

1. Nation and history on screen

Notions of spectatorship (Hansen, 1991; Hansen, 2012) in historical movies are at play in audience reception and its influence on the instalments of national history on film. The US blockbuster and the adaptation of (English) novels into films laid out the foundation of epics set in the past for British historicals. The films of the national cinematic epic always look back at “the classical Hollywood narrative film in continuity” (Thompson, 1985: ix). I am not concerned with the modes of expression particular to American and English cinema.

Instead, I consider the way the genre of historical fiction movie was perceived as delivering an example to follow at the time. Capturing the essence of national identity on camera was obviously informed by the American colossals of the 1950s. The camera and the editing of British historicals can be traced back to “the CinemaScope’s widescreen debut” in 1953 (Davis, 2012: 67), which made out of the epic the prevalent mode of Hollywood storytelling throughout the 1950s. Although “the trend of creating cinematic epics set in the ancient world went dormant in the 1960s” (McCall, 2014: vi), the genre had a number of decent instalments in later British popular cinema.

As a matter of principle, Western feature films were generally deemed prestige movies, with cultural credentials that were much better than whatever Soviet cinema had to offer. American and, later on, English productions helped filmmaking appropriate the means of expression commonly employed in re-enacting a glamorous past on camera. They (among other examples of European cinema, mostly, French and Italian) provided the film industries with the cinematic means needed to screen history. Essentially, the formal conventions of Western historical cinema served to complement local self-identification patterns, already incorporated in the structure of the country’s modern literary culture.

My reading of British nationalism makes reference to specific historical movies which record a 20th century national iconography. Whereas film studies consider their primary sources for their own sake, I approach the genre of historical movies in order to redeem the genre from its current status. Either vilified or worshiped presently, the historical movie is able to convey a sense of belonging to the nation. My aim is to flesh out the larger identity narrative behind the cultural and political meanings of cinema. The experience of watching movies and

the interpretation of historical titles as filmic texts are among the main concerns of my investigation as well.

The notion of film as language, developed within the semiotic tradition, helps viewers pay attention both to the perception of events on screen and spectatorship. Importantly, the topic of a grammatical system of signs is under scrutiny here. It should help explain the cinematic idiom of historical movies. The traditional interpretation of popular cinema as a sign system corroborates my reading of heritage movies. Firstly, it brings closer the patriotic epics set in the past to the historiography of the nation state, which is the guideline for the filmmakers who shot revealing films about the politics of re-enacting the past. Secondly, it shows that film makes sense “as a language (in its sign system, with cinematic technique the analogical equivalent of a grammar) but also as a rhetorical appeal to or an assertion of identity in the audience” (Blakesley, 2003: 5).

If used to study British historicals, the notions of national cinema, realism, or authorship shed light on the overlap between history and identity at play in the literary culture of the country. The influential work of David Bordwell on art cinema helps explain the belief that movies may be construed of as texts. As far as interpretation is concerned, there are no cinematic meanings as distinct from noncinematic ones; even a reflexive theme, such as the idea that film is an illusion, could be ascribed to a novel or painting (Bordwell, 1989: 107). Basically, the modern literary culture of the nation is one and the same throughout various public narratives. Moreover, my culturalist approach to the genre of heritage film stresses “that the object of study is not texts [...] but instead the uses made of texts” (Bordwell, 1996: 10).

Cinema brings to audiences the story told by state-owned media outlets whose main task was to foster national cohesion. The public already knows that to reflect on historical films means to think of filmmaking as evidence of political agency. Explicitly, the British viewership was aware of the state policy “to maintain national pride through patriotic identification with the nation’s history, culture, and people” (Nicholas, 1999: 75). Once more, this struggle to foster a sense of identity sanctioned by the political elite assists with “remembering that culture is a site of resistance” (Lyden, 2015: 17). Despite the best efforts of the nation state to level differences from the very moment nations surfaced on the map of Europe, it is plain to see that the maintenance of a nation-wide culture, as opposed to regional or ethnic self-identification, was a concern for the political elites.

