

Idealized Nationalism in *Downton Abbey*: A study of the Identity of Englishness in Heritage Film

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ABSTRACT

With the *Downton Abbey* series as a starting point, this study examines how fictional media is a new source of renegotiating national identity, in this case Englishness. A close analysis of *Downton Abbey* and similar cultural phenomena shows how heritage film modify and idealize certain aspects and values of history to alter and ultimately rewrite the memory of history. Different definitions of nationalism and identity are explored to lay the basis of a discussion of why *Downton Abbey* appeared when it did and how fictional productions of history and culture might be the key to the recreation of contemporary cultural identity. Thus, this article will reveal the connection between the popularity of heritage productions and their impact on the cultivation of cultural identities and national sentiments.

Keywords: national identity; Englishness; heritage film; *Downton Abbey*; cultural memory; nostalgia

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Introduction

A nation may be defined by its observable qualities like language or borders, but it may also be defined by the configuration of its nationalism. Essential elements in nationalism are cultural values and a shared history; nationalism is a mix of feeling and devotion and without being observable it serves as the spirit which defines the nation and the identity of its people. In the United Kingdom, the prominent national identity, Britishness, is challenged by the fact that the country struggles to remain a *united* kingdom; '[T]he traditional pillars of Britishness have collapsed' (McQuaid 230) which has sent each of the different parts of the country, including England, out in search of their own distinct national identity. Englishness as nationalism is time and time again rekindled through cultural phenomena where it flourishes in an idealized form in a less authentic historical setting. This is the case with film genres such as historical drama or heritage film. Accordingly, these cultural contributions on history play a vital part in the renegotiation of national identity despite their fictional take-off. Because of the impact of cultural media, especially television, a show like *Downton Abbey* has an important say in how the English people perceive their past and subsequently, how they perceive their present and themselves. This paper argues that history is modified in heritage film and thus it contends that British heritage film, more specifically *Downton Abbey*, portrays an idealized form of nationalism embodying the idea of Englishness as a response to a United Kingdom, in particular England, in search of national identity.

Because the idea of nationalism is abstract, this study draws on different definitions of the term, including the studies of Hobsbawm and Anderson which have been fused together to create a more nuanced methodological approach. As a result, this paper views nationalism as 'an ideological cultivation of the nation' (Nygaard). Furthermore, the paper also relies on media studies, including uses and gratifications theory, to analyse the concepts of audience and the gratifications of media. To limit the scope, the *Downton Abbey* series will serve as the only case to illustrate idealized nationalism in heritage film, however, supplementary scholarly research and examples of other cultural phenomena are included to widen the perspective of fictional media as a significant catalyst in the renegotiation of national identity.

The Genesis of Nationalism

It is difficult to give an exact definition of the concept of nationalism; the only certain thing about nationalism is that however precisely it may be defined it still holds different meanings to different people. In a discussion of the theoretical framework of nationalism, Benedict Anderson is worthy of mention, if not indeed indispensable. His publication *Imagined Communities: Reflections of the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983) argues that a nation is an 'imagined community' because even if people of the same nation have never met or been acquainted, they still share what Anderson

calls a ‘horizontal comradeship’ (Munro). This comradeship essentially embodies traditions, beliefs, attitudes, and a perhaps most importantly a shared history. Simply put, this ‘horizontal comradeship’ is the glue that keeps the imagined community, the nation, together. Thus, the people who share the contents of the “horizontal comradeship” are the sole foundation of the imagined community, that is, they generate the culture of the nation.

The utility of Anderson’s theory can be supported by West and Turner’s definition of a culture which is ‘a community of meaning, with among other things, a shared body of knowledge’ (41). Like the idea of comradeship this too indicates that there is a shared sense of meaning between people in a nation/culture which unites them; there is something which cannot be measured, a common understanding, which seems to be the notion of nationalism. Perhaps it is then more suitable to define nationalism not by what it contains but by what it does; it unites people and gives them a common identity. In this perspective, it becomes relevant to investigate the purpose of nationalism rather than try and define it. The historian Eric Hobsbawm defines a nation as a ‘a changing, evolving, modern construct that is brought into being by nationalism, and not the other way around’ (Madison). It is an interesting concept that nationalism is what shapes the nation, since, in Hobsbawm’s perspective, the nation cannot theoretically exist without the sense of nationalism bringing it ‘into being’. Therefore, it becomes essential to know what contributes to the present-day nationalism.

