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Case Study II: Elizabeth

Elizabeth (1998), a film set in the mid-sixteenth century, dealing with one of England's great historical personages, Queen Elizabeth I, represented a new stage in the development of the quality British costume drama of the 1980s and 1990s. This is a film that delights in the unrestrained passions of the early/modern period rather than the genteel reserve of Austen's drawing-rooms or the bourgeois respectability of Forster's. Where *Howards End* (1992) had emerged at the tail-end of the Thatcher period, *Elizabeth* was a product of Tony Blair's 'Cool Britannia'. Even so, the film is not unique; rather, its difference from earlier heritage films is one of tone, and a tone that became increasingly familiar as the 1990s wore on. There were in fact three Elizabeths in English heritage films made in that decade: Quentin Crisp's cross-dressed queen in *Orlando* (1992), Cate Blanchett's interpretation in *Elizabeth*, and Judi Dench's Oscar-winning outing in *Shakespeare in Love* (1999). Each represents a far more irreverent take on the national past than say, Merchant Ivory's earlier offerings in the heritage cycle. Think too of other historical films made in Britain in the 1990s that reach back beyond the drawing-room—*Restoration* (1996), and *The Madness of King George* (1997), for instance, the various Shakespeare adaptations, but also more populist fare such as *Bronzeheart* and *Rob Roy* (both 1995). *Elizabeth* also shares much with other late 1990s British costume dramas such as *The Wings of the Dove* (1997), *Pinkie and Madeline* (1999), and *Shakespeare in Love* in their efforts to reach wider audiences than earlier quality British costume dramas—partly by blending in attractions usually reserved for other genres.

Elizabeth was released in the UK and the USA in the autumn of 1998. Nominally a British film, it was directed by Shekhar Kapur, an Indian, and featured an Australian actress, Cate Blanchett, in the lead role. The official website for the film described it thus:

Based on the remarkable story of the rise of the young Elizabeth Tudor to Queen of England, *Elizabeth* depicts the early life of a woman of independent spirit who ascended to the throne in 1558 to a reign of intrigue and betrayal. The conflict of her private passions and personal friendships with her duty, as monarch, to achieve national unity form the basis of a story that is both heart-breaking and inspiring.

To survive, Elizabeth must suss out hidden agendas in her court, on the battlefield, in the church, and in those closest to her. The male-dominated ruling class would appear to have the advantage, but Elizabeth will deploy whatever means necessary to keep it that

what is rightfully hers. This young woman of intelligence and vitality will engender heretofore into the imposing icon of legend ... Elizabeth I.¹

The language of sussing out hidden agendas² and male-dominated ruling classes³ should immediately signal to us that among the audiences the film-makers hoped to attract were a street-wise, youthful audience and a politically aware feminist audience—neither of which are conventionally thought of as the core audience for profitable costume dramas or historical period pieces. Is this then really the sort of film I should be addressing at length in this book? One review of the film implies not, suggesting that it was 'a far cry from the sterility of British heritage movies'.⁴ But how could a film about one of the most familiar English monarchs, an intelligent drama about a key moment in the national past, a film which so blatantly explores questions of national identity, a period film with fine costumes, splendid locations, and prestigious performers—how could such a film *not* be a heritage film? This sense of ambivalence—the different interpretations that could be made of the film—will become one of the central concerns of this chapter.

The bid by the makers of *Elizabeth* to reach new audiences was clearly partially successful. While *Elizabeth* was no blockbuster in the *Titanic* mould, it did make a mark with audiences, it did become a cultural presence for a short period at the end of 1998 and the beginning of 1999, when it was one of the top ten films at the British box office—and even, for a while, at the American box office. Box-office success on this scale is not insignificant when we are talking about a modestly budgeted costume drama. *Elizabeth* was also a prize-winner—including five BAFTAs, a Golden Globe, and an Oscar. It had actually been nominated for seven Oscars, including Best Picture—and a great critical success. It was a stunning film, 'dazzling, vertiginous', one of the top movies of the autumn ... one of the must-sees of the month.⁵ It was selected as one of the films of the week of the month in numerous periodicals—for several issues running in some cases.⁶ Even a senior Los Angeles trade journalist had it earmarked for his 1998 Top Ten list.⁷

Arguably, *Elizabeth* could not have been made without four crucial developments having taken place. The first was the relative success of the various English costume drama/heritage film cycles of the 1980s and 1990s, but also related films such as *Bronzeheart* and *La Reine Margot* (1994). The second was the relative success of the new British cinema of the mid-1990s, and especially films like *Trainspotting* (1996). The producers of *Elizabeth* in effect attempted to combine the attractions of these two film cycles and address their relatively distinct audiences. The third

¹ Official website, at www.elizabeththemovie.com.

² Sheila Brown, 'Elizabeth' (review), *Sight and Sound*, 8 Jan. 1998, 18. See also the Alison Boshoff, unlabelled cutting, *Daily Telegraph* (5 Sept. 1998), 18; Oct. 1998, 13 Oct. 1998, Sunday *Times*, section 2 (20 Sept. 1998), 4; Lisa Richards, 'Long Live the Queen', *Boyz* (13 Oct. 1998), 12.

³ See e.g. the women's magazines *She* and *Mirror*; Claire, the gay men's magazine *Buzz*; the weekly *Smash* in the national newspaper *The Guardian*, and the London fringe magazine *Time Out* for Oct. and early Nov. 1998.

⁴ Martin A. Grove, 'Web Site and Janet Carver Angor: Well for Elizabeth', *Floppies and Reporters* (23 Oct. 1998), 3.

crucial development was the strength and ambitions of PolyGram. The fourth was the increasing interest of the Hollywood majors in well-made and marketable independent films with the capacity to cross over from the specialized circuits to the multiplexes. The part each of these developments played in the genesis of *Elizabeth*, and the influence they had on the look and feel of the film, will emerge as the chapter unfolds.

As in the analysis of *Howards End*, another of my tasks in this chapter is to look at the ways in which the initial idea for an historical drama was opened up and turned into a successful cultural commodity for a range of consumers. In compiling evidence of the extent to which the film opened up interpretations rather than closed them down, I will look at the range of discourses which circulated around the film, the range of ways in which the film was taken up in the culture at large, the debates that have unfolded about the cultural status and significance of the film. This will involve looking at the extent to which the film engaged with heritage discourses, but it will also involve acknowledging the range of other discourses with which it engaged. In order to understand how the film was able to generate such a range of interpretations and debates, I shall explore the contexts of production, promotion, and presentation. Much of the chapter will be about reception, however, although I will be focusing on commentary that is publicly available, on the internet or in print, rather than on empirical audience research. Much of this publicly available material can be seen as promotional material. Promotion—the business of drawing a film to the attention of potential audiences—is a vital ingredient in the cultural presence and success of any film. What we will see in this case is the way in which particular aspects of the film were prepared for and promoted to particular segments of the audience, the way in which specific interest groups and taste communities were encouraged to engage with the film in specific ways. The distributors of *Elizabeth*, for instance, made a special effort to reach what they called 'upscale, educated female viewers'.⁶

Of course audiences didn't necessarily take up the film in the expected ways and some alternative, perhaps even resistant, interpretations and evaluations of the film emerge in press and internet commentary, especially in relation to the question of historical authenticity. Films also get caught up in other cultural discourses circulating at the time of release, discourses that may be regarded as incidental to the promotional thrust behind the film but which may have a profound effect on the film's reception and its cultural presence—in the case of *Elizabeth*, for instance, the post-feminist discourse of 'girl power' played an interesting role in the take-up for the film. The film's promoters may not necessarily have foreseen that audiences would engage with the film through such discourses. Other discourses they may have deliberately avoided: for instance, the production team went out of its way to distance *Elizabeth* from the Merchant Ivory version of heritage cinema. Thus producer Tim Bevan stated on more than one occasion,

⁶ Telephone interview by the author with PolyGram Filmed Entertainment (PFE) theatrical distri-

that 'We were keen to do a period movie, but one that wasn't in the recent tradition of what I call "frock flicks." We wanted to avoid, as it were, the Merchant Ivory approach.' The quotation is taken from the Press Booklet issued to the British press. The booklet issued to the American press was identical, except for one tiny, almost imperceptible change: given the box-office appeal of Merchant Ivory in the USA, the reference to them was dropped, so that Bevan was now reported as saying 'We wanted to avoid *the classical approach*'.⁷ Good marketing will always involve attending to such details. Bevan went on to explain what their goals were with the film:

we thought it would be great to do a picture set in Tudor times, as that was the most exciting of historical periods. We settled on Elizabeth I and her early life, a period that hasn't been particularly well documented on the screen, and one which would give us more dramatic life. We also wanted to stamp a contemporary feel onto our story, and with the early part of her reign being filled with such uncertainty, we decided to structure it as a conspiracy thriller.

Co-producer Alison Owen added, 'We were a lot more influenced by films like *The Godfather* than by previous historical dramas.'⁸ This of course is good promotional material, with the *Godfather* (1972) reference designed to attract an audience that would not normally attend a costume film: this is a film, after all, that not only has an immense reputation as an intelligent and artful thriller but was also a major box-office hit. The reference is also of course nicely controversial, the idea that one might depict a national hero in terms of a Mafia film. Similarly controversial, and still with an eye on the market, was the decision to allow the Virgin Queen of national history to enjoy copious sex before becoming the virgin of legend. This irreverence was tempered by an attention to historical detail and an engagement with the discourse of authenticity—to lose that altogether would have meant losing a whole audience stratum who enjoy and appreciate such detail; to insist on the irreverent approach on the other hand was an attempt to encourage a less familiar audience to catch the film.

There is nothing new about this irreverence, of course. It was, for instance, a vital ingredient in Alexander Korda's 1933 British film, *The Private Life of Henry 8th*, an important reference point for understanding *Elizabeth* historically. We also know that some interpretations of even the Merchant Ivory films see them as irreverent and culturally radical. We can certainly situate *Elizabeth* in the cycle of what Claire Monk has called post-heritage films, films like *Orlando*, *Carrington* (1995), *Wilde* (1997), and *Wings of the Dove*, all of which share with *Elizabeth* a concern with the depiction of transgressive sexuality and/or sexual activity.

⁷ Tim Bevan quoted in British and American versions of the Press Booklet, and on the official website; my italics. See also Candice Hughes, 'Bombay Director Tackles Tudor England', Fox News on the net, http://foxnews.com/is_index.shtml?content=/news/international/0909/i_ap_0909_90.sml, 9 Sept. 1998.

⁸ Tim Bevan and Alison Owen, quoted in the Press Booklet and on the official website.

though always against a backdrop of luxurious aristocratic or Bohemian lifestyles and living spaces.

This mix of genres, sensibilities, and, in the end, audiences involved in the *Elizabeth* experience is in many ways typical of the media product aimed at a relatively 'mass' audience. The production and promotion of relatively populist texts must almost by default encourage a range of readings, and perhaps even encourage antagonistic readings; it is a vital means of maximizing audiences. The core heritage audience, in so far as one exists, was just one of the social groups at whom the producers and distributors aimed this particular film, though it is also clear that the whole question of historical interpretation and representation was at the heart of many responses to the film.

'THE REVENGE OF THE COLONIALS': QUESTIONS OF NATIONALITY¹⁰

Elizabeth is described on the official website as 'a film about a very English subject'. Stella Bruzzi, writing in *Sight and Sound*, suggests however that it would be inappropriate to see *Elizabeth* as 'a celebration of Englishness'. She is not alone in arguing that the film is, instead, 'marked by its distance from rather than veneration for its subject'.¹¹ If the film is not a *celebration* of Englishness, it can certainly be read as an *exploration* of Englishness, a historical meditation on the making of modern England and the construction of a central icon of the national heritage, the image of the Virgin Queen. No surprise, perhaps, that such a film should have emerged in a period when New Labour were seeking to rebrand Britain, to give it a more modern face while not ignoring established traditions. Nor indeed that such a film should prove successful so shortly after the death of that modern 'Virgin Queen', Princess Diana.

But if the film seemed radical in some respects, a break with tradition, some commentators thought it was still only going to work for 'serious Anglophiles'.¹² More than that, for one American reviewer, 'England has never seemed more English than in the exterior scenes of rude merrymaking'.¹³ We can also find uncompromisingly patriotic views closer to home, in the pages of the *Daily Mail*, for instance: 'England furnishes a wealth of wonderful too-long neglected loca-

¹⁰ Claire Monk, 'Sexuality and the Heritage', *Sight and Sound*, 5/10 (1995), 32-4.

¹¹ Shekhar Kapur, quoted in Gary Susman, 'Not Like a Virgin', *Boston Phoenix*, 19-26 Nov. 1998, from website (www.bostonphoenix.com).

¹² Bruzzi, 'Elizabeth', 48; see also Julianne Pidduck, 'Elizabeth and Shakespeare in Love: Screening the Elizabethans', in Ginette Vincendeau (ed.), *Film/Literature/Heritage: A Sight and Sound Reader* (London: British Film Institute, 2001), 130-5; and Pamela Church Gibson, 'From Dancing Queen to Plaster Virgin: Elizabeth and the End of English Heritage?', *Journal of Popular British Cinema*, 5 (2002), 133-41.

¹³ Rob Blackwelder, 'Elizabeth' (review), *PopcornO*, www.planetout.com/popcornq.

¹⁴ J. Hoberman, 'Drama Queens', *Village Voice*, Arts section (3-9 Nov. 1998), from www.villagevoice.com.

tions and they offer a marvellous setting for the big set-pieces, while the cinematographer 'revels in the Englishness of the settings'. In an interesting interpretation of how the film might be best understood by his readers, the *Mail's* reviewer went on to suggest that 'The film's other lesson . . . is that it's admirable to serve one's country. Kapur sees that Elizabeth flourished by putting the national interest first. He portrays this as a fine thing, even over-embellishing the patriotic finale by bringing in some anachronistic Elgar music'.¹⁴

This interpretation is surely a little perverse in its almost wilful refusal to acknowledge the post-colonial make-up of the film's most important creative workers, or to see the question marks that the film puts around the question of national identity and tradition. It also of course underlines the extent to which texts are open to interpretation, including to interpretations that may be quite at odds with the intentions of the film-makers. Perhaps the *Daily Mail* reviewer was being deliberately perverse in an effort to rescue *Elizabeth* for a conventional and conservative reading of national history, but that in itself simply underlines the fact that readings of films (or any other texts) will often be purposive rather than innocent, designed to serve the interests of the reader, consciously or otherwise.

As far as the film-makers were concerned, *Elizabeth* was clearly not intended to come across as a conventional presentation of a slice of the national past. On the contrary, in Kapur's words, it was conceived in part as 'the revenge of the colonials . . . I am the last person, in the world who should be directing *Elizabeth* . . . To ask an Indian who knows nothing about British history to make a film about a British icon. It was such a mad thing, I just had to do it'.¹⁵ Alongside Kapur were the Australian actors Cate Blanchett and Geoffrey Rush, the French actors Fanny Ardant, Eric Cantona, and Vincent Cassel, and two more Australians, the editor, Jill Bilcock, and the composer, David Hirschfelder. As the reviewer for the British publication *Asian Age* points out, 'few doublet-and-hose movies feature such an international spread. . . . A multi-national cast working for a multi-ethnic creative team is, of course, laudable, and just one of the ways in which the modernity of *Elizabeth* cannot be impugned'.¹⁶

What we are confronted with from this point of view is an 'outsider's view of British history', a position which Kapur relished: 'I was excited by what they were expecting from me . . . something very dangerous', 'something raw and informal, a bit melodramatic and chaotic'.¹⁷ This perspective clearly appealed to others involved with the film (which makes it even more surprising that the *Daily Mail* chose to see none of this danger). Geoffrey Rush, for instance, said in an interview that 'Shekhar has no cultural reverence for English history, and I enjoy that'.¹⁸ Cate Blanchett recalled that 'Shekhar kept saying "This is my Elizabeth"; he was

¹⁵ Christopher Tookey, 'Tonic for Heroine Addicts', *Daily Mail* (2 Oct. 1998), 44.

¹⁶ Kapur quoted in Susman, 'Not Like a Virgin', from website.

¹⁷ Matt Wolf, 'Make Way for the Tudor Twins', *Asian Age* (17 Nov. 1998), 14.

¹⁸ Hoberman, 'Drama Queens', from website; Shekhar Kapur, quoted in Gerard Raymond, 'Arden in the Court', *Village Voice* (3-9 Nov. 1998), from www.villagevoice.com; Tom Charity, 'Virgin Records', *Time Out*, 1466 (23 Sept. 1998), 16.

