critical scrutiny. However, the publication of a number of monographs and anthologies on the subject of popular British genres has drawn attention to the contextual significance of their representations, their relation to international trends and the problems of classification. Beyond academia, the importance given to genre in understanding British cinema was confirmed by the structuring of the BBC's seven-part documentary series on British film history (broadcast in the summer of 2007) through episodes on individual types of filmmaking.

Questions of genre

Certain questions tend to crop up in considerations of British cinema and genre. Firstly, and perhaps mostly significantly, how helpful is it to address British cinema in generic terms? Some Hollywood-centric categorisations have even suggested that British filmmaking constitutes a genre in itself. Given the diversity of British filmmaking, this is obviously an unhelpful and unscholarly attitude. Yet it does at least serve to illustrate how the national output might be more easily defined through its 'otherness' in relation to dominant models of filmmaking (Hollywood production, in other words) than through its own inherent traits and features.

If the key genres of British cinema are difficult to fathom, this arises partly from the notoriously unstable and un-centralised nature of the native film industry. In her survey of British cinema, Sarah Street points out that the fragmentation of the industry is disadvantageous to the flowering of generic filmmaking:

> The vicissitudes of film production continue to ensure that British cinema remains an eclectic base. Repetition and difference have always been key features of film genres, but this dynamic process has been slowed down, particularly in recent years when most films are one-off productions without the security of a major studio's support. Companies come and go, and with them ideas and styles which, in a more stable environment, might have been developed in subsequent films. (1997: 112–13)

When examples of a specific type of filmmaking are so few and far between, it may be as fruitful to identify groups of films with commonalities of narra-

tive, setting or purpose, or to locate cycles of similarly-themed work across generic boundaries. For example, the simultaneous arrival of a handful of upbeat films about disenfranchised men has been enough for an 'underclass comedy' phase to be identified and analysed, and there have also been waves of films about traumatised women, revenge, cross-cultural tension and theatrical or sporting endeavour that transcend generic classification.

Another question is that of the correlation between genre activity and the success – whether in economic or creative terms – of a national film industry. If British film culture is sometimes known for engendering one-off successes and interesting clusters rather than sustainable genres, the proliferation of films of a particular genre is surely cause for optimism. However, as shown by the ostensible resurgence of the British horror film, an increase in productivity does not necessarily entail a coherence of style or content, nor profitability. Furthermore, the connection that tends to be made between genre filmmaking and popularity is called into question by the stark truth that many British films utterly fail to connect with a mainstream audience, despite their populist aim.

Furthermore, how might patterns of genre assist our comprehension of the relationship between British and Hollywood cinema? It has been proposed that certain types of filmmaking, such as the historical drama and the romantic comedy, deploy visual, casting and performance strategies that conform to an international consensus on Britain and Britishness. Other films are bent on playing Hollywood at its own game (*Billy Elliot*, for example), or narratively foreground the relationship between UK and US culture. There are also numerous examples of films that wring comedy or pathos from the transposition of scenarios most associated with American filmmaking to parochial British lives and landscapes. For example, the cross-country motorbike ride taken by the mild-mannered cuckold of *Heartlands* makes for a consciously humdrum take on the road movie, scored not to the customary driving rock music soundtrack but to the gentle strains of English folk music (by Kate Rusby), whilst *One for the Road* re-imagines the heist movie as a comedy of social observation along the lines of the television sitcom *The Office*, and the thoughtful coming-of-age drama *Son of Rambow* (2008) has its young characters taking inspiration from a notoriously violent US action film. Other films, like many in the horror genre, are better understood as part

of a transatlantic or even international dialogue with filmmakers work in a similar field.

