sup>33</sup> Indeed, one reviewer found the film to be a nostalgic reminder “of what we most lacked: the much despised heritage movie [...] But today the pinnacle of Merchant Ivory’s efforts, reached with the superbly made *Howards End* (1992) and *The Remains of the Day* (1993), seems like a lost era.”<sup>34</sup>

A similar split occurred in the critical response to the film’s murder mystery. Most reviewers registered strong approval for Altman’s take on the genre. For some, this was no ordinary murder mystery; on the contrary it was described as “Agatha Christie meets Evelyn Waugh with additional dialogue by Noel Coward.”<sup>35</sup> It was “a finely wrought

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<sup>31</sup> Jonathan Romney, ‘Gosford Park’ *Independent* (Feb 4, 2002), [Independent.co.uk](http://Independent.co.uk).

<sup>32</sup> Stephen Holden, ‘Full of Baronial Splendor and Hatefulness’, *New York Times* (Dec. 26, 2001), [Nytimes.com](http://Nytimes.com).

<sup>33</sup> Stephen Rosen, ‘Altman, in the parlor, with a camera: *Gosford Park*, a British ensemble drawing room murder mystery’, *Denver Post* (Jan 4, 2002), p. E-01.

<sup>34</sup> Nick James, ‘To be or not to be’, *Sight and Sound*, no. 1 (Jan. 2002), p. 16.

<sup>35</sup> Stephen Hunter, ‘Comedy of Manners; In Robert Altman’s Genre-bending *Gosford Park*, a sendup with class’, *Washington Post* (Jan. 4, 2002), p. C1.

British whodunit with the emotional layering of a first-rate novel.”<sup>36</sup> Another article compared the film favourably to classical English literature: “You can think of it as an Agatha Christie movie that slowly transforms itself into a 19<sup>th</sup> century triple-decker novel [...] just when you expect a mock Miss Marple to totter into the dining room, you find George Eliot instead.”<sup>37</sup> Others though found its murder mystery plot beside the point. One critic wrote “*Gosford Park* isn’t about anything so trivial as murder.”<sup>38</sup> Another likened the final revelations of its plot to ‘the hoary contrivances of a 19<sup>th</sup> century melodrama.’<sup>39</sup> For them, it was far more satisfying as a social satire—a quality they associated with its director. As one critic put it, Altman “deconstructs the country-house whodunit into a sardonic analysis of the British class war.”<sup>40</sup>

Of course, there is no fixed way in which audiences must read this film. But what these reviews speak to is the success of the film’s marketing campaign. Whether or not *Gosford Park* was seen as British period piece, a murder mystery, or as Altman’s latest social satire, what is important is how the film’s marketing strategy appealed to a range of different audiences and tastes: As Julian Fellowes attests, “It is equally possible to see the film, as my mother-in-law did, as a wonderfully nostalgic look at the 1930s, or as an indictment of a horribly unjust way of life.”<sup>41</sup>

However, most reviewers were in agreement about Altman’s influential role in the film, with one critic even declaring “*Gosford Park* is another prime exhibit in defense of

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<sup>36</sup> Peter Rainer, ‘Magical Mystery’, *New York Magazine*, (Dec 24, 2001), Nymag.com.

<sup>37</sup> Stephen Johnson, ‘The Ghosts of Gosford Park’, *Salon* (Jan. 24, 2002), Salon.com

<sup>38</sup> Rafael, p. 30.

<sup>39</sup> Holden, ‘Full of Baronial Splendor and Hatred’, *Nytimes.com*

<sup>40</sup> Graham Fuller, ‘Altman’s latest return to form’, *Film Comment*, Nov-Dec 2001, no.6, p. 10.

<sup>41</sup> quoted in Johnston, ‘Assembling Stars Below Stairs’, p. 58-9.

Altman as auteur.”<sup>42</sup> Dozens of reviews identified *Gosford Park* not just as a Robert Altman film, but as his ‘most enjoyable film in at least a decade’,<sup>43</sup> or “latest masterpiece.”<sup>44</sup> The style of the film was invariably linked to Altman’s characteristic mode of filmmaking. Thus, “although Altman is a quintessentially American director working with a quintessentially British material, here he has made a film that very much belongs to his general oeuvre in both thematic and stylistic concerns.”<sup>45</sup> This was echoed by another reviewer: “Altman maintains both period and national authenticity even as he gives the environment the well-known Altman touch.”<sup>46</sup> Not surprisingly, most reviewers attributed the film’s success to Altman being an outsider. The film was thus heralded as “a quintessentially British movie, but one which only an outsider of Altman’s energy could have made.”<sup>47</sup> Most reviewers agreed, for “only an old Hollywood master like Altman, with the liberating imprudence of an outsider, could go so sure-footedly where even some of our native angels fear to tread: through the land-mined territory of the landed gentry and the subtler booby-traps of the great English class system.”<sup>48</sup> One commentator wrote of Altman’s “genius” in making “a very ‘Englandish’ film, in the sense that England is the main character,” but his praise is tempered with his dismay for the current state of the British film industry, adding “*Gosford Park* is Altman's first film