¹⁹ Charity, 'Virgin Records', 17.

liberated by the fact that he's Indian. Being both from the colonies, we have quite a skewed perception.¹⁹ Michael Hirst, the scriptwriter, was of a similar view:

The idea of an Indian directing a quintessentially English subject must have surprised some—but it delighted me. Shekhar had made a remarkable film called *Banliq Queen*... which was raw with emotion... not a quality easily associated with British films, at least 'historical' ones. He brought with him no preconceptions about Elizabeth. Without perhaps even being conscious of it, many English people are protective about the image—and virginity—of Elizabeth I; after all, she remains one of the greatest icons in our history. But the last thing the film needed was a reverential camera.²⁰

From this point of view, the view of the outsider, *Elizabeth* is not so much English as an irreverently post-colonial take on a core moment in English history. This sense of irreverence, this sense of a 'skewed perception' towards a quintessentially English subject, emerges time and again in the discourses which emerged around the film. It suggests that at the centre of the narrative is a theme typical of the heritage film: not the celebration of a fixed and pure national identity, but the hesitant exploration of the crisis of inheritance, the struggle over the meaning of Englishness, and the question of national ownership. *Elizabeth*, from this perspective, confronts us with the 'Howards End' questions. To whom does England belong? To whom *should* it belong? And how will this struggle be resolved? (Catholic or Protestant? Insular or allied with the Vatican, the French, the Spanish, or the Scots? And so on.) The 'skewed perception' also produces what can be seen as a very hybrid, exotic, cosmopolitan, and fluid English court in the Elizabethan period, a reflection on the strangeness of the English inheritance and the impurity of nationhood. Or at least, this is one way of looking at the film.

If this way of seeing, this sense of irreverence, can in part be attributed to Kapur's outsider status, then it is worth remembering just how many English costume dramas have been made by non-English film-makers. It is worth noting too just how much else is conventional about *Elizabeth*, with its emphasis on an iconic English monarch; its showcasing of no less than twelve period properties; its overall sumptuousness and visual splendour; its fine period costumes, decor, and architecture; its seductive performances; and its narrative exploring English history and a crisis of national inheritance.

PRODUCTION, DISTRIBUTION, AND EXHIBITION

Despite the multinational make-up of the filmmaking team, *Elizabeth* was officially classified as a British film, and proudly described by one of its producers as 'a real British film, financed, produced, written and shot in Britain'.²¹ It was made

¹⁹ Sheila Johnston, 'G'day to You Queen Bess', *Sunday Telegraph Review* (20 Sept. 1998), 9.

²⁰ Michael Hirst, 'Introduction', in Michael Hirst, *The Script of Elizabeth* (London: Bostree, 1998), 10.

²¹ Eric Feltner, quoted in Michael Ellison, 'Bard Battles for Oscars against Private Ryan', *Guardian* (10 Feb. 1999), 5.

by one of the leading British film and television production companies of the period, Working Title. The budget was around £13 million, with some of the funding coming from Channel 4, some from the European Union's MEDIA Programme, but most from PolyGram Filmed Entertainment.²² When production began in September 1997, PolyGram was a European entertainments conglomerate owned by a Dutch parent company, Philips. During 1998, as I noted in an earlier chapter, Philips sold PolyGram to Seagram's, the Canadian leisure conglomerate and owner of one of the Hollywood majors, Universal. The American links were already well established, however, since PolyGram had, with Universal, set up their own American distributor, Gramercy, in 1992 (when Universal was still owned by the giant Japanese company, Matsushita). Thus if *Elizabeth* was nominally a British film, it was in other respects a typical product of the now global entertainments industry, in which almost all products have some sort of multinational status. Typical in some ways, but in others, unique. According to PolyGram executive Stuart Till, '*Elizabeth* would never have been greenlit in Hollywood... but it has the ability to work on a world-wide basis'. (Box-office figures subsequently confirmed the substance of this claim.) If it was not the sort of film that Hollywood would make, Till was keen to promote it as an ideal European film, screening it for the EU's audio-visual commissioner Marcelino Oreja 'to show what the European film industry should be about'.²³

The size of the budget for *Elizabeth* is worth pondering. By Hollywood standards, £13 million was a small budget; by British standards, it was a fairly big budget. It was certainly a big budget for a British costume drama: few of the heritage films made earlier in the 1980s or 1990s could command that sort of budget, but the relative box-office success of many of those earlier films undoubtedly paved the way for *Elizabeth*. At the same time, there was clearly a gamble attached to this film—as there is for any film. That gamble is routinely played off in the industry by setting the familiar and predictable against the new and unpredictable. In the case of *Elizabeth*, on the one hand, it was a standardized product, working in what one trade journalist called 'a safe genre'; on the other hand, it was innovative and risky, given its relatively high budget and the lack of a high-profile cast or director.²⁴ Kapur in particular 'represent[ed] a £15 million gamble. After all, he [had] never made a film outside India before'.²⁵

The gamble was typical of the way in which PolyGram and Working Title were operating in the mid-1990s. Working Title's link with PolyGram meant it had access to far greater funds than it would have had as a fully independent company. It also had access to a well-established and successful British, American, and international distribution system. PolyGram, on the other hand, could leave the creative risks of the production process to a relatively small company with a strong track record. The American market, and the involvement of both PolyGram and

²² Eddie Dya (ed.), *BFI Film and Television Handbook 1999* (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 38.

²³ Stuart Till, quoted in Adam Minns, 'What Dreams may Still Come?', *Screen International* (23 Oct. 1998), 34.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 32. ²⁵ Charity, 'Virgin Records', 16.

Universal in Gramercy, who distributed *Elizabeth* in the USA, was vital to the strategies of both PolyGram and Working Title: a budget the size of *Elizabeth*'s would be inconceivable without buoyant box-office takings in the USA. Indeed, a film on the scale of *Elizabeth* would never have been made were it not for the proven interest of the Hollywood majors in well-made and marketable independent films, and the success of such films in the crossover market. The bottom line for PolyGram, Universal, and the other major corporations is of course to make a profit by exploiting a particular commodity in as many markets as possible. It is this bottom line which paradoxically created the space for an irreverent, genre-busting, European production like *Elizabeth*. The apparently monolithic Hollywood machine thus allows for—indeed, enables—the production of difference.

In order to cross over from specialist to more mainstream markets, and to appeal to American distributors, films like *Elizabeth* have to embody a range of appeals. In the case of *Elizabeth*, the producers and distributors invested in a 'safe genre', a known product-type, and sought to attract the core audience for that genre, a slightly more upmarket, older, and more female audience than the Hollywood mainstream. At the same time, they developed a strategy for opening up the costume drama market and attracting new, younger, and more male audiences alongside that core customer base. The plan was to build on the success of the costume drama/heritage film production cycle, lift it out of the specialized art-house circuit, insert it into the multiplexes, and attract more mainstream cinemagoers and more male cinemagoers than would normally patronize a costume film. This meant maintaining some allegiance to Merchant Ivory and the 'frock flick', but it also meant engaging with the *Trainspotting*-cult film-MTV generation. The strategy had an impact on the way the film was handled from the initial idea through production, promotion, and distribution. It was this strategy which allowed the producers to take a gamble on an 'outsider' like Kapur, to create a space for his radical ideas and eclectic, postmodern style, which was much more in tune with contemporary youth culture than, say, James Ivory.

The distributors developed a marketing strategy which involved defining a primary and a secondary target audience. The primary target audience was, in effect, the core patrons of the costume drama, and was defined in the marketing plan as an 'older audience, 25-44 age group, upscale educated, with a female bias'.²⁵ In other words, it was older, more middle class, and more predominantly female than the mainstream cinemagoing population. Market research by PolyGram had confirmed for them that this was the traditional audience for costume drama: 'Dramas tend to play older . . . and costume dramas *always* play older.'²⁶ Publicity was designed in particular to attract this core audience, deemed more likely

²⁵ Telephone interview with PFE staff, 23 Nov. 1998. Unless otherwise indicated, information below comes from the same source.

²⁶ Julia Short of PolyGram, quoted in Nick Roddick, 'Shotguns and Weddings', *MediaWatch* '99, a supplement to *Sight and Sound*, 9/3 (1999), 13.

to read film reviews; there was, for instance, a careful push to get the film noticed in women's magazines.

The secondary target audience was less rigorously defined, but was understood as 18-35 with a similar class and gender skew. As trade journalists selling the film to distributors and exhibitors noted, while 'the *Armageddon* crowd will not go to see this', 'this richly entertaining saga is accessible enough to go beyond upscale crowds and possibly find wider appeal'.²⁷ The distributors designed a careful release plan for the film in the British and American markets, a platform release that would enable the film to move out relatively slowly from exclusive, specialized cinemas to the multiplexes, and in so doing attract as many different audience groups as possible. The film was also released in the UK in October, a slot 'traditionally popular for independent movies', since it comes between the summer blockbusters and Christmas releases, thus both ensuring less severe competition, and maximizing its appeal to those audiences who do not appreciate the full Hollywood marketing onslaught.²⁸

In the UK, *Elizabeth* opened on fourteen West End screens the first weekend and was deliberately restricted to these screens for three weeks. On the one hand, this was very different from the nationwide openings of the Hollywood blockbuster; on the other hand, it was also different from *Howards End*'s opening in just one cinema. The distributors managed to get what they regarded as 'the best sites in the whole of London', including the Odeon West End and the Leicester Square showcase cinema, 'arguably the most prestigious screen in the UK'.²⁹ This first platform for the film enjoyed a full advertising push and generated excellent reviews, word-of-mouth, and box office, which were crucial to the success of the platform release. In its fourth week, the film moved up a platform, showing nationally on 160 screens; in its sixth week, it climbed to its third and highest platform of 197 screens.

The London release is vital for any films distributed in the UK. Between 1993 and 1997, for instance, London admissions were, on average, 27 per cent of the total admissions for the whole of the UK.³⁰ Further, with the national media based in London, screenings there will inevitably generate more copy than those elsewhere. Thus 'London cinemas provide a springboard for releases into the regions'.³¹ This of course is particularly important for a film given a platform release, which is precisely designed to exploit this springboard effect. Chris Bailey, then head of theatrical distribution at PolyGram, explained the rationale: 'With these more specialist titles, a platform release can raise the awareness of a film outside London. It builds up heat and is a hotter film when you open it regionally.'³² With the London opening, and therefore the national newspaper reviews

²⁷ Lee Marshall, 'Elizabeth' (review), *Screen International* (18 Sept. 1998), 28; David Rooney, 'Elizabeth' (review), *Variety* (14 Sept. 1998), 33.

²⁸ Mary Scott, 'Box-office Roundup', *Screen International* (9 Oct. 1998), 31.

²⁹ Telephone interview with PFE staff, 23 Nov. 1998; anon., 'Platform Shoo-ins', *Screen International* (23 Oct. 1998), 54.

³⁰ Anon., 'Platform Shoo-ins'.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Chris Bailey, quoted *ibid.*

and all the attendant publicity and word-of-mouth, coming some weeks before a platformed film moves into the regions, it is given a head start when it does eventually go nationwide over other films released in the regions at the same time. A platform release... has the benefit of leap-frogging stiff competition going wide on the same date.⁵⁴

A platform release is seen by the industry as the ideal way of doing things for the more upmarket, artistic end of the mainstream, for the sort of film that is going to be enjoyed by people who read reviews and depend on word-of-mouth, as opposed to those who are more influenced by the hard-sell of television advertising. The success of the strategy depends heavily on the quality of the reviews generated: 'You have to try to ascertain what reviews you are likely to get. If you have bad reviews, it will not be a success.'⁵⁵ The platform release was seen as ideal for *Elizabeth*, which the distributors saw as a typical 'upscale, literate dinner-party crowd, prestige movie'.⁵⁶ This was a film they were confident was going to review well and get good word-of-mouth, and they wanted to be in a position to exploit that publicity.

The platform release is a relatively sophisticated form of distribution which requires careful and regular attention to how the film is faring, and allows for minor adjustments to the advertising campaign week by week: 'In using a platform opening we can shape and evaluate the wide release. We can put new quotes [from reviews] into our roll-out campaign to sustain advertising.' Because the distributors were also wanting to attract a more mainstream audience, they grasped the nettle and ploughed in money for TV ads.⁵⁷ The use of television—there was also a short programme about the making of the film—once again signals the difference of this film from earlier quality costume dramas like *Howards End*, and the attempts being made to consolidate the mainstream end of the crossover market. The television advertisements for *Elizabeth* focused heavily on chivalry and on the powerful soundtrack, which were seen as among the key selling points for more regular cinemagoers.

If *Elizabeth* had been released straight onto 200 screens, the distributors believed it would probably have had a reasonably good opening but then have sunk very quickly, which would have been a very inefficient way of milking the market. A more likely release for a modestly budgeted costume drama like *Elizabeth* would have been to rely heavily on a run of art-house screenings, and then possibly build up to the metropolitan independents and more upmarket multiplexes. In fact, this was never the intention with *Elizabeth*, as can be ascertained from the size of the production budget, far in excess of what could have been recouped from such a modest release. The plan was always to start in upmarket multiplexes and selected independents before going to the art-houses and Regional Film Theatres.

⁵⁴ Chris Bailey, quoted Anon., 'Platform Show-ins'.

⁵⁵ Telephone interview with PFE staff, 23 Nov. 1998.

⁵⁶ Chris Bailey, quoted in Mary Scott, 'Box-Office Roundup', *Screen International* (16 Oct. 1998), 47.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

The business of promotion followed a similar series of stages. Initially, magazines, and especially women's magazines, were targeted, 'followed by the "quality" dailies. When the film went wide, the press campaign was extended to mid-market papers like the *Daily Mail*, and TV spots also kicked in.' Teaser trailers were shown in participating cinemas prior to the arrival of the film, while a limited poster campaign with a very striking design was run in metropolitan centres, especially London. At each stage, advertisements quoting carefully selected reviews were placed in the 'quality' newspapers and in listings magazines such as *Time Out*. According to Julia Short of PolyGram, 'we did a great deal of research into previous costume dramas, and we took *The Madness of King George* as our ruler. When we saw that we were doing better than *Madness*, we did more TV.' The television advertising campaign was very selective, with advertisements appearing mainly on Channel 4, 'grouped around "upscale" programmes like *Friends* and *Frasier*'.⁵⁸

The promotional strategy was thus twofold. On the one hand, it was designed to maximize the appeal of the film to its core target audience. On the other hand, it was intended to extend that appeal to a wider audience, both younger and more male, but without ignoring or alienating the primary target audience.⁵⁹ The attempt to reach a wider audience was readily apparent in the design of the poster and advertising copy used in the UK, with its stark close-ups of the four main characters, described in bold lettering as, respectively, heretic, lover, traitor, and assassin (Fig. 24): hardly the keywords of Merchant Ivory-style costume drama. The use of expressionist lighting and colour and the framing of the close-ups emphasized the harsh, piercing looks of the gangster rather than the soft glances or warm embraces of the romantic lover. And where other heritage films have used flowing, organic text-dividers depicting natural forms such as flowers or leaves, *Elizabeth's* publicity preferred a bolder, more threatening crossed swords design.