The appeal to the memory of the British struggle for political self-determination is an assertion of identity on camera. The framing of nationalism in the country’s popular cinema relegates the development of the historical fiction movie to a propaganda move. To some

extent, the history of the local film industry is of lesser interest. However, historicals help the 21st century spectators better understand national self-identification patterns, while movie production helps them better understand economic growth (and, possibly, life satisfaction). Consequently, I consider the local film industry only with respect to the momentum nationalist themes gained in the mainstream of public life. However, newly established production facilities and the state-run management of film production resources are duly mentioned. Effectively, they reinvented national history in influential cinematic images that have remained highly recognizable to the British viewership ever since.

The conviction that heritage movies have to live up to the standards of written history (which, in the first place, was itself many times accused of bending the truth to suit particular aims) cannot possibly explain why historical movies should be worse than art titles. As far as modern culture is concerned, thinking of the historical movie genre as being at cross-purposes with the interests of history is ultimately difficult to prove. Currently, whatever the rhetoric of national definition is, at least in part, a consequence of the cinema of national history. Historical filmmaking was regarded as a box-office phenomenon. The instalments of the national epics were a big audience favorite. In hindsight, it is possible to see that history on screen was never “problematic for nationalist mythmaking” (Frey, 2014: 61), quite on the contrary. Moreover, everybody seemed happy with the so-called convention of the national cinematic epic. The state paid to put national history on screen and this is what happened. The heritage film genre was a hotbed of national myth-making. In between propaganda and popular entertainment, the historicals are not only well known, but also still hugely popular across the country. Even now, the average moviegoer has no trouble associating them with his/her biography, not to mention the fact that the films on sale and readily available for download or online streaming.

Historical movies thrive on the conflict between ethnically designated groups. However, they put on display self-identification as a means to define characters on screen. Andrew Higson’s influential paper “The Concept of National Cinema” (1989) is of help in order to make the point that thinking of period movies as of the national cinematic epic, although taken for granted by most audiences, is inherently flawed. Economically, the “correspondence between the terms national cinema and the domestic film industry” (Higson, 1989: 36) reveals that historical movies are so expensive that only the state-run industry was able to pay for them. Except for this self-evident truth, there is no reason why the genre should be thought of as ‘national’. If examined according to what Higson mentioned back in 1989 as common ways of assessing movie production, the historical genre conveys a sense of

confusion. The text-based approach to national cinema (i.e. the adaptation to the screen of history and literature) shows that the screenplays of the historicals do not fit the profile: definitely, they are not literature into film. Instead, they are instances of a ‘homegrown’ reading of the past, predicated on the belief that art is propaganda. The influence of the American historicals and European cinema was all about cinematic know-how, not the message. The films resemble the stuff of literature and history, yet, most of the times, they are not adaptations of some novels or historical texts. In other words, directors and screenwriters took their liberties with the ‘real’ plot in order to convey popular ideas about national history.

It is safe to say that the people answered positively to the national challenge engineered by the elites:

if the public reacts negatively and refuses to reward the film at the box office, then the sanctioned narrative convention may be threatened and with it the political legitimacy of the ruling hegemony. Thus the plots sanctioned in national film distribution are a possibly explosive matter with huge political potential. (Celli, 2011: 4)

The consumption of video narratives on the history of the nation attests the legitimacy of a leadership able to instrumentalize patriotic feelings for political gain. The last item under discussion in Higson’s seminal paper possibly explains why historical movies cause such a divide. “The criticism-led approach to national cinema, which tends to reduce national cinema to the terms of a quality art cinema” (Higson, 1989: 36) is the main line of attack in the campaign against the people who personally benefited most from the national cinematic epic. The movie is

the act of imaginative re-creation that allows the spectator to imagine that they are ‘witnessing again’ the events of the past. The principle of re-enactment constitutes the semantic register of the genre. (Burgoyne, 2008: 7)

The narrative of the trials undergone by the nation claims the same credentials as the literary culture of the country. They are meant to instruct and record history. The extreme long shot, supposed to disclose the magnitude of historical events on camera, is a signature of the patriotic epic that all directors of the series employ as a matter of principle. Alongside filming on location, bright (mostly natural) lighting, or overstated camera movements, the long shot is part and parcel of the formula, regardless of one title or another. The well-known “wide field of

view of long shots [...] makes them ideal for the emblematic shots (shots that convey complex, associative ideas by the arrangement of visual elements in the frame)” (Mercado, 2011: 59). Catching sight of the nation is indebted to lavish cinematography, the kind that struggles to invoke images of political agency in history. However, the dramatic quality of most scenes is no authorial signature. Their purpose is to let the audience know that history itself unravels in front of them.