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<sup>42</sup> David Thomson, ‘Gosford Park’, *Sight and Sound*, Nov. 2001, no. 11, p. 17.

<sup>43</sup> Dennis Lim, ‘To the Manor Born’, (film review), *Village Voice* (Dec. 26, 2001-Jan 1, 2002), Villagevoice.com.

<sup>44</sup> David Edelstein, ‘Serve the Servants’ (review), *Slate Magazine* (Jan 11, 2002), slate.com.

<sup>45</sup> Levy, ‘Gosford Park’, *Screen International*, Screendaily.com

<sup>46</sup> Kirk Honeycutt, ‘Gosford Park’, *The Hollywood Reporter*, (Nov. 8, 2001), Hollywoodreporter.com.

<sup>47</sup> Geoffrey Macnab, ‘Gosford Park’ (review), *Sight and Sound*. Feb. 2002, p. 46.

<sup>48</sup> Alexander Walker, ‘Upper-class act of ‘32’ (review), *The Evening Standard*, Jan 31., 2002. thisislondon.com.

shot over here, and its grand-house setting is quintessentially English, but the film's qualities are un-English: they are virtues of ambition, scale, storytelling, and poise, things that one can sometimes feel have altogether vanished from British movies.”<sup>49</sup> Another noted how “the literary straitjacket of the microcosmic aristocrats/servants format is cast off by the director’s loose and probing lightheartedness, just as the underlying sense of self-loathing that marks many such home-grown English ‘exposes’ of aristocratic excess is happily absent.”<sup>50</sup> A consensus was reached by many British and American reviewers that linked Altman’s outsider status to the film’s successful examination of British society. As one reviewer put it: “Altman has no interests to protect, no weight of history on his back, no tribal myths to defer to nor archaic traditions to cherish, and he isn’t trying to get a leg up either... he comes to Perfidious Albion afresh.”<sup>51</sup>

Indeed, while interviewing Martin Scorsese about his 1993 adaptation of Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence*, British critic Ian Christie observed that filmmakers behind the most emblematic images of Englishness portrayed by the heritage cinema are not themselves English (or even British): “The foreigner’s eye. Polanski shot *Tess* in France and Merchant and Ivory, foreigners both, have created an England that seems more real, certainly more attractive than the real thing [...] Englishness seems to be in the eye of the beholder.”<sup>52</sup> This is humourously underlined in *Gosford Park* by Altman’s alter-ego in the film, the garrulous Hollywood producer Morris Weissman. Mirroring

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<sup>49</sup> Andrew O’Hagan, ‘*In a Class of its Own*’ (review of *Gosford Park*), *The Daily Telegraph* (London, England), Feb. 2, 2002, telegraph.co.uk

<sup>50</sup> McCarthy, ‘Gosford Park’, *Variety.com*

<sup>51</sup> George Rafael, ‘Gosford Park’ (review), *Cineaste*, Summer 2002, no.3, p. 30.

<sup>52</sup> Christie, ‘Passion and Restraint: Ian Christie talks with Martin Scorsese’ in Ginette Vincendeau, ed., *Film/Literature/Heritage* (London: British Film Institute, 2001), p. 67.

Altman's own outsider incursion into the British cinema, Weissman is included in the weekend shooting party to do research on his own nominally 'British' film, *Charlie Chan in London*. Through a series of telephone conversations between Weissman and his Hollywood studio, Altman offers his own ironic commentary on *Gosford Park*'s particular conception of Britain. In one scene, Weissman asks whether the American actress Claudette Colbert is British or 'just affected', a question which could equally apply to *Gosford Park*'s own trans/national identity: prompting us to ask: 'Gosford Park —is it British or just affected?' At another point, the film is self-reflexive in its treatment of Britishness. This is demonstrated in a conversation which occurs over the visual depiction of the police inspector's arrival. Here, Altman knowingly plays on how perceptions of Britain are often guided by international (in this case, American) worldviews:

I'm looking for a realistic Charlie Chan movie. That isn't out of the question... We can't do the same shit over and over again... Alan Mowbray, I mean *that's* a butler. I like that. [On screen *Gosford Park*'s butler (Alan Bates) opens the door to the inspector] These people look like Alan Mowbray, they're sort of tall and they don't talk too much, and they have fucking British accents, right. They talk like they're from England.