Created by Julian Fellowes, *Downton Abbey* has earned acclaims such as ‘the most popular series in the history of British television’ (Mattisson 1), however, to understand how *Downton Abbey* has any significant impact on the cultivation of national spirit, it must be defined in terms of genre and purpose. The concept *heritage film* functions as an umbrella-term for productions which ‘act as “cultural ambassadors” representing “Englishness” in foreign markets, as well as negotiating a sense of historical identity at home’ (Rix 44). Considering the economic scope (the average production cost of an episode estimates £1 million (The Telegraph)) and popularity (ratings over 120 million (Mattisson 1)) the salience of *Downton Abbey* can arguably be placed at the top of the contemporary heritage film genre.

The heritage film genre is special because it is closely intertwined with connotations of national sentiments. Andrew Higson explains heritage film as something which ‘offer[s] ... more settled and visually splendid manifestations of an essentially pastoral national identity’ (Baena & Byker 260). Suddenly, there is more to the purpose of film than just entertainment; the cinema has become a source of knowledge, which causes historical, though fictional, series like *Downton Abbey* to be the primary source of re-education in history. Arguably, the series becomes ‘a living dialogue on national identity’ (Ibid. 262), while providing entertainment. However, it is not enough to accept the portrayal of cultural values on screen and passively sit back while it becomes the image of one’s newly “negotiated” national identity. On the contrary, the viewer must be critical and interrogate this image due to its fictional basis. In accordance with Mattisson’s argument that ‘Television is a new form of

history that must be judged by what it sets out to do' (5) it is no longer an option to stay passive as an audience member.

The question remains how *Downton Abbey* has chosen to renegotiate a sense of nationalism. Part of the answer lies in the time of the series' conception. Ben Wellings points out that 'An understanding of history – or rather an ability to recall instructive episodes of national past – is a crucial element in the ideology of nationalism' (370), which means that the most "recalled episodes" will make up the dominant memories of the past. Indeed, he argues that '[m]emory of Empire' is pivotal in the shaping of 'contemporary expressions' of nationalism (375). Hence, the series is presumably set in one of the most important times in British history. It can then be claimed that *Downton Abbey* is generating *cultural memory*, a term described as 'complex ways in which societies remember their past using a variety of media' (Erll and Rigney 111). The show acts a gateway to the collective memory of historical and traditional national sentiments.

As a counterpoint, it seems narrow-minded to assume that the British people, and more specifically the English, are only looking inwards in their search for a national identity. The argument that globalisation and multiculturalism only grants people 'an increasingly larger palette from which to paint the pictures that make up ... individual and collective identities' (Thomsen 143) is a real challenge to the notion of *Downton Abbey* portraying nationalism, since the series seems to be painting with only a few selected colours of that palette, but with a very big brush.

Why *Downton Abbey* Rekindles the Past

If there were such a thing as a historical comfort-zone, it must have been the time of Empire and the Victorian Age for Britain. Historian Simon Jenkins describes the period as the 'zenith both at home and abroad' (206) while Victoria's rule is credited with 'stability' and 'continuity' (215). Indeed, this seems the right setting for a good story when one, namely the UK, needs stability, continuity and the memory of great deeds. The heritage film was born in the Thatcher era in a time when it was needed. Heritage films produce a psychological remedy (Rix 44) in times of economic recession and so, not surprisingly, *Downton Abbey* enters the stage in 2010 only two years after the global financial crisis (Havemann). The same phenomenon occurred when *Downton Abbey*'s elder doppelgänger, *Upstairs, Downstairs*, gave new life to 'English nostalgia during the uninspiring years of [Prime Ministers] Heath and Wilson' (Caldwell). Arguably, the *Upstairs, Downstairs* also represented a *historical comfort-zone* in a dull reality.