2. Camera and Editing: Standing in the Way of History

In popular cinema, the tale of heroes and villains stands in the way of history as something else than “purposeful meaning” (Eksteins, 2006: 335). The extreme long shot is supposed to disclose the magnitude of historical events on camera. All directors of the historical genre learned to employ it as a signature shot of these patriotic epics. Alongside filming on location, bright lighting, or overstated camera movements, the long shot is part and parcel of the film’s formula, regardless of one title or another. The upward struggle of the ethnic to achieve the modern nation state plays out against the battlefield in wide- angle view. The well-known “wide field of view of long shots [...] makes them ideal for the emblematic shots (shots that convey complex, associative ideas by the arrangement of visual elements in the frame)” (Mercado, 2011: 59).

Catching sight of the nation is indebted to lavish cinematography, the kind that struggles to invoke images of political agency in history. However, the dramatic quality of most scenes is no authorial signature. The device of the long shot and that of the mostly fake long take perform the function of dramatizing a rather fuzzy picture. The body of the nation benefits from thoroughly lit settings and shallow depth of field. They focus attention on iconic heroes that enter the frame only to add to the widescreen composition. The use- value of the long take is what a majority of moviegoers took for granted. Particularly, crane shots gave a sense of motion to the unfolding of the story captured at a distance so that the public apprehended the magnitude of events. The point is to have viewers experience infinite knowledge of both plot specifics and national history. Watching the full figure of characters as well as the surroundings in the background plane seems to be of help for the public. Furthermore, the national cinematic epic dramatized the reigns of famous kings by means of title cards and non- diegetic sound that occupy the screen. Voiceovers, direct addresses to the camera and patriotic film scores work to focus attention on typical wide angle shots.

The camera movement and the editing technique of the genre created similarity between all the titles of the national cinematic epic. Throughout most of period movies, thematic consistency complemented a cinematic idiom, specific to the attempt to capture national history on camera. The social memory of the past is linked to historical movies: historical characters on screen and the cultural politics of the nation go hand in hand. Although the current debate over the national cinematic epic is about the nation rather than the medium, the historicals pay homage to both the political commitments and the cinema codes of the genre. Even if much changes in the new films set in the past, they are equally effective in eliciting political attachment to the nation. Although difficult to prove which particular movie in the series shaped what example of national self-identification rhetoric in popular culture, the heritage movies are even now quite meaningful to the viewership. The awareness of the debate over heritage movie in contemporary was at the forefront of discussions about the legacy of the past.

The attempt to harness the power of cinema in order to strengthen or change patterns of national self-identification created mostly revisionist opportunities. For instance, the popular cinema gradually discovered the “qualities associated with the cinematic long shot [that] have been inherited from eighteenth century landscape painting” (King, 2008: 232). Taking ownership of the land through the gaze of the camera is the gift of the historical epics to the people. Moreover, the experience of watching history on screen was deemed a life changing enterprise. The movie industry are responsible for “a period of particular pressure in the history of spectatorship. That spectacle might radically change people was at once a conviction, and a fear” (Harries, 2007: 23).

The relationship between moviegoers and historical cinema was shaped by ideological factors. Irrespective of psychoanalytical concerns, the historical and institutional models of spectatorship prove right the classic worst- case scenario. Whenever it comes to changing moviegoers’ goals and behavior, the historical epics seem to be the ultimate example of propaganda: the particular doctrine of nationalism finds a vehicle in the heritage film genre. Accordingly, there is no escape from the suspicion that the public was subject to successful propaganda campaigns run by the government, much to the undisguised delight of all in power and most in the attendance.

The movies about the glorious past of the nation have long been exposed for not being free of propaganda tendencies. “As matters stand, the historian’s quest and history on the screen are at cross- purposes” (Kracauer, 1960: 80). One way or another, the genre of the historical comes across as a tendency- film. The characters struggle with socio- political concerns, which

makes them hardly recognizable as regular human beings. Except for the fact that everybody knows the looks of the protagonist perfectly well, there is not much for the audience to work with.