A final question relating to the deployment of genre concerns Bri cinema's oft-discussed commitment to realism, in terms of both a styli naturalism and a dedication to certain types of subject matter. This well be the reason, coupled with budgetary confinements, why more fa ful types of filmmaking, like musicals and action films, have never ta root, other than in mocking (*Hot Fuzz*) or disguised form (*The Full Mo* It would seem that the British musical – 'only an occasional occurre (Donnelly 2007: 117) in recent times – is only permitted when given appropriately exotic backdrop, such as the non-white communitie *Babymother* (1998) and *Bollywood Queen* (2002), the Indian subconti of *Bride and Prejudice* (2004) or even the world of nineteenth-cen opera of *Topsy-Turvy* and *Phantom of the Opera* (2004). And yet, with t sequences of public performance and prominent use of pop music on soundtrack, *The Full Monty*, *Little Voice*, *Billy Elliot*, *Mrs Henderson Pres* and *Kinky Boots* do insinuate, together with 'backstage' films about stars such as *Spice World*, *Velvet Goldmine* and *Still Crazy* (1998), a la desire for the revival of the British musical. Ironically, the few films have attempted this directly – such as *Babymother*, *Julie and the Cadi* (1999) and *Bollywood Queen* – have been hamstrung by their awkw fusion of melodramatic and realist modes.

British cinema may have a prestigious tradition of realist drama, it has been 'poor at mythologising the world around us' (Knight 200 feat achieved by Hollywood, which created iconic genres out of the ex ences of agricultural labourers and the immigrants of the early twen century (the western and gangster film respectively). Although the Br documentary realist tradition has been identified as a partial obst to the flowering of an imaginative cinematic culture, there have rec been parallel trends for the reworking of popular genres through re strategies, and the energising of social realist films through the adop of generic traits.

The remainder of this chapter looks at five broad and over-lap areas of British cinema where filmmaking activity and critical resp (or neglect) have been the most pronounced: the horror film, the gan film, the comedy and romantic comedy, the realist film and the histor costume film.

The history and costume film

From *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933) to *The Queen*, British cinema has been dominated by films that offer some kind of recreation of the past, whether based on historical events, literary sources or entirely imagined. Such is the commercial success of these films – and their ubiquity in both popular and academic surveys of the national cinema – it could be said that their historical emphasis is one of the defining characteristics of British film culture. However, as noted by scholars of film, literature and history, the representation of the past in recent British cinema is far from straightforward, and issues of genre, heritage and authenticity have been vigorously debated.

Although the majority of British films of the 1990s and 2000s have contemporary settings, 'period' or 'costume' films have played a dis-

proportionately large role in the conceptualisation of British cinema as fundamentally backwards-looking. It is tempting to explain this apparent nostalgia (which is not the sole preserve of historical films) as a sign of the nation's cultural and political conservatism. Alternatively, this can be taken as verification of the role played by cultural history – shared stories, landscapes and artistic traditions – within definitions of Britain and Britishness.

There is critical agreement that the subject matter of the historically-set film 'involves a special relationship with notions of nationhood and national identity' (Chapman 2005: 6):

> The historical film raises questions such as whose history is being represented, by whom and for whom? The theme of identity is central to the genre: class, gender and specifically national identities are among its principal concerns. The historical film is not merely offering a representation of the past; in most instances it is offering a representation of a specifically national past. (Ibid.)