Yet the markers of 'Englishness' in *Gosford Park* would not only be familiar to international audiences but to domestic audiences through its references to British film and television. The obvious example, of course, is the landmark 1970s British television series *Upstairs, Downstairs* (1971-1975) which, as its title suggests, deploys the same

narrative structuring device as *Gosford Park*.<sup>53</sup> But whereas the TV series featured a benevolent upper class family willingly supported by a deferential household of servants, *Gosford Park*'s depiction of class relations corresponds more to the British films of another American director: Joseph Losey. In particular, Losey's collaborations with Harold Pinter (*The Servant*, 1963; *Accident*, 1967; *The Go-Between*, 1970) are memorable for their 'outsider-as-insider view' of Britain which, according to Elsaesser, gives them "a patina of truth missing from the films of [indigenous filmmakers] Lindsay Anderson and John Schlesinger."<sup>54</sup> Not surprisingly, a number of reviewers picked up on this by comparing *Gosford Park* favourably to Losey's trenchant analysis of the master-servant relationship in *The Servant*.<sup>55</sup> But with its country house setting the film is actually closer to *The Go-Between*, another period drama that examines class and privilege. Like *Gosford Park*, Losey's film contrasts vital and appealing working-class characters with their more languid, or affected upper-class counterparts. Moreover, both films are framed through the experiences of a naïve innocent—the young Leo (Dominic Guard) in *The Go Between* and the novice lady's maid Mary in *Gosford Park*—who sees firsthand the inequities of the class system. Given Altman's lengthy career (*MASH* was released the same year as *The Go Between*) he would certainly be familiar with Losey's films, whose cynical view of British society is in many ways echoed in *Gosford Park*.

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<sup>53</sup> Interestingly enough, the co-creator of *Upstairs, Downstairs*, Eileen Atkins, plays the head cook Mrs. Croft in the film while Meg Wynn Owens, who plays Lady Sylvia's maid Lewis, had a recurring role on the series as a servant.

<sup>54</sup> Elsaesser, 'Images for Sale', p. 60.

<sup>55</sup> George Rafael notes how "*Gosford Park* is actually closer to Joseph Losey's and Harold Pinter's *The Servant* than to [Rules of the Game]", see *Cineaste* p. 30. Likewise, David Thomson writes "*Gosford Park* reminded me of another American director looking at a house and its social fabric. Joseph Losey's *The Servant*", see '*Gosford Park*: The House is the Star', *Independent* (Jan 27., 2002), [Independent.co.uk](http://Independent.co.uk)

At the same time, *Gosford Park* draws on the audience's familiarity with the British television serial. One tradition in the film that is thoroughly signaled in its list of generic forbearers is the period mystery, seen at its fullest in the lush adaptations of the detective stories by such popular authors as Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, and Dorothy L. Sayers (the most recent being ITV's incarnation of Christie's *Miss Marple* stories in 2005).<sup>56</sup> However, the enduring popularity of such adaptations can be tied into a more prominent tradition at play in the film: the classic serial adapted from the nineteenth- and early-twentieth century novel, a form of drama which has regularly has been associated with the 1980s and 1990s British heritage film.<sup>57</sup> The classic serial has been a characteristic of British television almost since its inception, with the novels of Jane Austen, the Bronte sisters, Thomas Hardy and Charles Dickens having regularly been adapted and readapted.<sup>58</sup> They also, of course, have proven immensely popular with international audiences, especially in North America where they are regularly rebroadcast on PBS's *Masterpiece Theater*. As such, the classic serial serves as an important reference point for viewers of *Gosford Park*, many of whom would be familiar with its literary pedigree, high production values, and most of all, its best of British acting.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the casting of the film. Many of the actors in *Gosford Park* are well-known to audiences from their previous roles in British television

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<sup>56</sup> See chapter 3 for a further discussion of the mystery genre in relation to *Gosford Park* and the heritage film.