The UK release strategy and promotional campaign proved highly successful, with an excellent opening weekend and very strong average takings per screen. It was the second highest grossing film of the week in London, and even though it was only showing on fourteen screens, all in London, it still managed to secure eighth place nationwide because of the exceptionally strong showings at each of the cinemas in which it was playing (in week six of its release, it was showing at less screens than all but one of the rest of the national top ten—it was number eight that week—but it had a higher average box-office take per screen than all but the top three). By its fourth week of release, when it had opened outside London, it had overtaken *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (1998) in terms of box-office takings that week to become the leading British film currently on release. By this stage, it was riding a wave of strong publicity and reviews, which served to attract the 'upscale audience', while the television adverts were evidently working on the more mainstream audience. The film eventually stayed among the top ten films at the British box office for ten weeks, and although its release was

⁵⁸ Roddick, 'Shotguns and Weddings', 13.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

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24. Costume drama as conspiracy thriller: the poster used in the UK for *Elizabeth*

not yet complete by the end of the year, it was still the third-most successful British film of 1998, behind *Sliding Doors* (1998) and *Lock, Stock*. By the end of its run, it had sold 1.24 million tickets and taken £5.5 million.²⁴

The film also did well in other European markets, opening in over eighteen countries over a nine-month period. It was in the box-office top ten for five weeks in the Netherlands and Denmark, for four weeks in Italy and Sweden, for two weeks in Germany, and for one week in Spain. More than 100,000 tickets were sold in each of France, Greece, and Portugal, nearly a quarter of a million in Spain, and nearly half a million in Germany and Italy.²⁵ It was equally successful in other territories. In Japan, for instance, it was the eighteenth highest grossing film for 1999, staying in the box-office top ten for ten weeks; in Australia and Brazil, it was

²⁴ *Screen International* (9 Oct. 1998), 30; *Screen International* (13 Nov. 1998), 22; Derek Malcolm, 'One Smoking Gun', *Guardian* (12 Dec. 1998), 3; Eddie Doyle (ed.), *BFI Film and Television Handbook 2000* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 14–14; Lumiere database, at <http://lumiere.obs.coe.fr>; Nielsen EDI Ltd., cumulative box-office statistics.
²⁵ Data from *Elizabeth* page on ShowBIZ Data online at <http://www.showbizdata.com>; weekly international box-office charts in *Screen International* for 1998 and 1999; Lumiere database; British Film Institute.

in the top ten for seven weeks and six weeks respectively.²⁶ It was also a major box-office winner in the USA, where it was one of the top-ranked independent productions released in 1998, with 6.18 million tickets sold, compared to 1.07 million for the whole of Europe.²⁷ While it took at least \$40 million in all other territories, it took \$30 million in the USA.²⁸ We should put these statistics in perspective, however, for if this was an impressive performance for a modestly budgeted British film, it hardly compared with the takings of unreservedly mainstream productions. Thus *Saving Private Ryan*, released in 1998, took \$226 million at the US box office, while *The Phantom Menace*, released the following year, took \$43 million.²⁹

These box-office statistics underline a bald fact about contemporary media activity: that it is increasingly difficult to ascribe national identity to media products. For if *Elizabeth* is variously an English film, a British film, a European film and a post-colonial film, it is also, as I noted above a product of the now global entertainments industry, a transnational commodity.

With a November release in the USA, *Elizabeth* was up against much stronger competition than in the UK, with several major films released for the holiday season. But this was also the beginning of the period for art-house distributors to release films which it was hoped would attract the attention of those making the Academy Award nominations.³⁰

The initial signs of holiday event titles pushing out niche fare was evident as the month's top-grossing titles cornered 75% of all ticket sales. ... Still, a couple of titles have managed to hold against the big guns—notably Gramercy's *Elizabeth* and Miramax's *Let It Be Beautiful*, which have done slow rollouts and will add more playdates later in December.³¹

As in the UK, *Elizabeth* was given a platform release in the USA. Initially, it opened at nine specialized cinemas in Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York, moving up a platform to 144 screens in its third week, when it went 'into exclusives in almost every market'. The following week, it moved up to yet another platform, showing on 316 screens (which was of course still some way short of the number of screens on which mainstream Hollywood films played). As in the UK, however, the film had two lives running in parallel. While its carefully orchestrated national release saw it go to more and more screens and do well as a crossover film in the multiplexes, it was also doing the rounds in the art cinemas, and the trade press

²⁶ *Screen International* (9 Oct. 1998), 30; (16 Oct. 1998), 27; (6 Nov. 1998), 30–1; (13 Nov. 1998), 22–3; Don Groves, 'Rookies Fall Flat', *Variety Extra online* (10 Oct. 1998), at Variety.com; Don Groves, 'Truman Awakens Overseas B.O.', *Variety Extra online* (17 Nov. 1998), at Variety.com.
²⁷ *Variety* (21 Dec. 1999), 20; Lumiere database.
²⁸ Bhavan Lall, 'Elizabeth Reigns on', *Screen International* (11 Oct. 1998), 31; Nielsen EDI.
²⁹ American box-office statistics from the Internet Movie Database, at IMDb.com.
³⁰ Andrew Hirdes, 'Elizabeth Rules', *Variety Extra online* (19 Nov. 1998), at Variety.com.
³¹ Leonard Klady, 'Waterboy Buoy's Nov. B.O.', *Variety Extra online* (1 Dec. 1998), at Variety.com.

continued to discuss it as an 'exclusive' film, presented by 'arthouse distributors' on 'the specialised circuit', and addressed to 'niche' audiences.⁴⁸

For a relatively small British period drama, *Elizabeth* thus proved an enormous success, with weekly average box-office takings per screen described as 'resounding' and 'stunning'.⁴⁹ Even on its first weekend, when it was showing on only nine screens, it managed to take enough money on those screens to reach number 27 in the box-office charts; indeed its average takings per screen were higher than any other film in the top 30. By the third week of its release, *Elizabeth* had become the most successful British film currently on release in the USA. By week four, when it was showing at more than 500 cinemas, the film broke into the American box-office top ten.⁵⁰ As one British newspaper commented, this was 'most surprising . . . This, remember, is a bit of black-teeth-and-boils English history not zapped up or modernised [sic], with an Indian director and an Australian lead. And we don't think Eric Cantona or Kathy Burke are pulling them in either.'⁵¹ *Elizabeth* eventually remained in the box-office top thirty in the USA for twenty-two weeks. In early February, it was still on more than 400 screens. When the Oscar nominations were announced in mid-February (*Elizabeth* received seven), it was on 624 screens, but thereafter gradually tailed off. The overall box-office takings were of course minuscule compared to the two major studio films released around the same time, *The Waterboy* (1998) and *Rugrats* (1999) (by week three, *Elizabeth* had taken nearly \$7 million, but *Rugrats* by that stage had taken \$53 million and *Waterboy* \$119 million; even after twenty-two weeks in the top thirty, the box-office gross for *Elizabeth* was still only \$29.1 million).

Although Russell Schwartz, president of Gramercy, the film's American distributors, claimed that 'this is better than we'd hoped for', it is clear that in fact a carefully finessed marketing plan was coming to fruition: 'We have a populist period movie here. . . . We're selling it as a historical thriller . . . with the emphasis on thriller.'⁵² In order to exploit the film to its maximum, Gramercy 'mounted a costly campaign for *Elizabeth*, including TV spots and two-page ads, . . . betting it [would] surpass the typically limited grosses that period pieces usually achieve.'⁵³ Another strand to the promotional campaign was a brilliantly designed website for the film, which included an elaborate game, 'Traitor in Our Midst', where you can try to find the traitor in Elizabeth's court. You gain points, you get clues—otherwise, you get beheaded! According to Schwartz, the website was created

in our ongoing hope to get men interested in the picture, which is obviously one of the marketing challenges. . . . [T]he obvious sell is to women. But because the movie is so much

⁴⁸ Monica Roman, 'Elizabeth' Reigns in Niche B.O., *Variety Extra online*, 1 Dec. 1998, at Variety.com; Andrew Hinds, 'Elizabeth' Rules', *Screen International* (13 Nov. 1998), 21; Andrew Hinds, 'Waterboy' Douses Field, *Variety Extra online* (16 Nov. 1998), at Variety.com; *Variety* (16–22 Nov. 1998), 11.

⁴⁹ *Variety* (16–22 Nov. 1998), 11; *Screen International* (13 Nov. 1998), 21.

⁵⁰ Box-office statistics here and below from *Elizabeth* page on ShowBIZ online at <http://www.showbizdata.com>, and from weekly box-office charts in *Variety* and *Screen International*.

⁵¹ 'Film charts', *Guardian*, Friday review (4 Dec. 1998), 29.

⁵² Russell Schwartz, quoted in Hinds, 'Elizabeth' Rules'. ⁵³ *Ibid.*

a thriller and actually has a lot of action in it, a lot of murders, a number of beheadings and burnings at the stake—it's got a lot of *Braveheart*-type spectacle to it—we wanted to make sure we were able to expose the film to men as well. . . . [T]hings like the web are 70% male (in their demographics) and there's no reason why we shouldn't try to get to [a male audience] and, at least, let them (see) what the movie's about rather than just saying, 'No, because it's a period picture I'm not interested.'⁵⁴

Positioning the film as both a traditional costume drama and a thriller that could appeal to a wider audience was the central strategy of the marketing campaign:

It's making sure that the early word-of-mouth audiences know what to expect. The television campaign, the trailer and things like the Web site are trying to not only paint a full picture of what it is, but also show it's not all about costumes—there's a really fascinating story of backstabbing and adventure. There's a lot in this movie.⁵⁵

The success of the marketing campaign can be gauged by the comments of the manager of a film website on the internet:

In the last two weeks . . . my preview page for this movie has been visited enough to rocket *Elizabeth* up to the top ten of my most visited previews, an honor not often granted by my visitors to period piece dramas. I think what may be drawing some of the attention, and may be the key to this movie's success, are the surprisingly riveting commercials that have been showing in some theaters and on cable TV. Rather than a limp British drama, *Elizabeth* is being marketed as a dark Machiavellian historical thriller about a young woman who steered her country down her own path, in the face of much opposition. Another thing that jumps out in the commercials is the cinematography and lighting of the film, which is very rich and enticing. . . .⁵⁶

The main promotional image used in the USA was different to the poster and advertisement design adopted in the UK (although the same key image was used for British book and CD tie-ins, see Fig. 28). The image foregrounds Cate Blanchett in a glorious golden dress, blending in with her auburn-coloured hair. Although she is looking straight to camera in a potentially challenging way, Schwartz saw it as an image of 'a very vulnerable woman. I haven't met one man who hasn't liked that shot. . . . Both sexes have quite taken to this movie.'⁵⁷ He also saw it as 'a very contemporary shot of her: I don't think people think of Elizabeth the Queen as a 25-year-old. They think of her giving a speech (in 1588 when England repelled the Spanish Armada or (in the classic shot) in all the white pancake makeup.'⁵⁸

Other promotional materials indicated a much stronger appeal to the traditional costume drama audience: older, more educated and upmarket, and female. A packet of seeds, emblazoned with a mock-authentic *EtR* logo topped off with a crown, allowed the owner to 'plant your own Royal wildflowers'. A bookmark

⁵⁴ Grove, 'Web Site and Tarot Cards', 8. ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Greg Dean Schmitz, 'Elizabeth', *Upcomingmovies.com*, at <http://www.upcomingmovies.com/elizabeth.html>.

⁵⁷ Russell Schwartz, quoted in Grove, 'Web Site and Tarot Cards', 8.

⁵⁸ Russell Schwartz, quoted in Martin A. Grove, 'Elizabeth: Crowning Gramercy Achievement', *Hollywood Reporter* (23–25 Oct. 1998), 8.

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25. Girl power: Cate Blanchett in *Elizabeth*

with the same logo gave a thumbnail biographical sketch of Elizabeth's life, concluding with the quotation, 'I may be a woman, Sir William—but if I choose, I have the heart of a man.' A package of elegant postcard-sized 'tarot cards' (Fig. 26) came in a mock-parchment case tied with a blue ribbon; the cards themselves illustrated with painted versions of promotional stills of the main characters, with historical details on the reverse.²⁹

As we look more closely at the reception of the film in subsequent sections of this chapter, the success or otherwise of a production and marketing strategy designed to interest different audiences and maximize the takings for a relatively unconventional film will become clear.

WHAT SORT OF A FILM IS IT? GENRES AND LABELS

What is the most appropriate generic label to apply to *Elizabeth*? Is it a 'lavish costume drama' or a 'mesmerising rollercoaster of a thriller'? 'An astounding historical spectacle, a costume romp' or 'the darkest costume picture ever to emerge from a British studio'? 'A sexually-charged romantic drama' or an 'artfully deco-

²⁹ My thanks to Anne-Marie Cook for showing this material to me.



26. Mock-tarot cards used to publicize *Elizabeth* in the USA

rated history lesson'? 'A cracking political thriller' or a 'superior historical soap opera that shrewdly sidesteps all the clichés of British costume drama with its bold, often modern approach? A 'bodice ripper' or 'an intelligent think piece about women and politics that transcends its time and place'?

Clearly, at one level, it is all these things. Some reviewers consequently thought the film-makers were unable to make up their minds about what they were producing: 'Kapur can't decide if he's making an art movie or a melodrama, an opera or a soap opera.'³⁰ Others recognized that this might have been a deliberate strategy to maximize audience reach: 'in a valiant effort to snare moviegoers who wouldn't go to a period picture if it came with a free diamond tiara, the distributors are pleased [to] call [*Elizabeth*] a "historical thriller"'.³¹ It was in this sense a strategy designed to provide something for all tastes.

²⁹ Ian Bernard, 'Elizabeth, Queen of Hearts', *New York News* (6 Nov. 1998), from website <http://www.dailynews.com>; Pauline McLeod, 'Best Movie, Woman', *Open* (3 Oct. 1998), 9; Andrew Wilson, 'All the Queen's Castles', *Daily Mail* (Magazine) (10 Oct. 1998), 20; Philip French, 'Life beyond the Ocean Wave', *Observer*, Review (27 Dec. 1998), 5; extract from review by Bruce Kirkland, originally from *Toronto Sun*, reproduced on Toronto Film Festival website, at http://www.cine.ca/FilmFest/toronto98/Jul22_fest.html; *Guardian*, Guide (3 Oct. 1998), 20; Barry Norman, 'New Releases', *Radio Times* (3 Nov. 1998), 70; Rooney, 'Elizabeth'; Victoria Newton, 'Best Actress', *Sun* (10 Feb. 1999); Jeff Giles, 'Review', *Newsweek* (23 Nov. 1998), no page given; Taylor, 'Lese-Majeste', *LA Weekly* (6–12 Nov. 1998), 65.

³⁰ Jeff Giles, 'Review', *Newsweek* (23 Nov. 1998), no page given; Taylor, 'Lese-Majeste', 65.

Conspiracy buffs will love [the plotting] . . . Feminists will delight in seeing a romantic, frightened woman take charge of her own (and her nation's) destiny. Historians will happily debate the sexy melodramatics with which the Protestant-Catholic conflict over the throne is stated. In short, this darkly sumptuous, hypnotically complex movie ought to have many constituencies . . . The largest of them may turn out to be moviegoers hungry for rich, old-fashioned historical spectacle . . .⁶³

As far as the American distributors were concerned, because it was 'much more of a historical thriller than a standard period film . . . [*Elizabeth*] creates somewhat of a new genre'.⁶⁴ There was indeed widespread recognition that this was not a pure genre film, but a hybrid, a 'political thriller cum romance' that was yet 'replete with smashing finery and looks as sharp as daggers', a film that could be described in the same publication as both a 'ravishing costumer' and a 'blazing historical thriller'.⁶⁵

At the same time, the film belongs to a generic tradition that can be traced back to the beginnings of the quality European heritage movie in the silent period, from films d'art to Lubitsch's *Anna Boleyn* (1920) and Gance's *Napoleon* (1927). In the 1930s, following the international success of *The Private Life of Henry 8th*, a whole series of films was made in both Hollywood and Europe that explored, often in quite irreverent terms, the private lives of prominent figures from European history. (Indeed, *Elizabeth* appeared in two of them, *Fires over England* (1937) and *Elizabeth and Essex* (1939)). *Henry 8th* in particular makes an interesting comparison with *Elizabeth*: although it was nominally a British film, it too was made by a multinational production team, led by the Hungarian director, Alexander Korda. Several commentators also linked *Elizabeth* to both Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* (1942), and *La Reine Margot* (1994) and other recent French costume dramas of that ilk.⁶⁶ To situate *Elizabeth* in such a context is to begin to suggest that it might be genuinely European in sensibility. Even if the focus of the film is English, it deals with a key moment in Western European history, tentatively exploring the prevailing relationships between England, France, Spain, Scotland, and the Vatican: when Elizabeth is crowned queen of England, Ireland and France, a very unfamiliar political geography is writ large.

The one trait of *Elizabeth* that is not thoroughly signalled in this list of generic forebears is the thriller element. Yet there is no denying that, if this is a costume drama that tries to authenticate its fiction in various ways (but also to fictionalize its history), it is also a thriller full of intrigue, violence, and the expression of brute power. The thriller element is tempered or counteracted by the elements of the woman's film, historical romance fiction, and the costume drama. The focus

⁶³ Richard Schickel, 'Review', *Time* (16 Nov. 1998), cutting.

⁶⁴ Schwartz, quoted in Grove, 'Elizabeth: Crowning Gramercy Achievement', 8.

⁶⁵ Sandra Contreras, 'Girl, Interrupted', *TV Guide Entertainment Network* (18 Nov. 1998), posted on Internet Movie Database, at IMDb.com; *Time Out, Critics' Choice* (30 Sept. 1998), 88; *Time Out, Critic's Choice* (28 Oct. 1998), 88.

⁶⁶ See e.g. Philip French, 'Another Fine Bess', *Observer, Review* (4 Oct. 1998), 6; Ryan Gilbey, 'The Big Picture', *Independent, Review* (1 Oct. 1998), 13; Rooney, 'Elizabeth', 33-4.

on Elizabeth, on her desires and sexuality, and especially her love affair with Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, is important here. So too is the sense of female community established in the entourage of young women (the ladies-in-waiting) that surround Elizabeth. Then there is the attention to lavish dress, the use of romantic music, and the overt discussion of a woman's role and the tension between duty and love.