A key point from a 2012 report by the Office for National Statistics shows that national well-being – measured in net national income per head (NNI) as an indicator of living standards – was 13.2% below the level of 2008 (Carolan et al. 2). This datum indicates that the general happiness in the UK has declined as a result of the financial crisis, but how come then that in times of post-crisis

we like to watch ‘rich people deal with rich-people problems’? (Chaney) It all comes back to the notion of a shared identity and therefore, nationalism. The memory of a united sense of belonging with a common purpose is crucial to a people that lives in a time where the state is struggling and the economy is in recession. Suddenly, when the old butler on the TV says, ‘Keeping up standards is the only way to show the Germans that they will not beat us in the end’ (S2E1 00:07:28) a forgotten common purpose is rekindled and the values of the English re-remembered. In times of struggle cultural unity is weakened while national devotion is challenged and thus people look to a fictional live version of the history book in the form of *Downton Abbey* to reconstruct the image of the nationality to which they belong.

Seen in a bigger perspective, the series came to an end in 2015 and by this time today the financial crisis was over, despite its long-lasting effects, but something which has not changed is the lack and need of a shared identity in Britain. However, it might not be that one single nationality is possible and a cultivation of Britishness might not be the answer. McQuaid states that ‘Britain is fractured by devolution’, while she argues that the future is one of a ‘dis-united Kingdom’ (230) led by fragmentation in national sentiments of belonging. Therefore, cultural phenomena like *Downton Abbey* are perhaps demanded more than ever; not only because they re-educate people in their history and in this way become a trigger for a new debate on national identity, but also because their fictional take on real historical events can be modified and adjusted to depict not merely the best version of history, but the best version for the people watching it. *Downton Abbey* has become a bespoke suit of history stitched with nationalism made for the audience.

Downton Abbey purposely fits into its contemporary milieu but in addition to this, it is not a coincidence that the series’ own time is set right after the peak of the Empire. The viewer is thrown right into the noble, upper-class society whose characters are the foundation of the period. Proper English manners, values and virtues, tea-times, the right newspapers, etiquette (however horribly French the word may sound in this context), dressing-times, titles, estates and English gardens – the very essence of Englishness – permeate every second of the series, because the England of then is not the England of today. As stated above, the Britain of today is characterised by a people preferring their own “closer” nationality, for instance Welsh, over British and this goes for all of them, even the English (McQuaid 230). However, the England of 1912 was British then because England was the heart of the Empire. In the words of imperial historian J.R. Seeley: “Greater Britain” was “a real enlargement of the English state” (Wellings 370). Accordingly, *Downton Abbey* is an English universe not a British one, because those two notions merged with the rise of the Empire in a time when England was centre.

The question then follows, how does a contemporary audience relate to a post-imperial class-based society ruled by the English? Suddenly, it becomes not only interesting but also highly addictive to be part of the world where ‘An aristocrat with no servants is as much use to the county

as a glass hammer' (S3E1 00:15:54). Somehow 6.9 million UK viewers feel like tuning in on Christmas Day (Midgley) for a last episode of the gilded scenery of life at Downton and indulge in everything upper-class and ostentatious. In contrast to Mattisson's point from the first chapter that 'television ... must be judged by what it sets out to do' the audience too must be judged by what they do with the media.

Uses and gratifications theory seeks to unveil the audience member's individual role when picking and choosing between media. The theory claims that media can gratify five different kinds of need. However, what is curious about *Downton Abbey* is that the show covers two of them at the same time. The first need is *cognitive* (acquiring information), which can be gratified through historical films, while the other need is *affective* (emotional experience), which can be gratified through movies or soap operas (West and Turner 407). Therefore, *Downton Abbey* is not watched only for the joy of a brief history lesson presented in HD quality frames, but also for the fix of empathy in the form of fictional characters and their exciting and – most feared by any English society member – scandalous lives. *Downton Abbey*, as a balanced mix between fiction and non-fiction, can only function as the foundation onto which a new national sense of identity is built because it encompasses these two needs.