The attempt to shift the focus of cinematic discourse answered to the political needs of the day. The historical fiction movie made the most out of the sense of distance experienced by the moviegoers. By using the technical devices of panning, tracking, zooming, alternating shots that

are close, medium, long, and all the rest of normal cinematography, as well as the systematic cutting that goes into the eventual editing, film instills in members of the audience a sense of distance from anything they might see outside the theater or within it before the lights are turned down (Singer, 2008: 9).

The modern literary culture of the nation state has always been keen on building national self-awareness. Prominently, linguistics, philosophy, not to mention history set out to advertise once more nationalism. The nationally-minded heroes were used as a frame of reference that helped state propaganda employ film professionals to transpose history into film. This gives yet another clue as to the identity between heritage movies and national historiography. The representation (i.e., the action of framing figures or shapes) of one iconic hero or another in patriotic epics is likely to make sense only within the boundaries of the modern literary culture of the nation. The self-congratulatory tone that permeates the historical genre is hard to miss. However, what challenges a foreign public is the enthusiastic response of the viewership to a somewhat inconsistent storyline. Explicitly, the audience is constantly exposed to previously unknown information about history.

The costume spectacular spearheaded the drive to emulate the standard norm of Hollywood epics in minor national cinemas. Effectively, close-ups and wider shots, alongside tracking and crane shots articulated a more sophisticated language of film.

The characters on screen are stock figures that find themselves in moral peril and have to live up to the expectations of their target audience. Such stereotypes “were, however, most notably consolidated in the modern cinema by the MGM historicals of the 1950s” (Elliott, 2011: 86). They are tempted to forget their duty to the nation, yet remain strong. Most of them stay faithful to the idea of national self-determination. However, one thing never changed in historical cinema: the purposefulness of what the exemplary character were doing on camera is beyond doubt.

On screen, “nationalism was a form of reflexive collective self- worship [...] performing the same functions for individuals and groups as did traditional religion” (Smith, 2003: 98). Historical movies prove that the idea of self-worship is particularly appropriate when it comes to the cinematic idiom of history. They put heavy emphasis on the nation-building function of the political elite. The fact that large crowds watched movies anonymously meant that the genre was an obvious choice for the extensive dissemination of national truths. The movie set in the past is useful for understanding the socio- cultural engagements in the process of negotiating patterns of national definition at the beginnings of the national self-identification. The extended metaphor of self- identification is cued both visually and linguistically. If the story told by historical movies is well- known for the local audiences, the visuals of nationalism had to be built in the mainstream of film culture.

Re- writing history in order to meet the political agenda is all that the historical movie did. For the most part, the historicals are held accountable for not being true to history, regardless of the narrative means otherwise employed by other chronicles of the past too:

History on film must be held accountable to certain standards but [...] these standards must be consonant with the possibilities of the medium. It is impossible to judge history on film solely by the standards of written history, for each medium has its own kind of necessarily fictive elements (Rosenstone, 1995: 36).

The characteristic mode of expression in historical movies is not necessarily cinematic art, yet it is a consistent epic idiom. Explicitly, stylistic commonplaces and particular visuals have come to be taken for granted by the public and filmmakers alike. They are peculiar to movies whose storylines unfold against the backdrop of national history re- built on a grand scale. The “static framing of [...] narrative- film shots [that] arose from the camera’s imitation of a spectator in a theater seat” (Thompson, 2005: 325) should explain the manner of filming propaganda productions. Notably, continuity editing (with the left- right spatial relationship firmly in place) is the convention Tudor sticks to. Setting and props, and, particularly, costumes are also the trademark signature of the film’s bid to credibility. Sometimes, the mise- en-scène seems to be a means to display painstakingly reconstructed artifacts and war-gear. Original weaponry and equipment serve as inspiration for the gear sported by actors. The display of warrior accouterments as well as of the material remains of a long lost civilization boosted the appeal of the brave men on screen.

They successfully elicited patriotic responses from audiences who found themselves in the position of the impersonal observer. This can either lend an observational, judgmental tone or much like objects in the foreground of the frame, make the audience work harder to put themselves into the scene, or a combination of both (Brown, 2012: 16). Voiceovers and sometimes lengthy episodes of narration spoken by an unseen author/narrator are a part of the genre's recipe. The long shot and deep focus are most of the times around, alongside camera movement that did not employ the common stylistic devices of non- heritage cinema. "The numerous ways we talk about a 'camera,' including such stand- ins for a camera as a shot, image, frame, motion, motion picture, motivation, point of view, and narration" (Branigan, 2006: xiv) show the way the ideology of the nation is brought to bear on the public through the resources poured into the local movie industry by the political establishment.