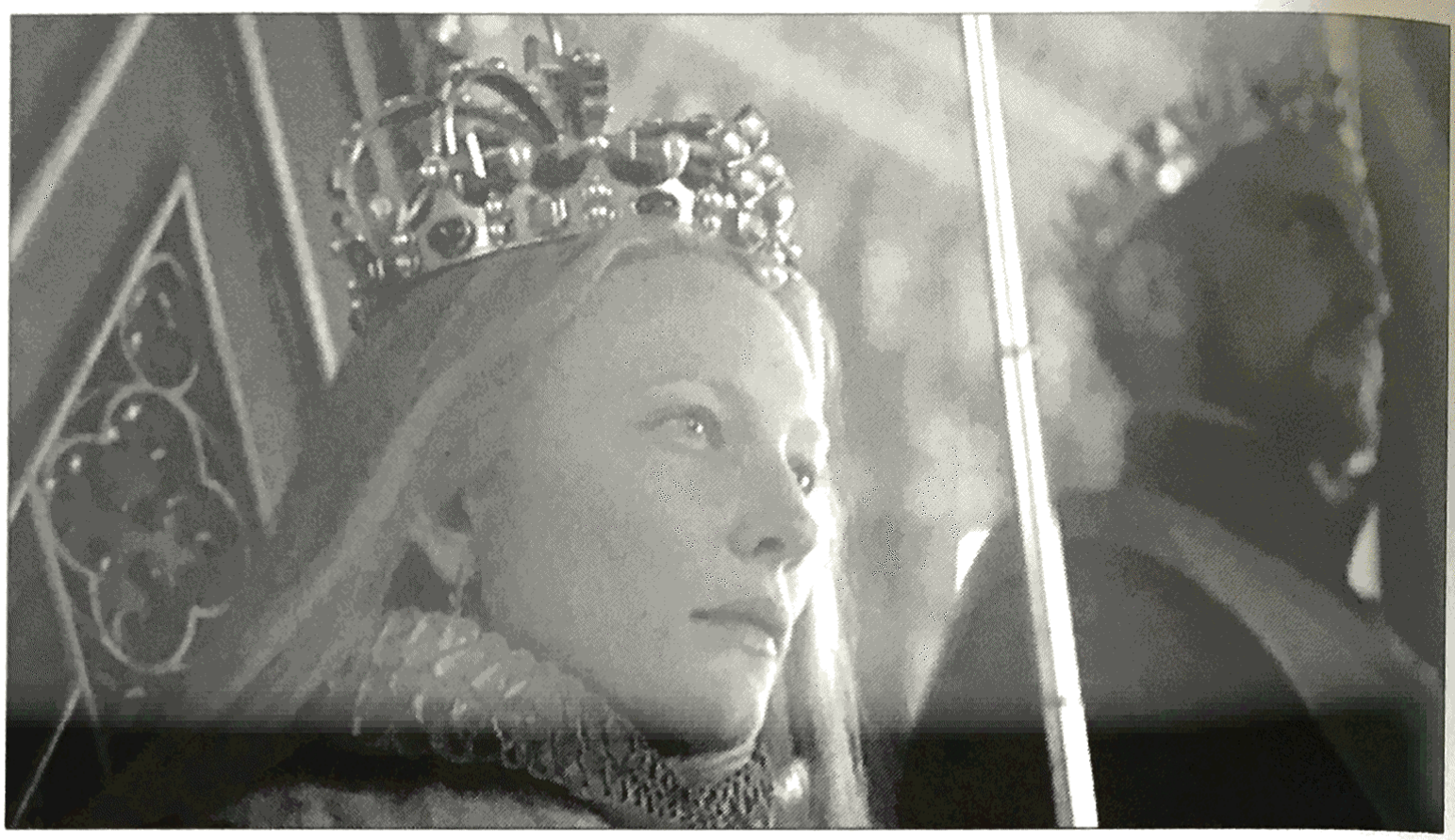
At the same time, the historical film can work – consciously or otherwise – to find contemporary resonance in its representation of a real or imagined past; it is taken for granted that the 'period' artefact is a valuable index of the present. As noted by James Chapman, films about real-life historical events such as *Chariots of Fire* and *Elizabeth* (1998) have only been an 'occasional presence' in British cinema since the 1970s, but they derive their cultural importance from coincidental contemporary events that had a 'major bearing on the ways they were understood, namely the Falklands War (*Chariots of Fire*) and the death of the Princess of Wales (*Elizabeth*)' (2005: 322).