Summing up, there are two important aspects of time regarding *Downton Abbey*; one is its contemporary reception, and the other is the historical setting of the story which, apart from representing Englishness in its most refined form, additionally forces the viewer to recollect the nation's past and go on an inwards journey to question one's perception of national feelings in contemporary time. The reason why this can happen, according to Astrid Erll, is because shows like *Downton Abbey* have 'a tendency to personalize history ... it creates intimacy and immediacy, which involves viewers in the historical matters represented' (Erll 139). It is a fine balance, but Downton has it all; the great historical period and all the favourite characters while the whole constellation makes everyone forget about the grey and dull situation in the present-day world. Finally, there is an answer to the question of who wants to watch 'rich people deal with rich-people problems', as Katherine Fusco believes that we watch *Downton Abbey* because 'We want to turn on our TVs, gaze upon all that polished brass, and not think too hard about who is doing the polishing' (Fusco 111). Therefore, the series represents a source for re-negotiating a national identity as well as a source of simple escapism.

Fictional Media Reconstructing Collective Memory

As mentioned in the first chapter, *Downton Abbey* generates cultural memory. Whether it be heritage film, historical fiction etc., it is the structure onto which the story is built that determines its impact; good media productions become popular and thus gain a status where they be crucial to the dialogue

on memory in which they engage. The core of this idea is the narration of the story being told. Every visual production has a narrative, whether fictional or not. Essentially, ‘narrative is a fundamental way that humans make sense of the world’ (Narrative 48). In the case of *Downton Abbey*, the narrative form is pivotal to the understanding of the impact of the series because its fictional foundation gratifies our affective needs with characters whom we can emotionally relate to; or at least we want to pretend we can relate when the Dowager Countess unknowingly asks, ‘What is a weekend?’ (S1E2 00:08:29).

There is nothing wrong with telling a fictional story through a realistic historical setting. However, since the series embodies the narrative duality of fiction and non-fiction while it delineates English nostalgia, it must be judged by the way it interprets history, seeing that it is responsible for the way the audience will perceive it. In line with Baena and Byker’s argument that ‘*Downton* becomes one of those places where “an identity-preserving, identity-enchanting, and identity-transforming aura lingers ... places in which England can locate and secure its identity”’ (263) the series plays on strong images of ethnic nationalism portraying an English lifestyle which is exclusive and passed down through heritage. Indeed, *Downton* life seems like a lost era in history. However, the England that forms the backdrop and the Englishness that everybody lives and breathes in the series are not historically accurate.

Baena and Byker talk about cultural rebellion as a term that questions how *Downton*’s upstairs and downstairs live in peaceful harmony with each other despite their social differences while almost every character can bring forth empathy in the audience (264). It seems rather unlikely that the patriarchal head of the estate, Lord Grantham, had he been a real character, would also be a feminist supporting his daughters’ right to pick and choose any husband and vocation in life while ultimately fighting to alter the law of heredity. In addition, the two youngest daughters, Edith and Sybil, who will not inherit the estate, pursue selfless labour with meaningful purpose, driving a tractor on a farm and becoming a nurse, respectively, as if no rich high-class girl at that time did not just find a wealthy husband and remain a part of the privileged class for the rest of her days. Every character with whom the audience, in terms of real history, should have a hard time bonding seems to carry all the right traits to make them likeable.

Downton’s characters are one point of contradiction to reality; historical accuracy is another. Most audiences would imagine the series to be exaggerated, but they would be mistaken. History has been toned down because some historical matters would not fit present-day audiences if the aim was for them to rediscover a proud story of their mother country with the purpose of inspiring them to reconstruct a nostalgic memory of their common past. This is seen both in the way the life at *Downton* would compare to real life at that time as exemplified by the studies of Lady Fiona Carnarvon, and in the way the creators of *Downton Abbey* have chosen to portray England in contrast to other countries.