Everybody wanted to have a glorious picture of the nation ready to use for their own benefit. Stylistically, the (fake) long take and the (extreme) long shot- deep focus techniques were the most obvious choices of the heritage genre. "The vanishing line, the vanishing- point and the meeting of parallel lines 'at infinity' [...] promoted the primacy of the gaze in a kind of logic of visualization" (Lefebvre, 1991: 41). They all overlap in an attempt to capture the vast expanse of land, which is the customary setting of epic battles. The identity on camera is delineated by means of what appears to be real-time shots. Supposedly, on- screen action happens in real time and compositions in long shot linger to allow the viewer to experience the magnitude of history. In other words, it is as if their duration on screen matched the unfolding of events off screen. Most of the times, the actual boundary between montage and the long take is nevertheless intact. Image and sound tracks are aligned to have the members of the audience believe in the re-enactment of history. The blurring of the boundaries between the diegetic and the non- diegetic time is merely a matter of narrative form rather than being material.

The heritage genre has always been discursively positioned as a cultural realist film. Gradually, historical movies had the socialist art of the early 1950s cinema replaced with the long shot aesthetic of barely visible individuals who, together, stand in for the nation under one party. Namely, by fostering the belief that events occur in real- time, the cinematic idiom of history is designed to give a sense of comfort to the public. The visual gimmick of using the camera as the eye of the viewer prompts audiences to go along with the epic unfolding of history: the extended narrative metaphor of the past was meant to be read according to the expectations of state enforced censorship.

The alleged real- time video of events is a means to display the political realism of 'proper' national self- identification. Everything boils down to the overlapping use of the long

take and the (extreme) long shot. As a matter of principle, into the view of the camera is either the crowd or the hero. Both the long take and the long shot mostly serve to depict a large number of ethnic characters, contemplated as huge assemblies of men in arms. Even if such a “stylistic signature of long take—long shot aesthetics” (Yueh-Yu Yeh & Davis, 2005: 161) is believed to stand for “the silent observer at a psychological distance” (Ibidem), here it is the body of the nation that helps the local audiences make sense of memories that are not individual but shared by all.

The background and the foreground of the compositions tend to be kept in focus for as long as possible in order to convey the sense of belonging with a community whose memories shape the moviegoers’ way of watching history on film. What is out of shot seems to be of great concern too. Although the camera has unobstructed range of shooting, the range of shot is limited. Despite the fact that the distance to which the long shot will go is increased as much as possible, the use of deep focus and high angle shooting points to the fact that there are still plenty of characters left out of view. The editing and the camera movement deliver shot sequences that are consistent with the narrative convention of history. The longer single shot sequences resort to the extreme long shot as well. The long shot itself is given the function of recalling the verisimilitude of real-time events. Commonly, the deep focus technique combines shooting on location, three-point lighting and dramatic compositions. To round up the picture, the bird’s eye view of events seems to be always welcome. High angle shooting and sharp focus help the public understand which part of the composition is blurred and what characters are worthy of attention.

Events are told from a perspective that is best described in the voice-over narration, title cards and other non-diegetic elements. The above-mentioned camera movements and editing techniques literally show as much as possible from the many extras of the epic genre. The genre of the historical could be construed of as supporting the idea of a classic narrative pattern in popular cinema. In other words, “the viewer makes sense of the classical film through criteria of verisimilitude (is x plausible?), of generic appropriateness (is x characteristic of this sort of film?) and of compositional unity (does x advance the story?)” (Bordwell, 2008: 152).

Keeping this in mind, the kind of spectatorship delineated in historical epics is quite particular. It brought together commonsensical assumptions about narrative movies set in the past and notions of cultural politics, which effectively changed the use made of generic appropriateness and compositional unity in costume dramas.