More than simply revealing contemporary attitudes to the past, the historical film can also refashion and demythologise history. Deborah Cartmell and I. Q. Hunter use the term 'retrovision' to describe how some contemporary films have constructed 'countermyths', looking to the past sometimes with 'horror at its violence and oppression ... and sometimes with nostalgia for lost innocence and style' (2001: 2). This trend for films that openly acknowledge their subjectivity of approach has become quite pronounced in recent years, with auteurs such as Mike Leigh, Ken Loach and Robert Altman contributing historical films in keeping with their own style

and thematic preoccupations. The tendency for 'deconstructive' approaches to history reached a kind of zenith with *24 Hour Party People* (2002), a film about the Manchester music scene of the 1970s and 1980s that is 'unreadable' without an 'understanding of how times and places morph and shift' (Brabazon 2005: 139). It has also been taken as significant that British historical cinema (like historical fiction and television drama) has become fixated with periods of national 'greatness' such as the Elizabethan, Jacobean and Victorian eras, reflecting 'both a British desire to revisit history in the wake of new definitions of Britishness and a need to rethink the meaning of Englishness in a devolved nation now that England's myths have been degraded by revisionism' (Cartmell & Hunter 2001: 3).

The range of subject matter covered by British historical cinema suggests that it is best described as a tendency than as a coherent genre. However, in the contemporary context, British period films can be broadly divided into five (overlapping) categories: the literary adaptation (discussed in chapter 2), the 'biopic' of political, creative or everyday figures (which includes *Hilary and Jackie* (1998), *Pierrepoint* and *The Killing of John Lennon* (2006)), the monarchy film, the war film and representations of the twentieth century.

As noted by Kara McKechnie (2002) and others, the monarchy film makes up a small but significant area of British film production, undergoing 'periodic revival' (2002: 217), and re-modelling kings and queens 'according to the need of the age' (2002: 226). Thus, *Mrs Brown* (1997) and *Elizabeth* work to humanise their subjects through a representation that subverts their popular reputation as stern (and chaste) rulers; *Mrs Brown* addresses Queen Victoria's (Judi Dench) relationship with a Scottish servant John Brown (Billy Connolly) in the years following the death of her husband, whilst *Elizabeth* deviates from the conventional depiction of the Virgin Queen by showing her as a young, sexually active woman struggling to 'balance the public and personal' (Pigeon 2001: 15). Elizabeth I remains a source of fascination for contemporary filmmakers and audiences, being the subject of two recent British television serials – *Elizabeth I* (2005) and *The Virgin Queen* (2005) – and also appearing in *Shakespeare in Love*. Evidently, the age of imperial and creative supremacy with which she – like William Shakespeare – is associated provides a more appropriate setting for the monarchy film than times of doubt or constitutional crisis, the Civil War drama *To Kill a King* (2003) being a rare, and commercially unsuccessful, exception.



The machinery of myth-making: Cate Blanchett as the young queen in *Elizabeth*

Perhaps more than any other historical film in recent British cinema, the contemporary relevancies of *Elizabeth* received close – and sometimes contradictory – critical and journalistic readings, as discussed in detailed case studies of the film by Andrew Higson (2003) and James Chapman (2005). At a time of devolution, *Elizabeth* was read (and indeed promoted) as both a celebration and a critique of 'Englishness', an issue complicated by the film having an Indian director (Shekhar Kapur) and Australian star (Cate Blanchett). The death of the Princess of Wales during the making of the film prompted some commentators to draw contemporary parallels with troubled young royals in the public eye; Renée Pigeon, for example, suggests that the queen has the 'vulnerability of a Diana and the ruthlessness of a Thatcher' (2001: 19). However, the film's exploration of the machinery of myth-making – exemplified by the sequence in which the young queen rehearses a well-known speech, as well as by the pictorial references to famous portraits – also resonated with the ideology of New Labour, suggesting how a 'reconceived history' might have 'practical efficacy in pre-millennium Britain' (Luckett 2000: 91):

> *Elizabeth* ... narrates a new history, one that reinforces the power of images over archival knowledge, and thereby legitimises a similar strategy for more contemporary narratives. The film might be seen in the context of Tony Blair's attempts to update the monarchy by

> demonstrating how the *image* of a monarch might produce national renown even in the face of very real domestic problems and their potential threat to nationhood. (Ibid.)