If for some viewers, then, *Elizabeth* was a fairly conventional costume drama with the right ingredients of romance, spectacle, and period detail, for others, this was 'no ordinary period film', since they did not usually offer their audiences such a 'rollicking good time'.⁶⁷ For the boys who did not care for the pleasures and concerns of costume drama, it was especially important to be able to sell the film as 'a rousing adventure . . . a fine historical melodrama, with enough adventure, intrigue, and romance to keep the proceedings from dragging', a film that might be compared with the likes of *Braveheart* and *Rob Roy*.⁶⁸ The thriller elements—the tortuous plotting, the conspiratorial, noirish sensibility, the often gruesome action sequences—were thus never allowed to disappear. The description of the film as a thriller was carefully foregrounded in the Press Booklet, on the official website, and in other publicity. In fact, for some viewers, the romantic costume drama element was lost altogether, and the film became solely a historical thriller:

Elizabeth has just the right running time for a film of this genre. When compared to Nixon, JFK and other reasonably historically based conspiracy films, Elizabeth emerges as easily the most watchable, in one sitting. Clever use of editing during the scene in which Elizabeth is working out how to address parliament, alludes to a *Taxi Driver*-style insight into another's mind. The whole story draws interesting parallels with *The Godfather, Part II*, as a ruler wanting to emulate his/her father's successes, [who] slowly destroys all those around him/her. The films conclude by showing how lonely such an achievement can be in reality, leaving Elizabeth as the 'Virgin Queen' and Don Michael Corleone isolated from the remainder of his family, sitting on his throne, by Lake Tahoe.⁶⁹

More typical, however, was a recognition that the film brought together the thriller template and the costume drama template, 'the costume drama escap[ing] its mothballs in Kapur's vertiginous, labyrinthine conspiracy movie'.⁷⁰ The hybridity of the film is visible from the start, rendering it very difficult to reduce the film entirely to one or other generic tradition. The opening sequence, for instance, is both highly stylized at the level of sound and image and, in the use of titles giving historical information, a fragment from a worthy educational drama. As such, it offers a heady mix of aesthetic pleasure and historical authenticity. These tensions,

⁶⁷ Charity, 'Virgin Records', 16; 'Taylor, Lese-Majeste', 65.

⁶⁸ James Berardinelli, 'Elizabeth, A Film Review', at <http://www.bomis.com/cgi-bin/ring.cgi?page=3&ring=elizabeth>; compare the comments of one of the producers, Tim Bevan: 'I thought that *Braveheart* had done a good job in broadening the range of historical film dramas and I hope this will be similar', quoted in Alison Boshoff, 'Hunt for Star to Play Virgin Queen', *Daily Telegraph* (13 May 1997), 5.

⁶⁹ Patrick James, 'Elizabeth' (user comments), posted on IMDb, 3 Nov. 1998.

⁷⁰ Tom Charity, 'Elizabeth' (review), *Time Out* (30 Sept. 1998), 79.

between stylistic innovation and the conventional period drama, and between romantic costume drama and the modern political thriller, frequently emerge in responses to the film, some calling for a purer generic experience, others delighting in the hybrid formation of the film, its exotic qualities, its inclusion of non-indigenous elements.

This struggle between the pure and the impure was figured thematically in the film too. At one level, the state of the nation in the Elizabethan period, the position of its boundaries, the nature of its allegiances, was at issue. This was yet another British costume drama in which inheritance was in crisis, except that on this occasion, the nation was to be inherited literally, not simply metaphorically. After escaping the terrors of her sister Mary, Elizabeth is crowned queen of England, Ireland, and France, but spends most of the film resisting further alliances with either France or Spain. Violently removing those who plot against her throne, she claims to 'have rid England of her enemies'. In her final act of the film, reinventing herself as the Virgin Queen ('I have become a virgin'), sexual purity has become consonant with the safety and sovereignty of the nation. Earlier, sexual activity has been more transgressive than pure, with the implication that both Walsingham and Anjou are gay, or at least bisexual, and the onscreen evidence of Elizabeth's secret pre-marital sex, Anjou's cross-dressing, and the orgy. Of course, Elizabeth's ultimate virginal purity has dual implications: both the refusal of men ('observe, Lord Burghley, I am married to England') and the adoption of a masculine persona ('I may be a woman, but if I choose, I have the heart of a man'), both the Virgin Mary and the patriarchal ruler. As one reviewer commented, 'Kapur cunningly confuses gender roles', enabling us to read this film, like other heritage films, as a liberal treatise on gender and sexuality.⁷¹

For some, though, *Elizabeth* was not to be taken too seriously—it was 'rip-roaring historical soap', after all, and as such 'destined to be a crowd-pleaser'.⁷² For others, the same ingredients meant that it was a gratifyingly conventional costume film and historical bio-pic—indeed, 'costume dramas just don't come any more powerful and satisfying'.⁷³ As a fairly conventional costume drama, it could engage with a variety of audiences. Thus it could please reviewers in women's magazines—this scary, stark but sexy historical drama . . . [which] captures the creepy, cold feel of an era and the magical, Madonna-like transformation of the virgin queen—and in gay men's magazines—'We're closet crinoline fans here at *Boyz Towers*, and despite the gaping historical errors in this period dramarama, we loved this epic of a movie . . . with the most luscious costumes, sweeping breathtaking shots, a cheeky underlying humour and a loud, in-yer-face soundtrack'.⁷⁴ For a discerning, upmarket British broadsheet newspaper, it could, by 'deploying

⁷¹ Tom Charity, 'Elizabeth' (review), *Time Out* (30 Sept. 1998), 79.

⁷² David Rooney, 'In Venice, U.S. Gives "Lola" a Long Look', *Variety Extra* online (8 Sept. 1998), at Variety.com.

⁷³ Jay Carr, 'Blanchett Portrays "Elizabeth" for the Ages', *Boston Globe* (20 Nov. 1998) from website (Boston.com).

⁷⁴ Anon., 'Film of the Month', *She* (Oct. 1998), 71; Richards, 'Long Live the Queen', 12.

the richness of a pageant and the sweep of a thriller', become 'the very model of a successful historical drama—imposingly beautiful, persuasively resonant, unflinchingly entertaining. It's tempting to suggest that if Shakespeare had come back four centuries later to make a movie about his Queen, this is how it might have turned out'.⁷⁵ At a pinch, it might even appeal to some of the working-class readers, or at least the female readers, of the more downmarket tabloids—although evidently the lingering taste of history is a bit too much for those with at least a middle-class education; historical drama is still at least a class-bound pleasure, an exclusive taste, not for the real mainstream, or at least this is how I think we must interpret the *Sun's* distaste for the film:

I think it's time [the European Parliament] started to pay film producers not to make certain types of films. Top of my list would be costume period dramas. There is a world of them. But if you really feel the need to see one, you could do worse than *Elizabeth*. . . It looks great and the acting is top drawer, although that doesn't mean it's much fun to watch. But if you need to see a frock pic before they bring in the much-needed European costume drama ban, this isn't a bad choice.⁷⁶

Some of course appreciated the film precisely because it was like 'an enjoyable history lesson'.⁷⁷ Even if, for others, it may have been no more than 'quasi-historical' or 'pseudo-biographical', it still helped some commentators 'open . . . a window into the culture that gave birth to Christopher Marlowe, Edmund Spenser, Francis Bacon, and William Shakespeare': for all its failings, in other words, it did have some historical clout.⁷⁸

Knowing that the fans of costume drama are sensitive souls, some commentators were gratified that the necessary danger signs had been posted around this rather impure version of the generic type. 'Both pageantry and cruelty are on display and the opening execution scene serves notice that this is no delicate costume drama—though the frocks are magnificent'.⁷⁹ Others felt they should erect their own signs: 'Be warned . . . this is not a Jane Austen period drama; this is very gory stuff'.⁸⁰ Nor, with its stench of conspiracy, its gruesome murders, its severed heads, its scenes of torture and people burning at the stake, and its between-the-sheets frankness, was this a tasteful Merchant Ivory adaptation of a Forster novel. Tastes were being both protected and extended by the film, and by the danger signs proliferating around it: 'Anyone expecting a typically stately, in manner and in pace, British historical drama will be jolted by Shekhar Kapur's stylish and fast-paced "historical thriller"'.⁸¹

⁷⁵ Richard Williams, 'Liz the Lionheart', *Guardian*, section 2 (2 Oct. 1998), 6.

⁷⁶ Nick Fisher, 'Elizabeth', *Sun* (3 Oct. 1998), 21.

⁷⁷ Nick Cannon, 'Cinema', *Woman* (5 Oct. 1998), 50.

⁷⁸ Anon., 'Elizabeth', *Premiere* (US, Nov. 1998), 28–9; Berardinelli, 'Elizabeth, A Film Review', from website.

⁷⁹ Mark Wyman, 'Elizabeth' (review), *Film Review* (Nov. 1998), 20.

⁸⁰ Nikki Lesley, 'Elizabeth (1998)' (review), posted to the rec.arts.movies.reviews newsgroup.

⁸¹ Michael Dequina, 'Elizabeth (1998)' (review), posted to the rec.arts.movies.reviews newsgroup.

Elsewhere, a different sort of danger sign was raised, one that was designed to seduce viewers to the film, rather than steer them gently away: 'If period pieces send you running in the opposite direction, be warned: Elizabeth is not your average frock fest. . . . [T]his historical epic . . . moves with the crackling urgency of a contemporary political thriller.'⁸² If the traditional audience for the quality costume drama is older, female-skewed, and safely middle-brow, then Elizabeth was determined to attract and, with the help of the critical and promotional machine, prepare new, more youthful, and more modern audiences for its version of the period film. Although it was 'a rich historical biography', as one reviewer explained, 'Elizabeth isn't your grandma's English historical epic' and moviegoers should therefore 'forget all that "virgin queen" stuff and Bette Davis' 1939 and 1955 movies about the 16th Century monarch.'⁸³ Instead, audiences were urged to prepare for 'barbarism in silks and velvets and brocades', for 'a dazzling entertainment that never attempts to hide its frankly contemporary slant.'⁸⁴

This 'dark historical thriller, in which "sixteenth century England is a sordid, deadly place" was thus 'far removed from the colourful pageant of most British historical movies'; this 'vibrant, red-blooded biofilm' was 'a far cry from the sterility of British heritage movies'.⁸⁵ But let's not forget that, for some commentators, the heritage film was far from sterile. The implication is obvious: that, where Elizabeth is passionate and libidinal, Merchant Ivory films, or Jane Austen adaptations, for instance, lack any such characteristics. Yet, as we saw earlier, for some audiences the Merchant Ivory film is the film of preference precisely because of its passionate sensibility, its engagement with emotionality and desire—even if it is very often the repression of desire that is explored.

Still, there is no denying that, for many commentators, there was a clear distinction between the usual 'bland British bore' and the 'uninhibited' Elizabeth, between 'the traditionally stuffy and aloof British costume drama' and the more 'accessible . . . entertaining and exciting' Elizabeth.⁸⁶ With Kapur 'throwing decorum aside', Elizabeth could be presented as a more democratic text, by comparison with the inaccessible elitism of the more conventional costume drama; this was 'a far cry from traditional British masterpiece theater filmmaking', and as such could be offered as a film to be enjoyed by a wider audience 'who like their period costume dramas defrocked of aristocratic poise'.⁸⁷ This defrocking brought with it what some saw as a more enlightened view of history, the warning signs making it 'safe to assume . . . that this won't be your average swishily attired, promonarchy Crimplene and corsets costume drama'. On the contrary, 'this subver-

⁸² Kevin Maynard, 'Mr Showbiz Movie Guide', online at <http://www.bomis.com/cgi-bin/ring.cgi?page=4&ring=elizabeth>.

⁸³ Blackwelder, 'Elizabeth', from website.

⁸⁴ Carr, 'Blanchett Portrays "Elizabeth" for the Ages', from website.

⁸⁵ Angie Errigo, 'Elizabeth' (review), *Empire*, 113 (1998), 42; French, 'Another Fine Bess', 6; Carr, 'Blanchett Portrays "Elizabeth" for the Ages', from website; Bruzzi, 'Elizabeth', 48.

⁸⁶ Anon., 'Elizabeth', *Premiere* (US), 28–9; Dequina, 'Elizabeth' (1998).

⁸⁷ Charity, 'Elizabeth', 79; Grove, 'Elizabeth: Crowning Gramercy Achievement', 8; James Cary Parkes, 'Elizabeth', *Gay Times* (Oct. 1998), 92.

ive rollercoaster of a royalty flick shows up, say, *The Madness of King George* for the Ely-livered reactionary tosh it was.'⁸⁸

The distinction between Elizabeth and 'your typical Tudor pageant' was in part explained in terms of the mixing of templates and Kapur's 'aversion towards the staid and the settled'.⁸⁹ This was a history film, yes, but it was 'revisionist history which allowed "the lush Elizabeth" to bust free of period torpor. Stuffy it's not.'⁹⁰ This was an English period piece, yes, but it had come 'by way of Bombay', producing 'a cross-cultural revelation' that was 'full of sensual, tactile detail and blistering dramatic heat'.⁹¹ This was a costume drama, yes, but it was also a historical thriller. Elizabeth was promoted as a 'historical thriller' because this was seen as a more populist touch, a bigger audience draw than a more conventional costume drama. Yet for those in the cinema trade, it was still very much an 'exclusive' film.⁹² At its North American premiere at the Toronto Film Festival, it was offered as 'a very intelligent film about power and power politics', a film with 'a recognizable theme . . . a moral quandary', while a mainstream British fan magazine discerned 'a decidedly arty bent'.⁹³ This was still, in other words, a relatively upmarket film, for a discerning, educated audience.

GIRL POWER

Costume drama is traditionally seen as a genre with a strong appeal for female spectators. While the producers and distributors of Elizabeth were at pains to reach a wider audience, particularly by building in the thriller element, they also attempted to maximize the female appeal of the film. In the UK, they carefully targeted women's magazines,⁹⁴ and were rewarded with Elizabeth being selected as 'film of the week' or 'film of the month' in several titles, including *She* and a cluster of IPC magazines, including *Woman*, *Woman's Own*, *Woman's Journal*, and *Marie Claire*.⁹⁵ Gossip about the film's stars also appeared in magazines aimed at a younger readership, including *19* and *Frank*.⁹⁶ Interest in these outlets focused on romance and sex, though not to the exclusion of the thriller element ('a glorious study of the early reign of Elizabeth Tudor . . . the "Virgin Queen", who had

⁸⁸ Kevin Harley, 'The Violence of Elizabeth I', *Pink Paper* (2 Oct. 1998), 14.

⁸⁹ Errigo, 'Elizabeth', Charity, 'Elizabeth', 79.

⁹⁰ Peter Travers, 'Elizabeth', *Rolling Stone* (26 Nov. 1998), cutting.

⁹¹ Gemma Files, 'Elizabeth' (review), *eye Weekly*, at http://www.eyenet.com/issue1000_09_20_98/film/filmfest.html.

⁹² See e.g. Monica Roman, 'Elizabeth Crowned Queen of Exclusives', *Variety Extra* online (10 Nov. 1998), at Variety.com.

⁹³ Festival director Piers Handling, quoted in Tamsen Tillson, 'Elizabeth Bows in Toronto', *Variety* online (22 July 1998), at Variety.com; Errigo, 'Elizabeth', 42.

⁹⁴ Telephone interview with PFE staff, 23 Nov. 1998.

⁹⁵ Anon., 'Film of the Month', *Cannon*, 'Cinema', 50; McLeod, 'Best Movie', 9; Liz Hoggard, 'Elizabeth' (review), *Woman's Journal* (Oct. 1998), 18; Demetrios Matheou, 'Elizabeth' (review), *Marie Claire*, 123 (1998), 143.