English-speaking historicals provided a benchmark against which local movie industries developed the homegrown varieties of the historical epic. The popularity of the genre

fits the profile of the epics with “its larger- than-life personae, [...] its stress on action and spectacle, [...] its embracing of popular trends and ideals that define [...] an era” (Santas, et al., 2014: XIV). On the one hand, Western scholarship on nation and national cinemas should help the ongoing debate about epic films take place in a broader context. On the other hand, series of historical spectacles are an intriguing example of why state propaganda matters in shaping national identity late into the 20th century.

The historical cinema provides insight into the construal of the genre “as a historically, ideologically structured set of subjects, themes, and values” (Bordwell, 1989: 80) in the hinterlands of European heritage films. The reading of the “object being narrated and depicted under a view” (Branigan, 1992: xiii) is a cognitive approach to the framing of the images that have come to be associated with the nation in historicals. They target recognizably characters as seen on screen. The value placed on the experience of viewing history on film deserves further scrutiny in relation with English- language scholarship, which is likely to help both the moviegoer and the film scholar better understand the use value of the genre. The performance of identity on camera amounts to a political framing of the past.

3. Persuasion across Genres: Literary Cultures and Visual Narratives

The use- value of “cinematic nationalism” (Elsaesser, 2005: 71) goes beyond the borders of the historical genre and into the mainstream of popular self- identification. The epics set in the past shaped the rhetoric of national self- definition for a large majority of the viewing public. Considering the devoted following of the genre throughout the second half of the 20th century, it feels safe to conclude that the genre was a big audience puller. Epic movies that have been “long defined as a nationcentric form” (Burgoyne, 2011: 2) make for fascinating historical viewing. Much like the print culture at the time of modern nation state building, historical filmmaking recorded a shared sense of identity. Making them into citizens has everything to do with public storytelling on camera about their own community, one that necessarily exists independently of individuals as well as of other ethnic or national groups.

Many editing sequences are meant to show time passing as audiences watch history. The political tool of montage was employed in order to pretend that off- screen action happens in real time. I assume that film industries had historical cinema instinctively fall back to a variety of “long-take, deep focus style [that] extends the possibilities for the perceptual realism of film” (Currie, 1996: 328). Once more, the long take comes across as the means to keep together cinematic time and space. There is no way around Andre Bazin’s view on realism

whenever cinema remembers the past of the nation. On the one hand, the long shot- deep focus style is definitely present in indigenous historical movies. On the other hand, analyzing reality is achieved by means of continuity editing. The long take and traditional editing techniques accompanying each other should make otherwise cliché patriotic movies worthwhile watching.

However, what sometimes is presented as a single long take that covers particular episodes is nothing more than a visual gimmick. As expected, editing is employed in order to convey a sense of continuous flow of action. It turns out that moviegoers were exposed to successive (battle) scenes rather than shots. The former come together in sequences that are supposed to make the public feel comfortable with the way history is pieced together on screen.

I suspect that the cinematic convention of national definition is a compromise between the long take as a structural device and montage as “psychological analysis from the point of view of spectator interest” (Bazin, 1967: 92). This time, the analysis is triggered by the representation of national fervor rather than by the director himself/herself. Far from settling the dispute, because, anyway, “the single- shot sequence [...] does not renounce montage” (Bazin quoted in Gray, 2005: 10), both disjunctive editing and the long take device advanced the agenda of the historical genre. I mean that they seem to have been naturally successful in portraying the image of the historical characters. Particularly, the claim to verisimilitude is backed up by the fake real- time continuity, which extracts the plot from one movie or another and places its specifics into the grand narrative of national history, in an act of political representation. Formally, the camera frames iconic characters caught in diegetic sequences of events, yet obviously break the rules of time- space continuity. Showing the momentous events of history in the shortest time available requires cross dissolves, non- diegetic sound if not voice- overs proper, and title cards to trumpet place and time. Characters fighting their way to national self- determination act their part in the ‘real-time’ shooting of battle scenes. The local filmmakers set out to document the past through seamless editing meant to deliver real- time eventfulness. Once the drama of conflict is played out, the actual unfolding of the past is edited into a familiar montage. Everything is recorded in the language of a popular culture indebted to the musical and artistic output of American and British society from the 1950s on, which rapidly spread to different regions of the world through a process of cultural transfer (Scheide, 2013: 3). The genre of the historical film consistently resorts to montage sequences of memorable frames. They review a number of key events in national history by means of real- time and (extreme) long shots. The long shot- deep focus technique is also used to reinforce the sense of chronological unfolding of events. At any rate, the debate over realism in feature films has a long history whose surface I barely scratch.