This intervention between monarchy and a modernising New Labour government would be personified literally in *The Queen*, in which a newly-elected Blair urges Queen Elizabeth II to carry out a demonstrative act of public sympathy following the death of Princess Diana. Although the depiction of a living ruler gives the film an unusual *frisson*, in some respects *The Queen* is typical of the monarchy film in its exploration of the disjunction between public and private personae, as well as the platform it gives to a weighty performance more than an impersonation, this time by an actress with an international reputation (Helen Mirren).

Just as monarchy films speak to the present, so stories about wars have reflected shifting attitudes towards past and present conflict. Recent events have indicated that the UK still has an 'appetite for war' but wants to 'engage in a very different kind of war to what was on offer up until 1991' (Macallister 2004: 171). As discussed earlier, historical films about colonial conflict have tended to be read as critiques of contemporary foreign policy, but this new sensibility can be discerned more generally from the various films that offer a re-imagining of the 'paradigm conflict' of World War Two. According to Christopher Macallister, films such as *The English Patient*, *Charlotte Gray* and *Enigma* (2001) contribute to a 'new heroic grammar at odds with both earlier films and traditional understandings of war' (2004: 174). In line with current thinking about war, these films offer counter-myths that challenge gender roles, promote the personal above the political and are sceptical about heroic endeavour (heroic virtue being transplanted instead to safely 'fantastic' places such as the worlds of James Bond and Harry Potter). The role of women on the home front and in the field of conflict is acknowledged in *The Land Girls* (1998), *The War Bride* (2001), *Charlotte Gray*, *Enigma* and *Mrs Henderson Presents*. But the impulse to give voice to those traditionally excised from official histories has also resulted in films such as the animated *Valiant* (2005), *Two Men Went to War* (2002) and *The Rocket Post*, which consider the roles, respectively, of pigeon messengers, men deemed 'unfit' to serve and German scientists. Furthermore, there is emphasis upon the needs of the individual rather than the many; the heroine of *Charlotte Gray* ends up as a liaison

operative for the French resistance through her quest to find her boyfriend, whereas one of the Bletchley Park code-breakers of *Enigma* is motivated by the need to discover the fate of his lover.

Although the period film is usually taken to refer to stories set in or before the early twentieth century, contemporary British cinema has often looked back to recent history, and with a degree of ambivalence. Whereas the historical film has been inclined to return to eras of supposed national coherence or achievement, there have been numerous family dramas set during times of social and cultural instability in the later twentieth century. To some extent, the depiction of racist attitudes between the 1960s and 1980s in *Wondrous Oblivion*, *East is East*, *Anita and Me* (2002) and *This is England* may reinforce perceptions of the 'backwardness' of the time, just as the 1950s-set *Vera Drake* and the 1980s-set *Billy Elliot* expose unenlightened attitudes towards class and gender roles. At the same time, a number of coming-of-age narratives work to explore their scenarios of social or ethnic division through stories about father-and-son reconciliations. This is the case in *Wondrous Oblivion*, in which David (Sam Smith), a Jewish boy living in suburban London, takes cricket lessons from Dennis (Delroy Lindo), a West Indian neighbour persecuted by local residents. In a fantasy of assimilation, his father Victor (Stanley Townsend), hitherto disinterested in his son's progress, eventually becomes part of a game that all three can play together (there is a similarly functioning scene at the end of *Bend It Like Beckham*). Sport also provides a foundational myth in *Sixty Six* (2006), in which Bernie (Gregg Sulkin), another Jewish boy, stands in danger of becoming excluded from a key moment of British social history when his Bar Mitzvah is scheduled at the same time as England's game in the World Cup final of 1966; not only are boy and father (Eddie Marsan) reconciled, but they manage – against the odds – to infiltrate Wembley Stadium, and thus the cultural mainstream.

Furthermore, some contemporary British films have sought to resurrect the spirit of past *cinematic* greatness, such as traditions of horror, Ealing comedy and the New Wave movement of the 1950s and early 1960s. With regard to the latter, *Vera Drake* reverses the standard gender balance of the kitchen-sink drama by giving voice and narrative space to a female character (see Hardy 2004), whilst *The Jealous God* (2005) is an adaptation of a John Braine novel from 1965 delivered in the style of the social realist cinema of the era.