⁹⁶ Anon., 'Joe's So Fiennel', 19 (Nov. 1998), 10; Anon., 'Talent Who', *Frank* (Nov. 1998), 35.

her heart broken by Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester . . . and who survived the murderous duplicity of her courtiers. A mesmerising rollercoaster of a thriller⁹⁷. Interest also focused on the fact that this was a film with a strong female central protagonist and a theme of female empowerment. 'The main interest of the film is in its reading of Elizabeth's iconic status as the "Virgin Queen". As played by Cate Blanchett, she is a beautiful, independent force of nature.'⁹⁸ This was a film with 'some unsettling modern parallels. Can female icons (from Madonna to Margaret Thatcher) ever have a private life?'⁹⁹ For younger audiences, the parallels were pursued in terms of the then current Spice Girls-inspired discourse of girl power. 19, for instance, charted some of the problems 'Liz' faced, concluding that 'Worst of all, her childhood sweetheart Robert Dudley (the not altogether unattractive Joseph Fiennes) has been lying to her . . . Despite it all, Elizabeth's courage and tenacity help her emerge a winner—now *that's* Girl Power.'¹⁰⁰

The appeal, power, and modernity of the central character were in fact widely commented on, not just in women's magazines. This was a film about 'a very modern woman . . . [with] an independent spirit and an iron will . . . [who] ruled in a male dominated age'; 'a smart, strong woman stretched to survive and command in a man's world, while her sense of duty conflicts with her romantic inclinations'; 'a female figurehead struggling to gain purchase in a patriarchal society.'¹⁰¹ It was also a film about 'a sexy queen', a 'hell-cat Virgin Queen', 'the ultimate bitchy queen', 'a guffawing good-time girl toughened up in the courtly school of hard knocks', 'the first Iron Lady', 'the world's greatest career woman', 'a feisty modern woman who wants it all but is unlucky enough to be trapped in a time-warp', 'a stressed out modern woman who must cope with a super-intense case of having it all', 'a woman torn between her bodily fluids . . . and her duty to secure the monarchy in a time of raging conflict.'¹⁰²

These different interpretations together suggested the film might be seen as 'proto-feminist', an attempt 'to synthesize Shakespeare, Harlequin and a Perspectives in Feminist History course', or 'an intelligent think piece about women and politics that transcends its time and place.'¹⁰³ This was certainly one of the ways in which the film was promoted, with the official website and the Press Booklet both quoting producer Alison Owen saying,

⁹⁷ McLeod, 'Best Movie', 9.

⁹⁸ Matheou, 'Elizabeth', 143.

⁹⁹ Hoggard, 'Elizabeth', 18.

¹⁰⁰ Anon., 'Elizabeth' (review), 29 (Nov. 1998), 18.

¹⁰¹ *Odeon Preview*, leaflet distributed at Odeon (UK) cinemas, Oct./Nov. 1998; Errigo, 'Elizabeth', 42; Gilbey, 'The Big Picture', 13.

¹⁰² Peter Rainer, 'Reviews', *New York* (16 Nov. 1998), cutting; Travers, 'Elizabeth'; Harley, 'The Violence of Elizabeth I', 14; Matthew Sweet, untitled cutting (review), *Independent on Sunday*, Culture section (4 Oct. 1998), 5; Shlomo Schwartzberg (Review of *Elizabeth*), *Boxoffice* online reviews, at <http://www.bomis.com/cgi-bin/ring.cgi?page=3&ring=elizabeth>; Kapur, quoted in Raymond, 'Ardor in the Court', from website; Janet Maslin, 'Amour and High Dudgeon in a Castle of One's Own', *New York Times* (6 Nov. 1998), E16; Harley, 'The Violence of Elizabeth I', 14.

¹⁰³ Bernard, 'Elizabeth, Queen of Hearts', from website; Katherine Duncan-Jones, 'Why Then, O Brawling Love!', *TLS* (5 Feb. 1999), 18; Jeff Millar, 'Elizabeth is Fun, But Hard to Take Seriously', *Houston Chronicle* (20 Nov. 1998), from website, HoustonChronicle.com; Taylor, 'Lese-Majeste', 65.

For me, it was very appealing that the central character is a woman. Her story seemed to have lots of parallels with modern twentieth-century women who are often faced with that choice between career and personal life. It is a dilemma many contemporary women are trying to resolve in their own lives that Elizabeth had to face. She had to give up the chance of marriage and children in order to achieve stability in the country. I thought that was very interesting.¹⁰⁴

For the more misogynistic commentators, of course, the feminist label was intended as a criticism, expressing concern at the way in which 'Elizabeth shed her girl-next-door image to become a thundering feminist, or simply 'another female autocrat who brought her government to its knees.'¹⁰⁵ For the more committed feminist writers, Elizabeth's feminism was merely 'half-baked.'¹⁰⁶ Most commentators fell somewhere in between, seeing this film about 'a woman in a man's world, who battles between love and duty, and defiantly carves out her own path, as *post-feminist* rather than *proto-feminist*, as 'HERstory with big gowns': "I am not your Elizabeth," she cries, "I am no man's Elizabeth." Talk about Girl Power!¹⁰⁷ Many did indeed talk about girl power, for this was seen very much as a bio-pic for the late 1990s: 'Kapur keeps this tale from turning into a dusty old history lesson by taking a cue from England's current rulers—the Spice Girls. The film wields a feisty, wholly anachronistic girl-power edge.'¹⁰⁸ Anachronism, though, was helpful in marketing *Elizabeth* to a modern, youthful audience with its own fashionable reference points: 'the appeal of the Tudor boss-lady is undiminished as Girl Power takes hold.'¹⁰⁹

Elsewhere, other contemporary parallels were drawn: 'In fact, this Elizabeth is just your average working gal, Ally McBeal in brocade instead of Banana Republic.'¹¹⁰ Kapur himself saw Elizabeth as Indira Gandhi; others saw 'a Tudor Princess Diana'; 'a 16th-century Margaret Thatcher; a secular Virgin Mary.'¹¹¹ The range of references suggests some of the problems with seeing Elizabeth in this film as *feminist*. Cate Blanchett, as everyone has noted, is magnificent in the role of Elizabeth. She's fun, she's haughty, she's naive, she's strong at all the right times, making an Elizabeth who's believable and sympathetic while at the same time being something of a hero.¹¹² But what sort of a hero was she? She may have been

¹⁰⁴ Alison Owen, quoted on official website.

¹⁰⁵ Harvey S. Karten, 'Elizabeth (1998)' (review), posted to rec.arts.movies.reviews newsgroup; Alexander Walker, 'Ruff Justice', *Evening Standard* (1 Oct. 1998), 27.

¹⁰⁶ Duncan-Jones, 'Why Then, O Brawling Love!', 18.

¹⁰⁷ Geoff Brown, untitled cutting (review), *The Times* (1 Oct. 1998), 37; tagline in the 'Go See' section of *Eye* (24 Oct. 1998), 12; Brown, untitled cutting (review), 37.

¹⁰⁸ Alicia Potter, 'Queen Size', *Boston Phoenix* (19–26 Nov. 1998), from website.

¹⁰⁹ Online film review for *This is London* (Nov. 1998), posted at <http://www.thisislondon.com/dynamic/hotx/film.html> Hot Tickets—Films.

¹¹⁰ Potter, 'Queen Size', from website.

¹¹¹ Kapur quoted in Raymond, 'Ardor in the Court', from website; Michael Fitzgerald, 'Twentieth-Century Tudor', *Time* (2 Nov. 1998), 44; from website, Time.com; Tookey, 'Tonic for Heroine Addicts', 44–5.

¹¹² Lesley, 'Elizabeth (1998)' (online review).

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'an independent woman of forthright but naively utopian ideals', but she 'became the very core of the monarchy she had fought to change'; as such, 'Elizabeth breathlessly exemplifies the double-edged sword that is true girl power'.¹¹³ Again, this may be a prime selling-point: double-edged swords are good marketing tools, since they appeal simultaneously to two different interpretations, two different audience experiences. For others, of course, there was a more simple problem: the contemporaneity of Elizabeth's characterization got in the way of history: 'She is a bit too much a 1990s woman ... She may be written a little too much like a modern woman'.¹¹⁴

One edge of girl power is that the girl is sexy, and this was certainly perceived to be the case with *Elizabeth*. 'Kapur infuses the young monarch with some distinctly contemporary female sensibilities. For one thing, she's no virgin, ... *Elizabeth* is the story of a woman with a healthy sexual appetite'; it is the story of 'the sexually charged early life of the Tudor queen'.¹¹⁵ Consequently, this was not only 'the sexiest bit of power-play I've seen at the cinema this year', but also, of all things, 'an enjoyable history lesson'.¹¹⁶ Several commentators indeed moaned wistfully. 'If only history had been like this at school—riveting, thrilling and sexy', full of sex, violence, intrigue, and fabulous wardrobes.¹¹⁷ Sex, and the eventual renunciation of sex, of course plays a central role in *Elizabeth*'s exemplary 'tale of female empowerment', depicting 'the journey from canoodling girlhood to the threshold of an imperial monarchy', the journey 'from a girl into an iron-willed monarch who put aside her personal desires to transform herself into an icon: The Virgin Queen'.¹¹⁸ The telling of this tale, the depiction of this journey, may have been influenced by 'gals' guides to empowerment', but it also raised 'some interesting questions about women holding power in male-dominated societies and the sacrifices of personality and sexuality, involved in retaining that power'.¹¹⁹

STYLIZATION AND SUPERFICIALITY

One thing that most commentators agreed upon was that *Elizabeth* was 'a stylised film of broad, dramatic gestures',¹²⁰ perhaps even 'excessively stylised, particularly

¹¹³ Maynard, Mr Showbiz Movie Guide (online).
¹¹⁴ Mark R. Leeper, 'Elizabeth' (review), posted to rec.arts.movies.reviews newsgroup.
¹¹⁵ Jack Mathews, 'A Proudful Queen Cuts to the Chaste', *Newsday online*, at [Newsday.com](http://www.newsday.com); Cannon, 'Cinema', 50.
¹¹⁶ Tom Shone, *The Sunday Times*, quoted in advert, *Time Out* (28 Oct. 1998), 79; Cannon, 'Cinema', 50.
¹¹⁷ McLeod, 'Best Movie', 9; Mary Ann Johanson, 'What's Love got to do with it?', *The Flick Flicker*, online at <http://www.boomis.com/cgi-bin/ring.cgi?page=48ring=elizabeth>.
¹¹⁸ Bernard, 'Elizabeth, Queen of Hearts', from website; Williams, 'Liz (the Lionheart)', 6; Hughes, 'Bombay Director Tackles Tudor England', from website.
¹¹⁹ *Entertainment Weekly*, 461 (4 Dec. 1998), 68; Anon., 'Elizabeth (1998)' (user comments), Internet Movie Database, at IMDb.com.
¹²⁰ French, 'Another Fine Bess', 6.

in its camerawork'.¹²¹ Promotional material proclaimed that 'the film ... spared no expense in the production values department',¹²² the more positive reviewers thought this expense had paid off: it was 'wonderful to look at, highly atmospheric and splendidly acted ... Credit must go to [the] producers ... for ensuring that so much ended up adorning the screen'.¹²³ For those who enjoyed the film, 'the visual potency of *Elizabeth* is never less than compelling, thanks to Kapur's swash-buckling camera, John Myhre's meticulous production design and [the] eye-popping splendor of Alexandra Byrne's costumes'.¹²⁴ As a result, 'this handsomely mounted and vigorous bio-pic' was 'the richest looking and most colourful [film] produced in this country for ages, its 'luscious, monumentalist pictures, its 'gorgeous' costumes, and its 'sumptuous freneticism' providing a visual magnificence rarely seen in British cinema'.¹²⁵

From the outset, *Elizabeth* signals that it is to be visually a very exciting film. Even the opening credits sequence is visually and aurally impressive, with its montage of colours, faces, images, and symbolism, overlaid with stylized titles providing historical background information, and choral music on the soundtrack. We are invited to enjoy the sequence as a self-conscious sign of both great cinema and educative historical drama, both aesthetic pleasure and authenticity. As we settle into the first diegetic scene, of a group of Protestants being prepared for and burnt at the stake, we are confronted with a relentlessly moving camera, big close-ups, overhead shots, and a veritable chaos of voices, music, sounds, and images. There is no letting up either: the final scene of the film, as Elizabeth becomes the Virgin Queen, is equally stunning as a virtuoso piece of cinema, poignant, passionate, and stylized.

How should we respond to such scenes? It is the task of the film's promoters and reviewers to guide us in this respect (although we may of course choose to reject their guidance). Thus, 'while the opening sequences are perhaps over-directed—full of whirling cameras and lofty overhead shots—the film settles in to establish a painterly but unmannered visual style full of bold strokes'.¹²⁶ The latter part of this quotation is typical of the many positive comments about the film in its identification of a self-consciously artistic, in this case painterly, feel to the film. In order to situate the film stylistically, or to help identify its ideal audience (and warn off others), as we've seen, commentators cited numerous influences and reference points, from *The Godfather* to Bollywood, from B movies to *La Reine Margot*, from *Dynasty* to MTV, and from Eisenstein and Welles to Greenaway and Jarman. The *Godfather* reference was pervasive, as we know. In an

¹²¹ Bruzzi, 'Elizabeth', 48.
¹²² Anon., 'New British Expo', *Screen International* supplement (Sept. 1998), 11.
¹²³ Tookey, 'Tonic for Heroine Addicts', 44-5.
¹²⁴ Rod Dreher, 'A Liz Tailored to MTV', *New York Post* (6 Nov. 1998), 55.
¹²⁵ Anthony Quinn, 'The Last Years of the Virgin Queen', *Mail on Sunday*, Night and Day (4 Oct. 1998), 42; Alexander Walker, 'Queen of the Screen', *Evening Standard* (25 Aug. 1998), 19; Sweet, *Independent on Sunday* (4 Oct. 1998), 5; Tookey, 'Tonic for Heroine Addicts', 44-5; Bruzzi, 'Elizabeth', 48; Sweet, *Independent on Sunday* (4 Oct. 1998; again), 5.
¹²⁶ Rooney, 'Elizabeth', 33.

interview with the director, another influence unexpected in the context of the period drama comes through equally strongly:

Kapur's copy of Michael Hirst's screenplay begins with a mission statement citing the intrigue of *The Godfather* and the shooting style of *Trainspotting*. The latter influence is chiefly a question of attitude: 'I thought that film was brilliant—it frightened me, it was so good. It's the new cinema: it gave me the confidence to do this,' Kapur says. He adopts a rich, florid, fluid syntax of jump-cuts, high camera angles and fast tracking shots. *The Godfather* is immediately felt in the finished film's murky sense of paranoia and veiled conspiracy.¹²⁷

The idea that *Elizabeth*, via *The Godfather*, was 'a conspiracy thriller in Tudor dress' struck more than one reviewer.¹²⁸ For others, the definitive reference point was further afield: 'the style is Bollywood: rhythmic, spectacular and lit and lensed ... like a giant fresco in motion'.¹²⁹ Again, such references are to be expected, given that Kapur's career to date had been in that context, including his previous film, *Bandit Queen* (1994), which had made such a mark in Western circles. Thus 'the film's operatic visual style owes much to Kapur's training in Bollywood'.¹³⁰ In this context, Bollywood clearly signifies both a genuine influence and a particularly stylized cinema. For reviewers in some of the more upmarket publications, however, Bollywood does not have quite the required cultural cachet and another, more prestigious reference point is required:

Elizabeth may not have too much to do with real history, but it has much to do with real cinema. Swirling overhead crane-shots, chiaroscuro by the gallon, inventive cutting, a showmanship that is never merely show-off. Never mind Bollywood, Welles and Eisenstein come to mind at the movie's high points and you cannot get higher than that.¹³¹

Other reviewers suggested the design of the film was 'an intelligent mainstream assimilation of the visual vernacular created by Peter Greenaway and Derek Jarman—a stylised and ornate idiom'.¹³²

There were some dissenters, though, who thought the film failed to live up to these art-house qualities, finding instead a 'lurid sensationalism. This is Masterpiece Theater for the MTV generation, a *Virgin Queen* for people raised on *Like a Virgin*'.¹³³ Another reviewer found 'the bouncy, kinetic flow of images and the shafts of light that too artfully pierce through the shrouded chambers of various castles' resembled nothing more than 'a pop video'.¹³⁴ A third thought the film 'vulgar and vacuous'; in the scene where Elizabeth dances in a meadow with her girlfriends, for instance, 'we almost expect a voice-over advertising hair condi-

¹²⁷ Charity, *Virgin Records*, 17–18.

¹²⁸ Brown, *The Times* (1 Oct. 1998), 37.

¹²⁹ Nigel Andrew, 'The Queen of All Pictures', *Financial Times* (7 Oct. 1998), 20.

¹³⁰ Raymond, 'Ardor in the Court', from website.

¹³¹ Andrew, 'The Queen of All Pictures', 20; see also J. Hoberman, 'Drama Queens', from website.

¹³² Williams, 'Liz the Lionheart', 6.

¹³³ Dreher, 'A Liz Tailored to MTV', from website.

