

In the 1980s, Britain started producing films that today make up a genre of its own, called “heritage film”, which is distinct from conventional costume drama. Heritage films demand many historically correct details, with meticulous historical accuracy a considerable part of its production arrangements and visual display. Heritage movies and television series “recreate with anthropological zeal the fashions and objects of the periods” in which they are set (Vidal 2012: 10). This (relative) historical trustworthiness gives the films a special aura, different from the traditional, more inaccurate Hollywood and European costume dramas. In heritage dramas many of the buildings, interiors and sometimes even clothes, jewels and other details, are authentic from the period in which the action takes place. Perfect authenticity is of course an unreachable ideal, but the aspiration towards it is shown in the extra material on DVDs and Blu-ray discs about the careful, demanding and expensive research behind the details in a heritage movie production. According to Belén Vidal, these dramas usually have “an opulent if static *mise-en-scène* exhibiting elaborate period costumes, artefacts, properties and

heritage sites.” (2012: 8) In the end, many of the movies display both a “museum aesthetics” and a luxurious visual “grand style”<sup>2</sup>. The viewers typically experience life in “an English stately home in all its splendor, decorated in the riches of its aristocratic past” (Rowley 2013: 36). The everyday habits, mentality and lifestyle is as important as the big events in the family circle and in national or world history.

Most heritage films tell stories of aristocratic or upper-middle class social circles, of people with an existence full of privileges unavailable to the common lot. We usually get to watch iconic images of aristocracy and empire, especially grand houses and palaces. According to Andrew Higson, the English heritage films represent a highly selective vision of Englishness: “At the level of the image, narrative instability is frequently overwhelmed by the alluring spectacle of iconographic stability, permanence, and grandeur, providing an impression of an unchanging, traditional, and always delightful and desirable England” (Higson 2003: 78). In spite of this, sensitive themes like adultery, domestic abuse, homosexuality, desperation for a male heir, bribery and fortune hunting are often included in the plots. Some film researchers therefore pinpoint the *gap* between form and plot: the form is visually pompous and nostalgic, while the plot certainly often contains social critique and irony towards the upper classes, even a revisionist perspective (Higson 2003: 149, Monk 2012: 102). There tends to be a discrepancy between the glorious and nostalgic visual display, and some sad and harsh themes. Several heritage dramas are seemingly progressive by exposing “neglected” groups in history, like women, homosexuals and servants (Monk 2012: 19). Still, the audience might experience a kind of “good old times” from the plots, with the slow pace of life in a more “civilized” age, with moral certainties containing a vision of an aristocratic, morally and socially *Great Britain*. So there are several ambiguities, open to interpretation in every particular film or series.