<sup>57</sup> For a fuller account of the classic serial, its history, and its ideological implications see Caughie, *Television Drama: Realism, Modernism, and British Culture*, p. 202-25.

<sup>58</sup> This includes *Pride and Prejudice* (1952, 1958, 1967, 1980, 1995), *Jane Eyre* (1956, 1963, 1973, 1983, 1997), *Great Expectations* (1959, 1967, 1981, 1991, 1999), *Wuthering Heights* (1953, 1962, 1978, 1998), *Vanity Fair* (1956, 1967, 1987, 1998), and *Bleak House* (1959, 1985, 2005).

and film. As a result, the audience's familiarity with these actors is used to draw attention to the class divisions of the narrative. By casting well-known actors 'below stairs' (Alan Bates, Helen Mirren, Derek Jacobi, Richard E. Grant and Emily Watson), Altman signals the significant role of the servants by placing their roles on equal footing with their upstairs counterparts (played by Maggie Smith, Kristin Scott-Thomas, Michael Gambon, Jeremy Northam, Charles Dance, and James Wilby). For instance, when the first footman George (Richard E. Grant) accidentally happens upon a private conversation between two 'upstairs' characters, he is dismissed with 'Don't worry he's nobody'. However, as Julianne Pidduck deftly observes, "this moment elicits an intertextual irony, as George is a distinct character in the film; also, many spectators know perfectly well that this is Richard E. Grant of *Withnail & I* (1987) and a score of other films."<sup>59</sup>

Indeed, many of the actors who appear in *Gosford Park* have a history of playing similar characters and class types across several different films and television programs. For example, a number of the actors above stairs have become almost synonymous for their upper-class roles in other heritage films: this includes Maggie Smith (*The Missionary, Quartet, A Room with a View, The Secret Garden, Tea with Mussolini, Washington Square, The Last September*); Kristin Scott Thomas (*A Handful of Dust, Angels and Insects, The English Patient*); James Wilby (*Maurice, A Handful of Dust, Howards End, An Ideal Husband, Cotton Mary*); Charles Dance (the classic serials *The*

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<sup>59</sup> Pidduck, p. 129.

*Jewel in the Crown* and *Bleak House*) and Jeremy Northam (*Wuthering Heights*, *Carrington*, *Emma*, *An Ideal Husband*, *The Winslow Boy*, *The Golden Bowl*, *Possession*).

By contrast, their counterparts below stairs are not generally associated with the roles in the heritage film. A number are widely-known for their television work: Derek Jacobi for his title role in *I, Claudius*, Helen Mirren for her role as detective Jane Tennison on long-running crime drama *Prime Suspect* and Michael Gambon for *The Singing Detective*—the latter two also having co-starred in the popular 80s ‘art’ film *The Cook, the Thief, his Wife and her Lover*. The relative newcomers Emily Watson, Clive Owen, and Kelly MacDonal are perhaps best known for their breakthrough roles in the contemporary films *Breaking the Waves*, *Croupier*, and *Trainspotting*, respectively. While the extensive career of Alan Bates includes a number of memorable roles both on television (as Guy Burgess in Alan Bennett’s *An Englishman Abroad*) and film, including that of the working class farmer who disrupts the class hierarchy in Losey’s *The Go-Between*.

Given its impressive ensemble of established British actors, *Gosford Park* provides the ideal window to examine how Altman engages with the tradition of British acting and actors. Above stairs, for example, the performances call on a peculiarly English acting style which, according to British actor Ian Richardson, “tends to be understated and depends heavily on nuance and irony.”<sup>60</sup> For Higson, this type of acting is synonymous with the heritage film and suggests “a sort of performative overdetermination” where “even the tiniest of gestures can speak volumes, although careful diction counts for much

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<sup>60</sup> Carole Zucker, ‘An interview with Ian Richardson: making friends with the camera’, in Alan Lovell and Peter Kramer (eds.), *Screen Acting* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 164.

too.”<sup>61</sup> This mode of acting is exemplified of course by Maggie Smith’s performance as Countess Trentham, an aristocrat ensconced in her own class beliefs. Bringing with it all the cultural requirements of reserve and repression (not to mention the intertextual markers of her roles in similar period films), her performance not only speaks to the class identity of her character but highlights the fact that we are watching a performance—that is, Maggie Smith pretending to be the Countess. However, this sense of performance is brought to the fore in the film by Ryan Phillippe’s role as Henry Denton, an actor who masquerades as a servant. Paralleling Phillippe’s own performance in the film, the role casts a self-reflexive look at the acting in the film. This is evident in the following exchange between Mary and Robert Parks:

*Robert Parks:* ‘Have you heard about Weissman’s valet? Turns out he’s a fraud. He isn’t Scottish at all.’