¹³⁴ Sweet, *Independent on Sunday* (4 Oct. 1998), 5.

tioner'.¹³⁵ A fourth was worried by what he saw as 'the director's fashionable filmmaking' and especially the way in which background information was presented in 'the opening credits' Gothic, Pop-Up Video-style paragraphs.¹³⁶ 'Quality drama has been tainted, it would seem, by the empty populism, the "overall flashiness" of contemporary youth culture ("Generation X in Elizabethan England").¹³⁷ Superficiality, the bane of postmodern culture ('looks great but lacks focus and depth'), and the low-brow, sensationalist pleasures of melodrama, for long the whipping-boy of aesthetes and intellectuals, were not infrequent criticisms:

Elizabeth has flash, dash and panache on the surface, but little more. While no one wants a corseted, airless recitation of historical occurrences, turning the passions of dynastic politics into a got-up *Dynasty* is tremendously off-putting. ... whereas Coppola ennobled pulp melodrama with his artistry, Kapur vulgarizes dramatic history with his garish sensibilities.¹³⁸

For another reviewer,

The gore and brutality of the early scenes suggest that Kapur is still locked into the sleazy, B-movie mode which was so inappropriate to the complexity of *Bandit Queen*, but which could conceivably prove fitting now that any royal thriller has to live up, or rather down, to *La Reine Margot*. ... he communicates ideas in the most rudimentary cinematic language ... the icy lighting and frozen compositions ... strongly suggest[ing] the genre of Gothic horror ...¹³⁹

If for some, the 'dark, Gothic look ... befits the lush dramatics of the piece', for others it is typical of Kapur, whose 'touch isn't exactly gentle. He cudgels home the impact of Catholic zealotry with plenty of God-is-watching aerial shots; other passages are 'overwrought' and there is 'a predilection for artful grotesqueries ... Such slickness elevates style over sentiment'.¹⁴⁰ But if there was a problem with 'a hardcore English historical drama ... directed by a muckraker who betrays influence from *The Godfather* films [with] moments of dramatic import coincid[ing] with thunderstorms', it perhaps did not matter too much because the film was 'too anachronistic and punched-up to be taken seriously'; and if it was, at times, watchable, it was only 'embarrassingly, soapily watchable'.¹⁴¹

We will need to return to the dissenters below, but for the time being, we should simply record the differences of opinion between those who saw the film as a worthy cinematic—for which read artistic—achievement, and those who saw it as vulgarly downmarket. (We should perhaps also record that many of both the

¹³⁵ Duncan-Jones, 'Why Then, O Brawling Love!', 18.

¹³⁶ Blackwelder, 'Elizabeth', from website.

¹³⁷ Sweet, *Independent on Sunday* (4 Oct. 1998), 5; pp. 8, 'Elizabeth' (user comments), posted on Internet Movie database, at IMDb.com.

¹³⁸ Schwartzberg (Review of *Elizabeth*), from website; Sweet, *Independent on Sunday* (4 Oct. 1998), 5.

¹³⁹ Gilbey, 'The Big Picture', 13.

¹⁴⁰ Rooney, 'Elizabeth', 34; Potter, 'Queen Size', from website.

¹⁴¹ Millar, 'Elizabeth is Fun', from website.

celebrants and the dissenters work for the same sorts of relatively upmarket publications, British broadsheet newspapers and the like; there is, in other words, no obvious class divide here.)

STORY-TELLING AND SYMBOLISM

Let's look a little more closely at some more specific aspects of the film's style, beginning with the mode of narration adopted and the way in which the story has been organized. *Elizabeth* is presented as a fairly complex, multi-layered narrative, embracing as it does both a love story and a story of political intrigue and infighting, while at the same time trying to be reasonably faithful to history. Michael Hirst, the scriptwriter, stated in his introduction to the published script that he 'wanted the film to be thick with plots', since this indicated something of the 'complex, labyrinthine and bizarre' politics of the Renaissance period and of Elizabeth's circumstances: 'By allowing into the script a number of plots, rather than teasing out the thread of one, I knew I risked leaving the door of confusion, if not open, then at least ajar. But the risk seemed worthwhile, since it allowed the sensibility of the period to come through.'¹⁴² Narrative complexity was thus intended not as a self-conscious stylistic flourish (it is after all very often a mark of art-house cinema), but as a symbolic representation of contemporary politics. Unfortunately at least one otherwise sympathetic reviewer found intention did not have the required effect, in that the film seemed to avoid 'the didactic and the over-explanatory to the point of being occasionally obscure.'¹⁴³

The action within each scene of the film is often frenetic, but the plotting is highly episodic and the overall pacing artfully slow. This pacing again left commentators divided. For the celebrants, while 'This may be considered a slow ride for some, . . . so are novels and they usually read better than movies. Like a novel, this story comes across more finely paced than most of the rushed 2 hour jobs out there today.'¹⁴⁴ For some of the dissenters, on the other hand, this was indeed, 'despite all the gore and periodic melodrama, . . . a very slow paced film with a rather confusing plot—unfortunately often consequences of attempts to keep, however vaguely, to historical facts. Often, it ended up as just a series of tableaux of beautifully shot scenes in large churches.'¹⁴⁵ At the other extreme, for another type of dissenter, the adrenaline rush of MTV was too evident in the 'feverish pacing, the 'giddy plotting': 'Michael Hirst's scattershot, often disorienting script, coupled with the breakneck pace of Kapur's narrative, drives you crazy. You wish

¹⁴² Hirst, 'Introduction', 9–10.

¹⁴³ French, 'Another Fine Bess', 6.

¹⁴⁴ Timothy Voon, 'Elizabeth' (user comment), posted to rec.arts.movies.reviews newsgroup.

¹⁴⁵ Anon., 'Elizabeth' (user review), 16 Oct. 1998, posted on Internet Movie Database, at IMDb.com; see also Parkes, 'Elizabeth', 92 ('a slow-paced, muddled melodrama'), and Schwartzberg (review of *Elizabeth*), from website ('Royal intrigue is inherently dramatic but "Elizabeth" is pretty sedate stuff, despite multiple murders and sexual shenanigans').

the movie would stop long enough to catch its breath and give us at least a farthing's worth of historical context.'¹⁴⁶ For Hirst, though, historical context might actually be symbolically represented through what others might see as the disorienting narrational device of montage (we should not however assume that intention is the same as effect). Violent juxtapositions within the film

like the burning of the martyrs and the dancing of the women . . . could as a matter of fact bring us much closer to some kind of historical 'truth' than any amount of dead facts and inert details . . . whether of costume, language or furniture. The film itself, the way it was made, as much as its content, was the message.¹⁴⁷

Narrative always effects a dual pull, both the attraction of each individual moment, and the forward drive of the unfolding drama. I argued earlier that this tension is intensified in the costume film because of the attention paid to the allure of the *mise-en-scène*. As a decidedly episodic narrative, *Elizabeth* certainly affords room to explore the discrete pleasures of each scene; as a conspiracy thriller, or indeed as a romance whose outcome is unclear, the film also possesses a relatively strong hermeneutic energy. This dual function was again intended by the scriptwriter:

I wanted the film to be intimate and personal . . . to vibrate with the nervous system of a young woman . . . but also to have a sense of scale, of grandeur, for the young woman was also a Queen. For me, the midsummer pageant on the Thames performed both these functions, and was always a pivotal and seminal scene.

Hirst goes on to explain that he saw the pageant as an intensely romantic moment for Elizabeth and Dudley ('one of the great romantic images in European culture'); but he also wanted to interrupt the scene with political intrigue in the shape of the assassination attempt.

Such scenes have a resonance for me over and above their narrative importance . . . but since this is a film, they must also carry the narrative forward, serve a function. Hence at this point we decided to interrupt the idyll, to reintroduce political reality, in the shape of the assassination attempt. But to hold these two things in tension—the independent and free content of the scene, and then its narrative function—is, I think, one of the principal jobs of the screenwriter.¹⁴⁸

Kapur in fact felt 'the plot should be simpler . . . but Michael Hirst said, "Plot is like a serpent, slithering around you all the time", and so the camera . . . became the serpent and a co-conspirator, representing all the myriad conspiracies that I personally didn't understand.' Kapur thus sought 'to tell the plot with the way the camera moved.'¹⁴⁹ If for some of the dissenters the film consequently seemed overly episodic, this was in part blamed on Kapur, whose 'panache [was] not quite

¹⁴⁶ Maynard, Mr Showbiz Movie Guide (online); Taylor, 'Lese-Majeste', 65; Dreher, 'A Lie Told to MTV', from website.

¹⁴⁷ Hirst, 'Introduction', 9–10.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid. 8.

¹⁴⁹ Raymond, 'Arden in the Court', from website; Charity, 'Virgin Records', 17.

enough to hold the episodic script smoothly together' and who, at his best, was only just able to 'keep a story juddering along'.¹⁵⁰

MISE-EN-SCÈNE AND THE CAMERA EYE

It is not just the narrative organization of the film that is distinctive, since the visual style—the *mise-en-scène*, the camerawork, and the editing—is equally eye-catching. In part what is at stake here is the aesthetics of spectacle. Earlier 'British' period films and costume dramas of the 1980s and 1990s—especially the Merchant Ivory films—developed an aesthetic that was ideal for the spectacular display of heritage properties. As we've seen, this meant slow-paced narratives, a slow cutting rate, and a preponderance of long shots and medium shots rather than close-ups, which allowed heritage iconography to linger on the screen. The difference of some of the shots—the length of time they are on the screen, the spectacular vantage point from which many of them are framed, their detachment from classical conventions for marking establishing shots and point of view shots—invites a reading of them as exceeding narrative requirement. This gap between narrative requirement and the attraction of the *mise-en-scène* thus allows the image to come to the fore precisely as image, as spectacle, as the unlettered display of heritage properties.

Elizabeth adopts a very different aesthetic. It has a much faster-moving narrative, given its thriller elements. There is much more editing, and there are far more close-ups than in most of the earlier 'British' costume dramas of the 1980s and 1990s. In other words, there is less scope for *Elizabeth's* camera to linger over or display heritage iconography. Where the average shot length of *Howards End* was 8.92 seconds, the average shot length of *Elizabeth* is little more than half that, at 4.67 seconds (with one montage sequence cutting together nineteen shots in sixteen seconds). *Elizabeth* is thus up there with the fastest cut American films (when it came to making zippy movies, the Americans were always in front¹⁵¹). There is consequently much less time for the spectator to gaze uninterruptedly at spectacular architecture, landscapes, interiors, and costumes by comparison with *Howards End*, but this doesn't stop the film appearing decidedly spectacular. What we are faced with, however, is a very different regime of spectacle. Where the Merchant Ivory films are contemplative, *Elizabeth* is frenetic. The speed of developments and the constant bustle of activity leave no room for the camera to caress period details. It would however be misleading to reduce the spectacle of *Elizabeth* to a dynamic cutting rate or to narrative energy. Spectacle is more properly about what we see and how we see it—how the images are organized, how audiences are invited to look at or participate in the image. At the same time,

¹⁵⁰ Walker, 'Ruff Justice', 27; Gilbey, 'The Big Picture', 13.

¹⁵¹ Barry Salt, *Film Style and Technology: History and Analysis* (London: Starword, 1983), 213.

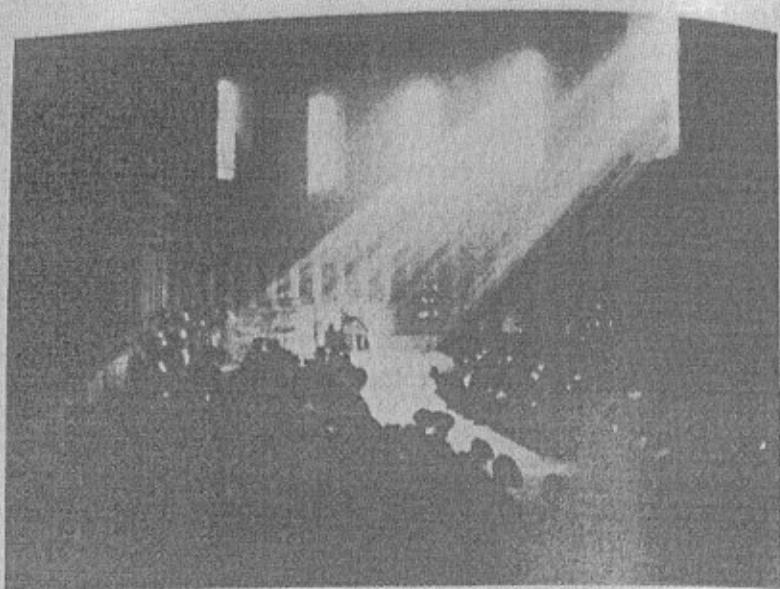
clearly the very rush of images in *Elizabeth*—the speed of the editing, the speed at which the images pass before us—contributes to its spectacular visceral feel.

Elizabeth's spectacular attractions are drawn from the eclectic range of genres mixed together in the film. Thus the film draws on Kapur's background in Bollywood, with its intense colour scheme, its dramatic camera movements, and its sense of theatricality. It draws on the conventions of the historical epic, with its crowd scenes and cavernous sets, its set-piece sequences of pageantry and courtly ritual, its shots of horsemen thundering across open landscapes, and its panoramic view of the battlefield strewn with dead and dying bodies after the English army has been destroyed by Mary of Guise's troops in Scotland. It draws on the rich *mise-en-scène* of the quality film, from Sternberg and Eisenstein to *La Reine Margot*, but also the choreographed violence and expressionism of *The Godfather* and the post-MTV aesthetics of *Trainspotting*. In each case, the sense of spectacle is greatly enhanced by the sheer scale, magnitude, or intensity of the strategy—the size of the crowds or the breathtaking expanse of the battlefield, with the castle looming behind, for instance. In part, what is at stake in this visual extravagance is the size of the budget and the consequently relatively high production values, certainly for a European film. But the sense of visual extravagance is also partly the result of the excessively and self-consciously stylized way in which the film-makers put the film together.

Despite this eclectic range of stylistic influences, *Elizabeth* still shares some formal and iconographic characteristics with earlier heritage films. There are for instance still plenty of heritage costumes, properties, and landscapes on display in the film, even if there is much less sense of the camera lingering on those properties, mainly because of the relative brevity of the shots. And if some of the shots are brief, some are also very flamboyant—and once again frequently divorced from the conventional means of establishing space or character point of view. The most marked shots in this respect are the frequent towering vertical shots, some of them bird's eye shots, others taken from an extreme low angle looking vertically up. The film also uses a constantly moving camera, which often seems to be looking through or around something at the proceedings (shooting through gauze and other materials, or round bars, stone carvings, or vast pillars, or through architectural frames within the camera frame). Such shots can again be understood as artistically rather than narratively motivated, although they clearly also have an expressive function (Kapur talks about them as expressing the voice of destiny, of something greater than the mere individual¹⁵²). Thus they accentuate the aesthetic difference of the film while at the same time creating a spectacular feel that is closely related to the use of heritage properties.

The *mise-en-scène* throughout the film is rich and artful. Many of the interiors are set in castles, and while there are obviously some cavernous spaces, the film-makers have also created some frighteningly dark and claustrophobic areas,

¹⁵² In the voice-over commentary he provides to the film on the American version of the DVD.



27 Architectural lighting in *Elizabeth*.

especially in the opening scenes during Mary's reign of terror. When Elizabeth succeeds her sister on the throne, more light is thrown on the proceedings. The banquet scenes especially are riots of colour, sound, and music, while there are some gloriously busy crowd scenes at court. As I've already noted, *mise-en-scene* in the period drama must perform several functions. It must provide a diegetically plausible narrative setting, but it must also provide a relatively historically accurate setting; most film-makers will also ensure that the *mise-en-scene* is both aesthetically pleasing and capable of carrying symbolic narrative weight. These functions will not always or necessarily operate in unison. *Elizabeth*, not unexpectedly, demonstrates the difficulty of achieving a meaningful blend of functions.