On screen, history is easily stripped away of whatever does not play into the self-aggrandizing narrative of the nation. Conclusively, recording the past of the nation on camera aims for determining specific citizen responses. Filmmaking and filmwatching give to film professionals, filmgoers, and film producers the opportunity to experience together their own sense of identity. Formally, shooting historical movies is relatively free of obtrusive camerawork. The belief in continuous moves and smooth transitions was overwhelming. The camera was used to provide the impression that the picture of the past needs to be put into the perspective of the long shot. Except for establishing shots, many other sequences open with the structural device of the (extreme) long shot. Commonly, they are high- angled tracking shots that give the public wide views of country-wide settings.

However, video communication seems to involve understanding images in relation to the meaning of the vocabulary usually used in literature in order to achieve national self-identification. With historical movies more than with other genres, matching movement to action is a must- do for the informed audience. The left- right spatial relationship between characters on screen shows that continuity editing is necessarily present. Continuous action in the diegetic time has to match up with the way history describes series of events and politically disregards others. Viewers pay attention to the story because of invisible camera movements that give structure to the story by means of shot variety. Although the historical movie genre avails itself of rather obtrusive long shots, its grand statements about nationhood are backed up by a comprehensive routine of camera shots and angles. The match on action technique is insistently employed throughout most outdoor scenes, not to mention fighting and battlefield scenes. The viewership is exposed to multiple alternative views (at least two, if not three or more, mid shots and close- ups that intercut with tracking and high- angle ones) of the same event. Shots are cut together in order to preserve time sequence as if their purpose is to detail and keep track of particular stages in the movements one character or another performs on screen. The (extreme) long shot delivers all or most of the action, while the other shots (such as point of view ones, close- ups, standard shot/countershot procedures, etc.) match not only with the master shot. Importantly, they are consistent with the cultural expectations of the viewers about the past. The spectacles set in the past prove the use value of history on screen in building a narrative of national self- identification audiences have come to take for granted. These movies demanded the illusion of reality more than other. As expected, an assortment of shots, mostly medium ones and close- ups, usually follow the establishing shot and give structure to the story aimed to portray the body of the nation. In other words, “a single long- take view (never actually shot by a single camera) becomes a master shot” (Dudley, 2010: 2)

able to convey on screen the thrills of historical dramas. Movies about national history invite attempts to pin them down with certainty. Effectively, they display a consistent nature, both in message and means of expression. Such consistency helps viewers conceive of them collectively. What is more, their story seems to remain the same at all diegetic times.

If approached from the perspective of cinematic genre or authorship, the jingoistic costume dramas miss the mark of art cinema by a large margin. The flow of historical events from one shot to the other has come to be taken for granted. Lighting, setting, costuming and even the historical kind of acting are specific to the convention of the historical. Directors turn to shooting on location and natural lighting, while employing more confidently basic filmmaking skills: the real-time shot (or what appears to be one) and the (extreme) long shot-deep focus technique shaped the unfolding of events on screen. Even if a “coherent filmic space- time [achieved] through continuity editing” (Clark; Doel, 2006: 235) is the norm of mainstream cinema, the specific way in which the historical genre works within the boundaries of verisimilitude is widely recognized in the country’s popular culture. Most likely, the opportunity to see national history on screen shaped the popular comprehension of geopolitics too. Cinematic geopolitics makes sense whenever the narrative of the past verges on a language of indictment that climaxes in resentment and recrimination against easily recognizable ethnic/national groups. Above all, it meant that expectations about the iconic pose of founding figures on the battlefield built up to unrealistic levels of confidence about the place of one’s nation in the world.