*Mary:* ‘I could have told you that. Who is he then? You don’t think he’s the murderer, do you?’

*Robert Parks:* ‘Worse than that. He’s an actor.’

This doubled address, invoking both character and actor, is perhaps best underlined by Jeremy Northam’s role as the real-life matinee idol Ivor Novello. Unlike Denton, whose charade as a servant results in his rejection by both classes, Novello has a legitimate upper class connection through his cousin—the *nouveau riche* lord of the manor—even though he is something of an outsider because he must ‘work’ for a living (albeit as a successful actor). The upper classes are thus intrigued by his celebrity, but their fascination is mixed with contempt for his way of life. As such, his character offers something of an ironic perspective on the upper classes. Thus, when asked by his

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<sup>61</sup> Higson, *English Heritage, English Cinema*, p. 32.

producer friend ‘how do you put up with these people?’, Novello’s response ‘I make my living by impersonating them’ not only calls attention to Northam’s performance as Novello but presents this type of upper-class Englishness as a role—a trope underlined by Charles Dance’s portrayal of the stolid Raymond Stockbridge, whose manner and bearing, along with his proper diction, appear almost parodic of the stereotypical English gentleman. This is not, of course, to say that these performances suggest something false about the characters. If anything, the film adopts a deliberate strategy to create representations of upper-class characters that are taken to be naturalistic, even though they may appear somewhat affected. The irony thus arises out of the attitudes the characters assume to be natural—an irony made all the more evident by our alignment with the servants in the narrative.

This is particularly clear in the different culture of emotional expression that exists between classes. Unlike the understated and restrained performances above stairs, the representations of the servants are far more emotive. The difference is perhaps best illustrated by the casting of Alan Bates and Helen Mirren as the two most senior servants in the house, the butler Jennings and the housekeeper Mrs. Wilson. Above stairs, both characters attend to their duties with the reserve characteristic of their upper class counterparts. Below stairs, however, they reveal the feelings behind this façade—Jennings in a bout of drunkenness over the fear of his criminal record being exposed; and Mrs. Wilson in a grief-stricken outburst over the loss of her son. Yet the poignancy of Bates’ and Mirren’s performances not only attracts our sympathy but points to the silencing and repressive atmosphere that exists above stairs. Hence, Elsie’s spirited

defense of her employer/lover in front of the upper classes results in her dismissal, while Probert's anguish over the death of his master is met with the police inspector's unsympathetic 'pull your self together.' Equally harsh is the upper class's response to their peers, with Louisa Stockbridge's tears over McCordle's death met with her husband's dismissive 'anyone would think you're an Italian', and Anthony Meredith's emotional plea for McCordle's financial help provoking the disdain of the guests. The seeming disconnect between the expression of feelings and the strict adherence to social propriety is characteristic of the upstairs/downstairs representations of the film. As such, the performances can be seen to reinforce the class-bound roles of the film, with emotional reticence of the upper classes used to connote repression, while vitality of the servants is conveyed in part through their display of feelings and desires.

Of course, the casting by Michael Gambon as the cantankerous Sir William McCordle, ostensibly contradicts this argument. Gambon, like the other downstairs actors, is not known for playing the upper-class roles often associated with the heritage film (indeed, in *The Wings of the Dove* he plays a derelict opium addict). But upon closer inspection, McCordle is not your typical upper-class gentleman, but a parvenu. This is emphasized in part through Gambon's performance, with his character's 'lowly' background betrayed by his crude manners, gruff speech, and lascivious behaviour—characteristics that also bring to mind Gambon's previous role as the deplorable Albert Spica in *The Cook, the Thief, his Wife and her Lover*. Gambon is thus the exception that proves the rule, with his casting deliberately playing off the stereotypical image of the English gentleman. Yet his casting also ties into the larger marketing strategy of the film

which not only calls upon the recognition of the names and previous roles of the actors, but the types of Britishness/Englishness these characters play in *Gosford Park*.