At one level there was the problem of how to achieve an authentic period look, with landscapes for instance untainted by modern developments. In this context, the fact that the film-makers had shot the film in heritage properties underlined 'the authoritative tread of the production'. In period drama, though, the authentic must very often be newly manufactured: 'Sixteenth century England does not exist', as Kapur noted, 'so we had to create it.'¹⁵⁷ That process of recreating the past is of course very often as much about blending in with well-established convention as it is about 'historical accuracy'. In attempting to create an authentic look

¹⁵⁷ Wilson, 'All the Queen's Castles', 20.

in *Elizabeth*, the film-makers actually attempted to break with convention to achieve a renewed realist effect—to achieve what has been called *transgressive realism*.¹⁵⁸ Northumberland, for instance, was chosen as one of the key locations for the film because of its 'bleakness': 'We wanted to get away from the "chocolate box" feel so many period movies have', explained producer Alison Owen. 'Northumberland is beautiful, but in a very stark way.'¹⁵⁹

Starkness, bleakness, a bid for transgressive realism: this may have been one motivation for selecting Northumberland, but the acknowledgement that Northumberland is also beautiful should remind us of another function of *mise-en-scene* as spectacle. As one reviewer put it, 'the real scene-stealers are the locations.'¹⁶⁰ Promotional material was not slow to alert people to the claim that *Elizabeth* was filmed 'amid some of the most spectacular historical locations in the UK' (nor was it slow to suggest to other film-makers around the world that they might consider using some of these same locations).¹⁶¹ For some reviewers, as I noted earlier, these locations were not simply spectacular but had a patriotic function too: 'The film delivers splendidly in the way it looks. England furnishes a wealth of wonderful, too-long neglected locations and they offer a marvellous setting for the big set-pieces . . . [The] cinematographer . . . revels in the Englishness of the settings.'¹⁶² For other reviewers, while the spectacle of the locations was not in doubt, there was a definite sense that the *mise-en-scene* was conventional, familiar: 'lots of the pageantry that goes traditionally with the territory of historical chronicle . . . [much of it] set among stunning shots of Merchant Ivory-type heritage locations such as Haddon Hall and Durham Cathedral.'¹⁶³ For still others, it was the mixture of the unexpected—'filmed in the vibrant colours and rich textures of Indian cinema'—and the more predictable—'stunning locations from Haddon Hall in Derbyshire to Durham Cathedral'—that made 'the entire movie . . . a sensual adventure'.¹⁶⁴

Another of the undoubted pleasures of *Elizabeth* was the 'ornate costumes', remarkable for both their number and their splendour: 'Blanchett had a total of 27 different costumes for her role, ranging from relatively simple smocks to fantastic bejewelled gowns.'¹⁶⁵ Indeed, 'this film is all about costumes. . . . It becomes just a succession of costumes and images, like a music video.'¹⁶⁶ As a result, as one

¹⁵⁸ See Roman Jakobson, 'On Realism in Art', in Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska (eds.), *Readings in Russian Poetics* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1978), 38–46; Paul Wilentz, 'On Realism in the Cinema', in John Ellis (ed.), *Screen Reader 1* (London: SEPT, 1977), 47–54.

¹⁵⁹ Wilson, 'All the Queen's Castles', 20.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ Anon., 'Elizabeth I', *British Film and TV Facilities Journal* (Spring 1998), 43; see also the Press booklet.

¹⁶² Tooley, 'Tonic for Heroine Addicts', 44–5.

¹⁶³ Gerald Kaufman, 'Royal Flush', *New Statesman* (2 Oct. 1998), 36–7.

¹⁶⁴ Diane Brook, 'Elizabeth I is Known as the Virgin Queen. So Why does a New Film Show Her Having Sex with a Courtier?', *Maid on Sunday* (13 Sept. 1998), 52–3.

¹⁶⁵ Haggard, 'Elizabeth', 18; Wilson, 'All the Queen's Castles', 20.

¹⁶⁶ Iago-6, 'Elizabeth' (user comments), posted on Internet Movie Database, at IMDb.com.

reviewer put it, 'the film looks fabulous, and in the costume dramas... that's often enough'.¹⁶³ For others, though, part of the success of the film was not simply that it looked good, that some splendid costumes and locations were on display, but that they were 'skilfully used', they had a narrative function.¹⁶⁴ Thus the castle locations may have added to 'the authoritative tread of the production' but they did so 'not just as backdrops': 'The large hewn stones are a visual analogue of Elizabeth's hard stony era. The walls, rooms, and spaces speak of people playing for high stakes—and for keeps'.¹⁶⁵ Similarly, while 'the photography and design' and 'the regulation silks, cloisters and candelabras' are 'sumptuous', they 'also help to carry part of the burden of explanation, as this is a world in which objects and architecture speak as loudly as words and glances'.¹⁶⁶

In this instance, intention and effect are in unison. According to the official website for the film, Kapur and his production designer, John Myhre, were influenced by a Russian film version of *Macbeth*.¹⁶⁷ 'When I watched *Macbeth*', Myhre is reported as saying, 'I knew exactly why Shekhar wanted me to see it: the use of stone. The film literally starts on the stone of the castle, which looks like it has been carved out of a cliff. Shekhar loved that look; to him, the stone represented England and destiny. We used this look for the Whitehall Palace scenes in particular.' Myhre found other narratively useful details in the architecture of Durham Cathedral, one of the main settings for the film's interiors: 'doorways that felt like they had teeth, and windows that looked like eyes peeping in... We were trying to get this feeling that Elizabeth is never alone—even when she is alone—and to capture this whole feeling of conspiracy and intrigue that is prevalent throughout the Palace.' Clearly, then, settings were chosen for reasons of both historical authenticity and narrative meaning. Myhre underlines the narrativity of *mise-en-scène* still further when discussing the influence of another film, Josef von Sternberg's *The Scarlet Empress* (1934):

In *The Scarlet Empress*, the Princess leaves her beautiful home to live in this wonderful castle, only to find that the castle is a frightening place to be, full of unsettling imagery. In a way, this is what goes on with Elizabeth. She leaves the security of Hatfield House for the isolation of Whitehall Palace. Shekhar also latched on to the way that Josef von Sternberg liked to photograph scenes through veils. I thought this would be a very interesting look to heighten the intrigue of the romantic scenes between Elizabeth and Dudley.¹⁶⁸

What emerges from this quotation is that the narrative functionality of props and settings is in part a question of their presentation in filmic terms. The reverential and tasteful tableau shot may be typical of heritage cinema, but *Elizabeth* is certainly not a film in which the camera stands back and simply observes the

¹⁶³ Mathews, 'A Pridelful Queen Cuts to the Chaste', from website.

¹⁶⁴ French, 'Another Fine Bess', 6.

¹⁶⁵ Carr, 'Blanchett Portrays "Elizabeth" for the Ages', from website.

¹⁶⁶ Marshall, 'Elizabeth', 28.

¹⁶⁷ I've been unable to identify which film this is.

¹⁶⁸ John Myhre, quoted on the official website for *Elizabeth*, in the section on John Myhre and production design.

settings, interior designs, costumes, and performances. On the contrary, as one reviewer put it, 'instead of squatting for minutes on end observing some inspiring tableau, the camera soars overhead, glides or jabs, eager to follow the action'.¹⁶⁹ Indeed, the camera is constantly moving, and is in fact quite often *unmotivated* by action or narrative. As I noted above, the film-makers also favour the eccentric or unexpected angle, with the camera not infrequently looking vertically up from the ground, or down from lofty ceilings. But if some of the camera positions do lend towards the distanced, observational and spectacular tableau, the film-makers are certainly not afraid to use the close-up. Nor are they afraid to use non-naturalistic effects, such as slow motion, fades to white, heavily out of focus backgrounds, jump-cuts, and flashbacks.

TASTE WARS

The film's style split reviewers. The danger with such a rich, stylized film is that it will come over as no more than 'a variety show, full of stunt effects', but in fact the film's celebrants found it 'an organic and intelligent whole', its style integral to the meaning of the film.¹⁷⁰ This was because for some the style functioned symbolically. Thus one reviewer argued that 'its dramatic overheads, deep-focus compositions, and baroque bustling through cold castles... emphasize the heroine's search for a center in this unbalanced world'. Another saw 'the dramatic contrasts of chiaroscuro, and the sinister lighting of flesh against funereal gloom [intensifying] the ominous patterns of plotting and counterplotting'. A third enjoyed the way Kapur interpreted the 'themes of illusion, imprisonment, and subterfuge in rich, rhapsodic imagery. Curtains—yards and yards of 'em—emerge as the dominant leitmotif'.¹⁷¹ For others, the style was indicative of an intelligent reworking of the generic conventions of the period drama. The way it pushed at so many of those conventions enabled it to work as a successful piece of contemporary filmmaking, 'made with as much concern for modern sensibilities as for its selected facts of history'.¹⁷² Thus while the film has 'the requisite scenes of court ceremony and spectacle', the stylistic innovations of the film mean that they are presented without any of the 'conventional stuffiness' and thus have 'an anarchy and spirit about them that seem entirely fresh'.¹⁷³ As a result, not only is *Elizabeth* 'far removed from the colourful pageant of most British historical movies, but also no recent cinema trip into the past has been so enjoyable'.¹⁷⁴

But the film also had its detractors, for whom its style was indulgent, 'obtru-

¹⁶⁹ Brown, *The Times* (1 Oct. 1998), 37.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ Hoberman, 'Drama Queens', from website; Quinn, 'The Lust Years of the Virgin Queen', 42; Ponce, 'Queen Size', from website.

¹⁷² Brown, *The Times* (1 Oct. 1998), 37.

¹⁷³ Rooney, 'Elizabeth', 33–4.

¹⁷⁴ French, 'Another Fine Bess', 6; Brown, *The Times* (1 Oct. 1998), 37.

sive, a confused, sensationalist variety show, desperately in need of 'a firmer production hand' to bring its disparate strands together:

Kapur's direction . . . is a curious mixture of the conventional and the outré. He provides lots of the pageantry that goes traditionally with the territory of historical chronicle. . . . And then, disconcertingly scattered throughout the movie, are those Berkeleyesque overhead shots, interspersed with slow-motion sequences and moments in which camera exposures are bleached with light. This melange sometimes works well and sometimes seems tum. . . .¹⁷⁵

This is not outright dismissal, but an anxiety about what is a typically postmodern mixing of genres and styles, the imposition of 'an ultra-modern approach' to the representation of the past, but also to a genre with well-defined conventions.¹⁷⁶ Under the pressure of this

of-the-moment style . . . the picture begins to unravel. Entire scenes seem out of character for the mood of the film—like shots of a Vatican spy skulking through castle shadows in action movie-style slow-motion . . . and Kapur's use of upside-down camera angles, meant to portray disorientation . . . instead are so out of place they jar the audience out of the story.¹⁷⁷

Where the celebrants had seen *Elizabeth* as a successful intervention in the genre, several of the dissenters thus experienced its style as jarring. And if it wasn't jarring, then it was superficial, style for style's sake. Thus for one reviewer, it seemed 'annoyingly enamored with its own campy, post-feminist cleverness'. For another, it was

too self-conscious in its desire to leave most English costume dramas, well, in the closet. . . . The problem is that it [boasts] a showy, highly resistible artiness that may put off as many moviegoers as it attracts. One minute the screen blurs and bleeds to white, the next Kapur indulges in a horror movie technique or two that suggest a corseted equivalent of *Halloween*. . . . Like its star, *Elizabeth* is smart and savvy and more than a shade too knowing. If it weren't so determined to be cool, it might even generate some heat.¹⁷⁸

This sense that style had erased all feeling was not atypical. For one reviewer, 'A stark montage of corpses on a battlefield feels too art-directed really to shock.' For another, 'despite the sumptuous regalia, exterminating priests, misty castle ramparts, feverish couplings and occasional violence, the conspicuous lack of emotional resonance makes this film *Queen Margot's* poor cold English cousin'. A third was also

left cold. I hadn't been able to invest emotionally in the protagonist because I didn't understand her motives . . . I didn't know where she was coming from, or what she was after.

¹⁷⁵ Blackwelder, 'Elizabeth', from website; Walker, 'Ruff Justice', 27; Kaufman, 'Royal Flush', 36–7.

¹⁷⁶ Blackwelder, 'Elizabeth', from website.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁸ Travers, 'Elizabeth'; Blackwelder, 'Elizabeth', from website; Wolf, 'Make Way for the Tudor Twins', 14.

That's strange, since *Elizabeth* is largely a character study, and if I didn't get a good insight into the main character, it could have only been moderately successful.¹⁷⁹

As one generally sympathetic reviewer puts it, Kapur's risk-taking intervention in the stylistics of the costume drama at its best 'captures the danger of the times, a confusion and vulnerability that extends to gender and sexuality . . . what Kapur calls the chaos of the moment'. But risk-taking is a risky business: 'Chaos cuts both ways, and the movie is sometimes clumsy and crude.'¹⁸⁰

What can we learn from this dissent amongst commentators on *Elizabeth*? At the very least, we should note that form does not determine meaning, that interpretation and pleasure are not bound by the structure and style of a film, that intention cannot necessarily dictate effect, that one's man's meat is another man's poison. But does this mean simply that there's no accounting for taste, or can we explain the grounds on which the dissent takes place? In very broad terms, we might suggest that those who favour the film's stylistic innovations do so in what is now, at least in the West, more or less an art-house or cult-film context (Eisenstein, Welles, Jarman, Greenaway, foreign-language film-making). Many (though admittedly not all) who *dislike* the film, however, seem worried precisely that what *ought* to be an art-house film, or at least a safe, upmarket quality film, has broken out of the confines of the specialist circuit and into the multiplexes, addressing the MTV generation in what seems a pretentious, flashy, attention-grabbing manner too much a part of contemporary consumer culture. There is undeniably a struggle over taste taking place here.

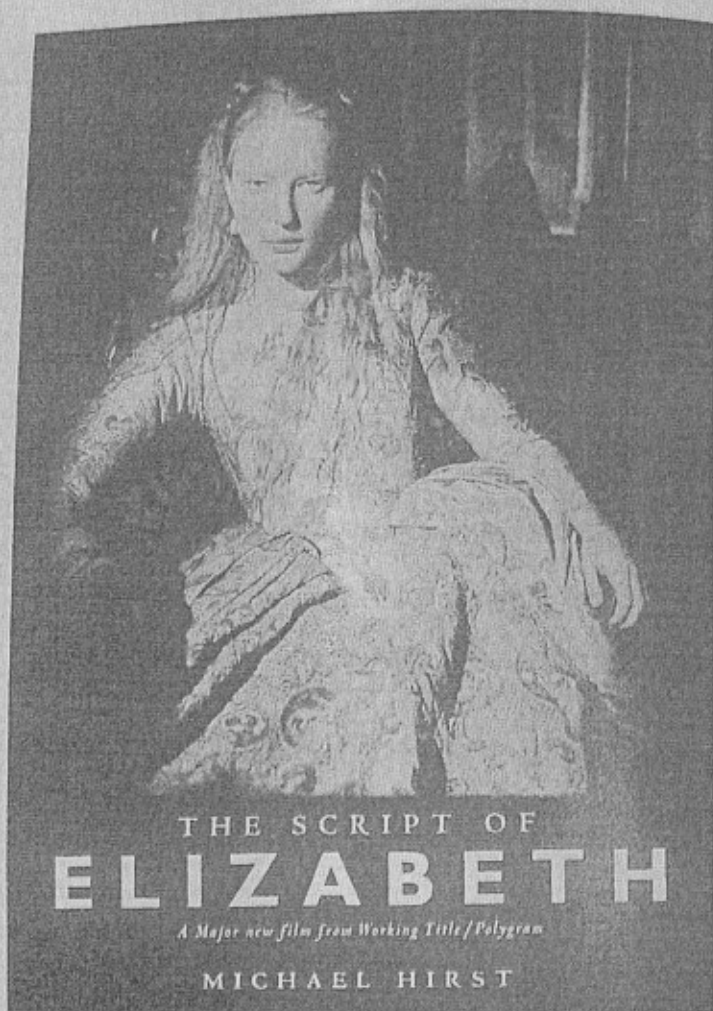
There was also perhaps a struggle over what sort of film we are watching, a struggle which is surely symptomatic of a period film which tries to be different, to work like *Trainspotting*, but which, at the same time, does not want to be too irreverent, does not want to break entirely with the conventions of historical authenticity or with the taste of the Merchant Ivory audience. Taste wars are in some ways inevitable when the film in question tries to be both a modern conspiracy thriller in Tudor dress and a romantic period costume drama. The different responses of dissenters and celebrants are in this sense the product of a film addressed to markedly different audiences at the same time.

CAMEOS, CASTING, AND STAR APPEAL

The attempt to maximize audience reach is evident too in the casting of the film—and again the strategy came in for some criticism. In some ways, the problem is a familiar one of the tension between the discrete attraction and the overarching narrative: to what extent are the attractions of stars, locations, production design, costumes, music, romantic plot, and so on, integrated into an organic, cohesive

¹⁷⁹ Sweet, *Independent on Sunday*, 5; Contreras, 'Girl, Interrupted', from website; Luke Buckmaster, 'Elizabeth' (user review), posted to rec.arts.movies.reviews newsgroup.

¹⁸⁰ Charity, 'Virgin Records', 17–18.



28. The cover of *The Script of Elizabeth*, by Michael Hirst

haughtily into the camera, with the shadowy figure of a would-be assassin behind her. Although this is similar to the image used in American publicity, it is different to the main publicity image used in the UK.