The narrative pattern of historical films itself provides an alternative explanation for the infatuation with the genre of historical movie. The self- aggrandizing discourse of the country’s elite was more or less overlooked by moviegoers for the sake of their own imagined community. To my mind, the grounds for the outstanding success of the genre pertain to the narrative of history circulated by textbooks. Explicitly, the nationalism of “resentment” (Greenfeld, 1992: 18) is plain to see on screen. In my reading, historical films are case studies of the nationalism of resentment, usually displayed by the cultural politics of nation states. Such movies make the point of the “ethnonational mobilisation [that] often results from the conscious efforts of elites” (Conversi, 2007: 17). The plot of historical titles appears to be an adventure story that, nevertheless, deals with the theses of historiography rather than with hard-facts. Considering that these movies are being rerun on television all the time, the genre is in the spotlight of the country’s popular culture even now. The afterlife of historical movies in both popular culture and mainstream media has everything to do with the current condition of movie distribution.

Looking back on the historical fiction movie, the popular cinema sought “to unify a particular people in a hostile world, to give them a realm of emotional attachments in the face of continuing change, and, above all, to propel them on a path of progress” (Jusdanis, 2001: 5). Historicals mostly look the part every time the local audiences get to indulge in stories based on distinctly ethnic characters and settings, already familiar to most moviegoers from their days in the country’s public schools. Producers and movie professionals either turn a blind eye on the immediate political agenda of their movie or openly embraced it. As the epic spectaculars make evident, the framing of history in popular cinema was yet another propaganda tool in the hands of the political elite. To all intents and purposes, the characters on the silver screen entered the service of political elites from the very moment the birth certificate of the national cinematic epic was signed. Regardless of the time the historicals were released, directors and cinematographers give a snapshot of their present.

Ultimately, they are scrutinizing the experience of shared (dis)satisfaction with the current state of their imagined community. Anyway, the achievements self-evident to local audiences mostly fail to make sense to foreign observers. Mainly, they are related to the story of an exceptional civilization that had to follow patterns of development beyond the understanding of anyone else but the natives. The filmic texts seem to have always been widely acknowledged as a means of advancing the understanding of national definition by the local viewership. Such movies welcome a nationalism studies approach rather than film studies analysis proper. Their reception is what drives forward critical examination, while the cinematic convention strengthens “the various national traditions, celebrating [...] great men” (Sorlin, 2005: 166). They helped the public feel that the nation had what it takes to overcome the distinction between us and others. Essentially, the historical fiction movies bridge the gap between the “hot societies and cold, development and underdevelopment, societies with and without history” (Sahlins, 1976: 211). Finally, the nation found an authoritative account of the past that supplanted the dry academic approach to national history. What is more, the historical genre is compelling anecdotal evidence of the above- mentioned development and history.

Most of the period pieces of historical cinema are nevertheless quite well- liked and, consequently, come across as instances of popular patriotic fervor. To all intents and purposes, they make for good examples of national definition on film. These movies appear to be more or less harmless, hardly entertaining, and, looking back on them, dramatically dated. Regardless of the name they are assigned—costume, period or (post)heritage films —the cinematic story set in the past is not necessarily pertaining to documented facts as much as it is a nationalistic reading of history.

The lack of an explicit definition of national cinema comes to light whenever notions of national self-identification are employed to define the indigenous movie industry. The sheer mentioning of historical events, duly placed in the costume drama setting, is deemed reason enough to label them as belonging to the particular genre of historical titles. The comparative method in movie analysis shows that these productions are consistent enough in style and purpose to be viewed as a full-fledged genre. The ready availability of the aesthetic and formal features displayed by historical filmmaking does not make the video of the nation worthwhile watching for audience that do not belong to the same ethnic or national background. The themes of state-building, national unity, and patriotism set apart the genre from everything else cinema has to offer. This alone makes it difficult to argue that there is something of a specific film poetics at play in the genre, as a series of “prestige films” (Higson, 2011: 99). The past of the nation is staged on camera for the viewing pleasure of millions.

The particular sense of being, common to the history on screen, and its use-value place the heritage film outside the history of popular cinema. The debate about the genre of historical movies should be placed within the larger scheme of the national culture that provided the rhetorical commonplaces later appropriated by cinema. Paying attention solely to a number of individual movies (and, for that matter, to the genre of historical movies on its own) is sure to result in a disjointed sequence of events that falls short of the expectations set by nationalism studies. Such a reading of cinematic self-identification would definitely resemble the story told by history textbooks. As told by filmmakers, the story of the nation state gains momentum. It gives insight into the mainstream narratives of identity most audiences have come to take for granted. The historicals prove their ambition to be more inclusive of the national experience than ever before in the culture or nation states.