As such, these roles are tied into the highly circumscribed and conventional versions of Britishness/Englishness that are central to the perception of the film both in Britain and abroad. To this extent, the casting of well-known actors brings a powerful sense of their previous roles to the film and, by corollary, draws upon certain inherited, class-bound notions of Englishness/Britishness routinely associated with British film and television. At the same time, the roles play self-consciously on these received notions of national (and cultural) identity that are central to *Gosford Park*'s own ironic critique. Yet the very self-consciousness of the film is integral to its transnational appeal. The film thus highlights a paradox at the heart of its representation of Britain. On one hand, *Gosford Park* addresses nationally-specific discourses by incorporating a range of recognizable 'British' attractions—by its emphasis on actors/acting, setting, or subject-matter. On the other hand, the film's attention to such 'national' discourses is not only made possible because of transnational funding, but is intended for and enjoyed by international audiences.

## Conclusion

The objective of this study has been to locate *Gosford Park* within the critical and cultural context of British cinema. Following Vincendeau's claim that heritage cinema has proven a meaningful critical construct, I have taken on its central debates as a framework to understanding how *Gosford Park* operates as a heritage text and as a cultural document. As such, I have argued that the film not only offers a critical perspective on the discourses associated with heritage cinema, but also engages with questions of class, national/cultural identity, and film style that are integral to its interrogation of the past, and consequently, are integral to understanding *Gosford Park* within the context of British cinema.

In doing so, this study contests the reductive criticisms of heritage cinema as aesthetically and ideologically conservative/regressive. Evaluating heritage cinema in terms of its alleged linkage with the ethos of Thatcherism—typified by nationalism, conservatism, and classist nostalgia—not only masks the diversity among heritage films, but their capacity for innovation and social critique. This was established in Chapter One, where I argued that the emergence of 'post-heritage' and auteurist discourses was a superficial attempt by critics to detach certain films from the ideological context in which heritage films were previously discussed. By examining these critical tendencies in relation to *Gosford Park*, I hope to have shown how these interpretations not only neglected their own reliance on an ideologically-defined concept of heritage, but also overlooked their substantial formal and thematic similarities with the heritage tradition.

Chapter Two argued against the critical characterization of the narrative form and *mise-en-scène* of heritage cinema as promoting an ‘aesthetics of display’ typified by nostalgia for an idealized past, rather than a critical interrogation of it. My analysis showed how the formal and representational strategies of heritage cinema—contrary to fetishizing the objects and places of the past—are central to *Gosford Park*’s own sophisticated social critique. Through the foregrounding of working-class characters and its social emphasis on heritage space and period detail, the past is re-presented not merely as spectacle but as a crucial site for an exploration of class difference.

Chapter Three analyzed *Gosford Park* from the perspective of British literary traditions. Framed by a British literary genealogy (from Jane Austen to Agatha Christie), the film calls upon the symbolic image of the English country house to explore the social past. The device of the inheritance plot was seen as key to bringing together the characteristic form of the British detective novel with the social understanding of the English novel, and, in doing so, demonstrated how *Gosford Park* functions both as an effective murder mystery and an incisive depiction of a moribund way of life.

The examination of *Gosford Park*’s marketing and promotional practices, critical reception, and box-office statistics in the final chapter illustrated the importance of the film’s British cultural identity to its inter/national success. As such, while I have demonstrated that *Gosford Park* engages with subject-matter and discourses that have played a major role in the representation of Britain—or at least a particular ‘idea’ or ‘image’ of Britain—both at home and abroad, ultimately, I suggested that *Gosford Park* offers an ironic perspective on Britishness by foregrounding the constructed nature of

such representations. In this way, the film not only self-consciously plays on conventional, or most readily recognizable markers of Britishness—be it through its subject-matter, themes, setting, and use of particular British actors—but underlines the difficulty of ascribing national identity to a film designed for both domestic and export markets, and funded by transnational sources.

Each of the chapters in this thesis project has focused on the significant role contextual forces play in understanding *Gosford Park*. To this extent, the dominant discourses of heritage cinema served as a vehicle for not only understanding how *Gosford Park* can be understood as a heritage film, but also provides a greater understanding of its relationship to British culture and history. To discuss *Gosford Park* in the context of a debate about heritage illuminates a number of concerns central to any discussions about British cinema as a national cinema. It draws attention to the film's representation of the British national past, to its representation of class, to its narrative strategies and its visual style, to its citations of British cultural traditions, and to discourses of cultural and national identity. Treating *Gosford Park* as a vehicle through which these concerns are addressed provides an opportunity to engage with these discourses in a manner that can ultimately lead to a greater understanding not only of the film itself, but the role cinema plays as a national representation and as a cultural commodity.

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