Many of the films discussed above can be placed within a loosely-defined body of British heritage cinema. The term 'heritage film' was first used by Charles Barr in relation to 1940s films of 'British understatement and the rich British heritage' (1986: 12). But the term quickly become associated with a certain type of period drama that came to prominence in the 1980s. Typified by films such as *A Room with a View* (1985) and *Howards End* (1992), the heritage text was commonly understood as a film that drew upon a work of classic literature, dwelt upon the lives and properties of the upper classes and was set roughly in the period between 1860 and World War Two. The so-called 'heritage debate' that ensued amongst scholars of British film culture initially called attention to their political implications, with some commentators deeming them to be nostalgic and conservative within the context of reactionary Thatcherite ideology. But further analysis, prompted by feminist and gay readings, led to more nuanced and varied positions on their gender politics, their appeal to audiences, their umbilical link with the 'heritage' industries and their generic delineation and coherence.[3]

Critical work on the heritage film has also queried the extent to which the term can still be applied to more recently made British period films. Pamela Church Gibson (2000), Claire Monk (2002) and others have suggested how some films of the 1990s such as *The Wings of the Dove*, *Elizabeth* and *Shakespeare in Love* depart from the 'canonical' heritage film through their visual style, hybridised form, self-conscious foregrounding of questions of myth-making and historical representation, and their appeal to contemporary sensibilities. Many of these qualities are also hallmarks of period films from the early twenty-first century such as the biopics *Pandaemonium* and *Becoming Jane*.

In relation to *Elizabeth* and the gleefully anachronistic *Shakespeare in Love*, Julianne Pidduck proposes that they mark a 'postmodern turn in the British period drama', allowing a 'playful, performative sensibility' to overtake the 'realist mode' (2007: 172). Furthermore, 'against a British heritage tradition premised on precise dialogue, pastoral *mise-en-scène* and subtle dramas of love and class distinction, these Elizabethan films employ the lexicon of corporeality and sensuality' (ibid.).

It has been argued that films such as *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Tichborne Claimant* (1998) and *Mansfield Park* (1999) are more 'progressive' in their registering of contemporary debates around sexual and cul-

tural politics (see Wood 1999; Gibson 2004; Dave 2006: 36–40). However, the deployment of the term 'post-heritage' to categorise these and other films has not been universally welcomed, as this carries the implication that previous examples of the heritage film were incapable of radicalism in intention or interpretation. Furthermore, British film culture has long known a strain of iconoclastic or deliberately 'inauthentic' approaches to history, from the avant-garde contributions of Derek Jarman and Peter Greenaway to the 'vulgar' work of Ken Russell and the Carry On films.[4] However, even though the term 'heritage film' has always had far greater currency in academia than among audiences or within the industry, the 'marketing, promotion and indeed textual strategies of recent British period films ... have worked hard, and with considerable strategic sophistication, to project the films as "not heritage films"' (Monk 2002: 193). Some examples, such as *The Revengers Tragedy* and *A Cock and Bull Story*, could even be identified as 'anti-heritage' in their self-conscious subversion and parody of the expectations of a period film.

A further point of contention is the efficacy of applying the 'heritage' paradigm – conceived at first to interrogate the relation of the period dramas of the 1980s to Thatcherite ideology – to the films of the Labour era. Noting how the differing conditions from the mid-1990s onwards have implications for the 'ideological substance' of the heritage film, as well as the 'currency' of the critical debate around it, Monk proposes that the heritage aesthetic (and its ideological function) has more recently been embraced by underclass films and romantic comedies (2002: 195). Certainly, in their selective social vision and enthralment to the pastoral, films such as *Notting Hill* and *Bridget Jones's Diary* could well be labelled 'contemporary' heritage films. Such questions about the representation of modern Britain will be the focus of the following chapter.