The real counterpart to the life of the Crawley family is found in the life of Lady Almina who married the 5th Earl of Carnarvon in 1895 and became Lady Almina Herbert of Highclere Castle – the real Downton Abbey. To give a brief illustration of how history has been down-scaled, a comparative analysis of Lady Mary Crawley’s wedding in 1920 and Lady Almina Herbert’s wedding reveals a handful of the differences. First, the scope of Mary’s wedding is nothing compared to that of Almina’s. Mary is married in the small local church of the Downton village, while Almina is married in St. Margaret’s Church on Parliament Square in London, which, for the occasion, was filled to the brim with flower decorations and palm trees. Just to top it off, the former Prime Minister was present at Almina’s wedding. Moreover, regular celebrations at Highclere Castle around the 1900s included around 500 guests and on occasion members of the royal family (Carnarvon 1-15) (S3E1 01:03:48). Of course, it must be considered that a world war happened in between the two weddings, and that the plot of the series is not based on the life of the Carnarvon family. However, there is a strangeness to the fact that the Crawley characters are put into the real house and home of the Carnarvon family with their authentic furniture and their ancestors on the walls, while all their pomp and circumstance are minimized to such a degree that the audience is served a completely different story about what reality looked like for noble families in England around 1900. Consequently, historical circumstances to which a present-day audience might not be able to relate are substituted with fictional narration in which the audience can engage and successfully bond with their own past.

The series has also drawn a distinct line between life conducted by the English and everyone else to emphasise the concept of England as the nation with the greatest heritage in the form of virtue and tradition. For instance, when Daisy, the kitchen maid, asks why women are not served first at dinner, Anna, the lady’s maid, replies ‘That’s the way it’s done on the Continent. And we don’t like foreign ways here.’ (S2E2 00:19:47). This creates a certain aura of English privilege around all of the Downton members from downstairs to upstairs, which makes the audience perceive this idealized Englishness as something everyone possesses in their hearts, high as low in all classes of society. Another example is when the Dowager Countess says to her daughter-in-law Cora, who is born American and married into English upper-class, ‘I’m so looking forward to seeing your mother again. When I’m with her I’m reminded of the virtues of the English.’ unsure of the intention behind this, Matthew inquires: ‘but isn’t she American?’ to which the Countess confidently responds, ‘exactly.’ (S3E1 00:14:52).

The audience uses the bonding with fictional characters as a medium for them to meet their own past; the way the characters perceive the world is the way the audience will believe the world was then. It is the cycle of cultural memory. The starting point for the creators of the series is real history, so while ‘[t]he filmmakers have built the plot from the story, ... the viewers build the story from the plot’ (Narrative 51). What *Downton Abbey* has done as an object of cultural memory is to

select and refine the idea of Englishness and tailor it so that specific dominant qualities stand out and become the primary impression with which the audience is left.

The history of the English is rebuilt through the series by highlighting important cultural values while subduing facts that would not appeal to a contemporary audience. Moreover, the exclusive ethnic nationalism is mixed with the bonding between characters and audience, which consequently turns the image of Englishness in the series into a more civic nationalism because everyone can relate and participate through the personalised relation to history. Thus, *Downton Abbey* is not only responsible for the reconstruction of memories; it also sets the agenda for which specific things are left out and which are purposely remembered for the audience to experience.

Conclusion

Downton Abbey has established itself as a significant cultural contribution in the ‘living dialogue’ on English identity. This study shows that nationalism, which in Hobsbawm’s perspective shapes the nation, is to a great extent determined by cultural media in contemporary society. Moreover, the study has shown that *Downton Abbey* might be ideologically driven in its portrayal of national sentiments because it appears in a time where England as an individual ‘imagined community’ in the UK lacks purpose and ultimately common identity. The fictional narrative of the series enables the audience to relate to a replication of their own history. In this way, a sense of ethnic nationalism in the series is broadcasted to the people by the personal bonds built between characters and audience and thus, it becomes a civic nationalism where no matter how little or how much English a citizen might define themselves to be, they can all take pleasure in watching *Downton Abbey* and the cultural memory it instils. Consequently, it can be concluded that fictional media productions are able to set the agenda of cultural debates and in this way not only retell history but also renegotiate the shared sense of national identity. The fictional narration of authentic historical episodes challenges the objective perspective of the past and creates the idealized nationalism. As a result, the Englishness which is brought to life in the series is ideal for contemporary England, which finds itself in a limbo where English nationalism is not what it once was but neither has it had the time to reinvent itself. Thus, heritage productions like *Downton Abbey* not only function as a psychological remedy, but also encourage the search of a new national identity because the idealized manifestation of former nationalism appeals to contemporary time. This might be the spark to ignite the ever so urgent living conversation of contemporary nationalism; ‘this’ being ‘a poeticised past that never was’ in the words of Robert W. Rix (44).

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