

Theses

The antecedents of this dissertation:

Over many years of teaching academic courses and writing study materials on Film History, and specifically British Film History, I have encountered many challenges in teaching the history of cinema and compiling film history literature. This encouraged me to look more into the evolution and practices of writing film history and national film history. While studying the transformation of film history writings in Britain the Seventies came into the focus of my attention since it was the decade which brought significant changes in this field.

The Seventies is a key period from the perspective of the changing tendencies in film production in Great Britain. Surprisingly enough only four British film books had dealt exclusively with this period up until the completion of this dissertation. The Hungarian literature on this decade of British film is virtually nonexistent. The Seventies is widely considered as a period of transition and thus neglected by most film historians. Yet this transitional nature makes it worthy of attention. Digging deeper into the period highlighted the question of the representation of national identity in a national cinema, which has become the focus of most film history studies of the period and consequently that of the dissertation. The concept of national identity manifested in and shaped by national cinema made it necessary to define such terms as identity, nation, national cinema and the components of the national character.

During my research into the Seventies, and especially the film industry of the decade, my attention was drawn to television since it was the period when television took over the role of cinema as mass media entertainment. It seemed especially relevant to explore the contemporary drama series and their significance in a broader social, political and economic context and in the contemporary filmmaking environment.

The aim of this dissertation is to draw attention to the much-neglected period of the Seventies and all the changes and transitions that took place in the fields of film history writing, filmmaking, television and in society. These changes all brought the question of national identity to the fore, highlighting the ambiguities and changes of its perception. Since this period of British cinema and film history writing is almost completely absent from Hungarian literature the dissertation sets out to map the major transitions occurring in film history

writing and explore the question of national identity and national cinema through looking at concepts such as identity, nation, national cinema and national character. I also aim to draw attention to the problematic nature of the definitions of those often used but rarely specified terms, especially in the light of the social developments in Britain in the Seventies.

The social changes and economic crisis coupled with the financial difficulties of the film industry manifested in the projection of national identity not only on the big screen but on the small screen as well. Television became mass media entertainment and replaced cinema in this respect in the decade, and thus became of primary influence in shaping and picturing national identity, which made the examination of the medium essential in this dissertation.

A unique feature of the dissertation is that it compares the contemporary drama TV series of the Seventies (especially *Play for Today*) with the quality literary adaptations of the following decade not in terms of binary oppositions but side by side looking for common features and continuities in their representations of the national identity. The dissertation elaborates on the second wave of British costume drama in the Eighties and on the much debated notion of heritage film with special attention to the heritage films' bond to the middlebrow and the middle class.

The most important common feature of film history writing, filmmaking, television and society in the Seventies in Britain is the concept of national identity and its projections, which became even more complex and controversial in the following decade of Thatcherism.

Theses:

- I. First of all, it is essential to note that the often ignored period of the Seventies had been the ground root for the changes in film history writing, film making practices and social transitions which came to full bloom in the Eighties.
- II. The release of the Ministry Of Information Films Division documents under the Thirty Year Rule reinvigorated the empirical studies during the decade and led to the revision of the films and related materials of the Second World War and consequently of the practices of the former film history and critical writings. The study of the films and related documents of the Second World War period highlighted the concept of national cinema and the national identity projected by the films made during the war. By the end of the Seventies, a new trend began to

take shape which brought film history writing and film theory closer. As a result, film history gained acceptance as an academic discipline.

- III. Identity, nation, and national identity are often used but rarely specified concepts. The definitions, or attempts to define them, show just as many uncertainties and controversies. The definitions of nation and national identity emphasizing unity, homogeneity, common inheritance, shared values and beliefs etc. proved especially irrelevant or even invalid in the light of the social and political turmoil of the Seventies. It was the very decade when the notion of assumed homogeneity had to give way to heterogeneity and most importantly this diversity began to find its way into contemporary films and television, thus it has to be taken into consideration when talking about national cinema. Henceforth, any discourse has had to reflect the diversity and heterogeneity of British national identity.
- IV. In the Seventies television became the number one mass media replacing cinema. The crisis that affected the film industry had its role in this transformation, as had the rapid spread of TV sets in British households. TV programmes, especially the contemporary drama series, took over the role of cinema in projecting and shaping national identity.
- V. The socially conscious filmmaking of the contemporary drama series of the Seventies representing “social imagery” was replaced by “national imagery” in the form of quality literary adaptations, putting the whole range of national iconography on display. The new trend of such period pieces was closely linked to the social and economic trends of the Eighties hence their label “heritage film”. The two consecutive trends seemed to reinforce the polarizing concepts so often used to describe the changing poles of British cinema. However, instead of focusing on the differences it is much more rewarding to examine these trends in parallel in order to get a full picture of what is British national cinema.
- VI. Despite all their apparent differences, *Play for Today* and the period pieces of the heritage cycle have some important common features, such as their links to the middlebrow and to the middle class as their primary target audience.
- VII. The Seventies, in the history of the contemporary drama TV series, also marked a departure from televised theatre and a move towards television films. Renowned

movie directors whose influence on the final output became more and more noticeable aided the writers of these TV drama episodes. Some of the writers and directors managed to leave their unique signature on these prime-time TV dramas, which marked the true beginning of ‘author television’.

The dissertation begins with an overview of the key literature in the interdisciplinary premises and ends with the close reading of two of the *Play for Today* TV shows and three heritage films to examine the national identity that can be surmised from the two seemingly different filmmaking approaches.