The CD provides a typical example of the way in which the modern media work, since it was published by the Decca label, which was owned by PolyGram, who also funded the film. Film and CD thus fed off each other to the mutual benefit of PolyGram. While the CD was available in the usual outlets and bought

by fans of the film, it also had a more specific, upmarket appeal given its classical music connotations, with performances by the New London Consort, directed by Philip Pickett, and several pieces of 'authentic' period music, ranging from Tallis and Byrd to Mozart and Elgar. A sticker on the front of the CD suggested another selling angle: 'From the composer of *Shine*' (David Hirschfelder). The CD was in fact heavily promoted in classical music outlets, which both ensured that the CD sold well (indeed, it sold out of its first UK imprint), and publicized the film to the sort of upmarket consumers seen as the core audience for the film.

Another way of reaching that audience was through literary tie-ins. Unlike many of the English heritage films of the 1980s and 1990s, *Elizabeth* was not directly based on a literary source, but the marketing for the film still managed to establish literary connections for the film. First, there was the published screenplay, a large format, beautifully designed book, with dozens of wonderful production stills and portrait photographs in colour, and a 'serious' introduction by Hirst. In other words, it was a relatively upmarket publication. In his introduction to the screenplay, Hirst further invokes a literary heritage, noting that the image of Elizabeth and Dudley (Leicester) at the midsummer water pageant drew on a passage in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, while his attempts to juxtapose the beautiful and the violent in the film were inspired by Elizabethan poetry, and particularly the work of Sir Thomas Wyatt.¹⁹²

Secondly, and at the other end of the literary scale, there was a novelization of the film, a much more downmarket publication, which made no attempt to aspire to the literary high-brow, and was quite clearly addressed to a female readership. The novelization is of course a despised, non-canonical literary format, and this one is written according to the conventions of popular historical romance fiction, an equally despised genre. Fact and fiction are quite openly woven together in the novelization, but if the historical background, the political intrigue, and the violence of the film are consistently maintained in the novelization, it is also much more blatantly focused on affairs of the heart, on desire, romance, and sex. The back cover blurb stresses the romantic elements too, whereas the blurb for the screenplay makes more of *Elizabeth*'s filmic connections. It is in such promotional details, in the differences between the back-cover blurbs for screenplay and novelization, that the marketing strategy for *Elizabeth* is laid bare, its address to different audiences and tastes displayed for all to see.

Another important way in which the appeal of *Elizabeth* spills over the edges of the film itself is through its insertion into the culture of heritage tourism. As we've already noted, heritage iconography is still very much present in *Elizabeth*, and it is still very beautiful, even if it is displayed much less languorously than in a film like *Howards End*. Majestic castles and pastoral landscapes act as the fleeting backdrop to narrative episodes or scenes of pageantry and ritual; ancient interiors provide the magnificent settings for numerous scenes both intimate and epic; the camera will often foreground architectural details; and the costumes are

¹⁹² Hirst, 'Introduction', 8-9.

stunning. This iconography was then carefully exploited in a way that tied the film into the wider field of heritage, travel, and the tourist gaze. Thus, however much the film-makers may have wanted to distance themselves from the Merchant Ivory tradition, this aspect of the film's reception was shared with earlier costume dramas.

It is not simply that the film was 'a sumptuous historical drama', but also that it 'tours some of 16th century England's most desirable residences'; it is not simply that the film was 'an astounding historical spectacle, a costume romp', but that it took 'us on a breathtaking tour of some of the most stunning buildings in Britain, many of which are open to the public'.¹⁹³ For all its difference, there was still a concerted exploitation of heritage spectacle in discourses surrounding the film; this was still one way of opening the film up, engaging with different audience interests, encouraging different ways of consuming heritage spectacle, spectacle that may be detached from narrative requirement. It is also at this point that *Elizabeth* becomes more than a film, more than something to be appreciated in the confines of the cinema auditorium. Through its textual formation—its aesthetic of display—and through the discourses that circulate around it, that vaunt and valorize it, *Elizabeth* becomes a tourist brochure, an intervention in the wider heritage culture. The Press Booklet, the official website, and various other promotional organs, listed all twelve 'period' locations, including Haddon Hall, Alwark Castle, Bamburgh Castle, Warkworth Castle, Raby Castle, Chillingham Castle, Durham Cathedral, and York Minster, giving details of their history, their architecture, and how they were used in the film.¹⁹⁴ Perhaps this does suggest a gradual change in the secondary discourses that circulate around heritage films, a shift from seeing costume dramas, historical films, and quality literary adaptations in terms of a culturally refined, object-venerating museum aesthetic to seeing them in more populist terms through the discourses and practices of heritage travel and cultural tourism. ('Seen the film?' asks the *Daily Mail*. 'Now visit the location ... [and] relive the movie'.¹⁹⁵) At the same time, there is still a clear sense in which heritage materials become the focus of secondary discourses in the promotion and reception of the film. And as we've seen this discourse was already being mobilized around the much more culturally refined *Howards End*.

The discourse of heritage tourism, the presentation of *Elizabeth* as heritage showcase, is foregrounded in two full-page articles in British newspapers, both of which were organized around *Elizabeth*'s spectacular historical attractions. The *Daily Mail* devoted a page to situating the *Elizabeth* experience historically (Fig. 29). Alongside a long article on the making of the film, the *Mail* presented readers with a tour guide to the twelve 'period' locations. Under the headline, 'Reel history. How you can visit the historic locations used in *Elizabeth*', the article identified

¹⁹³ Rees, 'From Goals to Roles', 12; Wilson, 'All the Queen's Castles', 20.

¹⁹⁴ See e.g. the Press Booklet, 31–4, and Anon., 'Elizabeth I', 43.

¹⁹⁵ Uncredited clipping on the 'Elizabeth' fiche at the British Film Institute National Library, *Daily Mail* (3 Apr. 1999), 55.

the scenes shot in each place and gave details of how the locations could be visited, complete with phone numbers. The article was illustrated with an 'olde worlde' map showing the locations, and glossy postcard images of Bamburgh Castle and Durham Cathedral.¹⁹⁶

Another full page in the *Travel* section of the *Independent on Sunday* was given over to a piece on Northumberland's castles, using *Elizabeth*'s locations as the entry-point—or perhaps more precisely, the selling-point: '*Elizabeth* is just the latest of many films to be made in Northumbria. The dramatic castles and coastline are hard to beat: centuries of keeping marauding Scots at bay has left a rich heritage for the film industry.' The article was illustrated with a huge half-page colour photograph of Warkworth Castle seen across a lake and greenery (courtesy of the British Tourist Authority). It transpires that the locations have a heritage even as locations: 'Shakespeare, as well as Shekhar Kapur, knew Warkworth, and chose it as one of the settings in *Henry IV, Part I*, describing it as "this worm-eaten hold of ragged stone".'

But it is Bamburgh which gets into all the films. The splendid sweep of sands with the complete castle on the cliff is irresistible to location managers, and has starred in *Ivanhoe*, *Kidnapped*, *The Secret Life of Ian Fleming*. Derek Jarman made his acclaimed film *The Tempest* here. Even *El Cid*, starring Charlton Heston, has a shot of Bamburgh Castle. Inside the entrance hall is a plaque recounting the films: *Hunting Tower* 1927, *Becket* 1964, *The Devils* 1969, *Mary Queen of Scots* 1972. Naturally, it had a bit part in *Elizabeth* as well. ... Such star quality is always recognised.

This particular newspaper article functions very much as a tourist guide, with a 'factfile' giving details of how to get there, where to stay, what to visit (with contact details), the address of the Northumbria Tourist Board, and a map showing key locations. The article also tells you which approach to take to some of the castles, to ensure the least twentieth-century view.¹⁹⁷ *Elizabeth* also featured on the 'Movie Map' issued by the British Tourist Authority in the summer of 1999, another invitation to visit heritage locations that have appeared in films.

Moya Luckett argues that there is something different about the heritage spectacle in *Elizabeth*, in that it reveals not just a romanticized touristic vision of historical Englishness but also its other side, the cruelties that took place inside the majestic castles.¹⁹⁸ It is certainly the case that, by moving back to the sixteenth century, the film-makers have created a sort of pre-modern space in which to play out dangerously primitive and irrational passions. While not strictly medieval, it draws on the connotations of medievalism with its scenes of murderous priests, grotesque torture and gory violence. But is this really a new departure in the way in which heritage space is used in English costume dramas and historical films? I

¹⁹⁶ Wilson, 'All the Queen's Castles', 20.

¹⁹⁷ Hilary Macaskill, 'A Castle Fit for a Celluloid Queen', *Independent on Sunday*, *Travel* section (25 Oct. 1998), 7.

¹⁹⁸ Moya Luckett, 'Image and Nation in 1990s British Cinema', in Robert Murphy (ed.), *British Cinema of the 1990s* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), 90–1.

All the Queen's castles

Heritage tourism is a booming industry in England. The country's castles, palaces and stately homes are being visited by millions of tourists each year. The industry is worth billions of pounds to the economy and is a major source of employment. The industry is also a major source of income for the government. The industry is also a major source of income for the government.



Elizabeth I reigns over England. So why does a new film seem to her as a necessary event? And why all making the movie nearly three decades later?

A 1998 by MICHAEL JACKSON in the director's hand. The film and production are presented in partnership with English Heritage.



REEL HISTORY

How you can visit the historic locations used in *Elizabeth*

1. Hampton Palace, Northampton
2. Hampton Palace, Northampton
3. Hampton Palace, Northampton
4. Hampton Palace, Northampton
5. Hampton Palace, Northampton
6. Hampton Palace, Northampton
7. Hampton Palace, Northampton
8. Hampton Palace, Northampton



9. Hampton Palace, Northampton
10. Hampton Palace, Northampton
11. Hampton Palace, Northampton
12. Hampton Palace, Northampton
13. Hampton Palace, Northampton
14. Hampton Palace, Northampton
15. Hampton Palace, Northampton
16. Hampton Palace, Northampton

29. 'You've seen the film, now visit the castle': a full page 'heritage tourism' spread from the *Daily Mail*

argued earlier that even the far more polite adaptations of the work of Jane Austen, E. M. Forster, Oscar Wilde, Henry James, and Evelyn Waugh used heritage space ambivalently. In films from *Chariots of Fire* to *Howards End* to *The Wings of the Dove*, matters of class, gender, and ethnic oppression were explored and illicit sexual liaisons took place in heritage settings. At the level of the narrative, the national past was almost always depicted as troubled, with inheritance and identity in crisis. In *Howards End*, Leonard Bast even dies a sort of medieval death after being attacked with a sword by Charles Wilcox!

Such examples notwithstanding, there is no denying that the move further back into the past in *Elizabeth*—but also in another Working Title film, *Phunkett and Macbratne*—takes us from genteel drawing-rooms to vast stone castles where less decorous and much more overtly threatening passions can be played out. In effect, the studiously picturesque landscapes and buildings of so many other English costume dramas have been reworked according to the aesthetics of the sublime. In part, it is a shift in scale, from the relative intimacy of the drawing-room to the awesome magnitude of the castle. In part, it is a question of sensibility, the reassuring surface decorum of the earlier films replaced by the terror and astonishing of *Elizabeth*'s sublime imagery. As the English costume drama meets the thriller genre on the one hand and retreats towards medievalism on the other, heritage England becomes a far more dangerous space to inhabit. But that has by no means been a hindrance to the tourist industry; for all its differences from earlier heritage films, *Elizabeth* was still taken up within the same discourse of heritage and tourism.

'IT'S 1554—SO NO MACDONALD'S, THEN': MODERNITY, IRREVERENCE, AND THE INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY¹⁹⁹

The heritage industry repackages the past for modern-day consumers and participants. The same impulse—to re-present or modernize history—lay behind the production of what one of the producers called a "modern" film about a historical character. Their view was that 'Elizabeth I... had so much potential for a modern audience'²⁰⁰ (Apparently the screenplay was originally titled 'Elizabeth I', but the American distributors 'felt that made the film seem more dated'.²⁰¹) This bid for modernity meant that the film-makers were not overly concerned to establish historical accuracy during the unfolding of the narrative. There is no insertion of dates as new developments take place, for instance, and in any case chronological time is quite radically conflated in the film. Although the events depicted probably cover about twenty years of official history, there is little sense of time passing in this manner; Elizabeth herself hardly seems to age, for instance. The film thus often glosses over the facts as they are accepted by most historians, and the producers and distributors of the film made little effort to suggest otherwise. Their approach is neatly summarized in one of the taglines used in publicity for the film:

Forget About Pulp Fiction
Anyone For A Slice Of Pulp Fact

¹⁹⁹ Anon., 'Elizabeth' (review), 19 (Nov. 1998), 18.

²⁰⁰ Quoted on the official website.

²⁰¹ Schwartz, quoted in *Classical Hollywood Cinema: Chronology Achievement*, 8.

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN LIBRARY

This is a clever promotional gambit, given its reference to one of the most talked-about and influential cult films of the 1990s, its frank acknowledgement of the populist sensibility, and its play on the relation between fact and fiction (indeed the published screenplay was presented as 'a masterly weaving of fact and fiction'²⁵¹).

Yet at the same time this is a historical film and it is presented as such in various ways, even if historical accuracy is not allowed to become a fetish. The titles at the beginning and end of the film do establish dates and facts, most of the characters are based on actual historical personages, chronology may be condensed but it is still in broad terms maintained, and costume and production design do not fly entirely in the face of authenticity. The historical discourse is further invoked on the official website for the film, which offers several pages of 'proper history' as background to the film, covering the period from the reign of Henry VIII to that of James I. A similar parade of historical detail could be found on the reverse of the 'tarot cards' distributed by the American distributors ('It's all about giving background').²⁵² This ambivalence of the film with regard to history generated considerable debate; it will, I hope, prove instructive to examine the terms of this debate.

In his introduction to the screenplay, Michael Hirst wrote:

The first thing to say about *Elizabeth* is that it is a film, not a documentary. Many of the scenes are based on historical fact (or what passes for historical fact), but others are not. Of course, before I even began to write I had done a huge amount of historical research but the reason behind the research was to discover a way into the material, a lever to shift it with, what film people call 'an angle'. Unlike life, films have to have a dramatic shape.²⁵³

What this suggests is that history is *Elizabeth's* backstory; it is the setting for other dramatic narratives, but is not the narrative itself. For a journalist writing for one of the industry's trade papers, and thus attuned to the requirements of entertaining film-making, this relegation of history to backstory does not constitute a problem: 'The life of Elizabeth I is not an easy subject for a film . . . —there is a risk of all that history congesting the drama. Here, except briefly in the first part, it doesn't.'²⁵⁴ Drama is the important thing for the mainstream audience, not historical accuracy, which can get in the way of a good story. Thus, if *Elizabeth* 'plays fast and loose with history', it does so in order to be able to present 'a vivid, sweeping portrait of her early life and times'.²⁵⁵ If 'historians will no doubt have a ball quibbling over the telescoping of events into a movie-friendly time-frame', this does not mean the rest of us have to: 'Kapur . . . doesn't really give a damn that some of the film's finer historical points wander away from the truth. And nor do we.'²⁵⁶

²⁵¹ Back-cover blurb; Hirst, *The Script of Elizabeth*.
²⁵² Schwartz, quoted in Grove, 'Web Site and Tarot Cards', 8.
²⁵³ Hirst, 'Introduction', 7. ²⁵⁴ Marshall, 'Elizabeth', 28.
²⁵⁵ Charity, 'Elizabeth', 79.
²⁵⁶ Unattributed comment from *Sunday Telegraph*, quoted in Teri Greener, 'Show People', *Guardian* Guide (14 Oct. 1998), 20; Richards, 'Long Live the Queen', 12.

The most controversial aspect of the film was that it was 'decidedly erotic' for a biography of Elizabeth I, daring to suggest that she had a healthy sex-life before she became the Virgin Queen of history.²⁵⁷ Hirst justified this sexual experience as a necessary plot development, a logical narrative motivation, something that needed to take place in order for the film to proceed:

For putting Elizabeth into bed with Dudley, I have already been branded a heretic. Now neither you nor I, nor any of the rent-a-quote historians know with any certainty whether they were actually lovers. Nobody disputes that they behaved like lovers, but her virginity is still highly prized, and an essential part of her status as an icon. . . . [By] showing them as lovers, I have not changed the course of English history. . . . The characters in the film sleep with one another, because that is the logical expression of their desire, their passion, their love. . . .²⁵⁸

It was here that the tension between official history and filmic narrative came into sharpest focus. The film-makers were trying to tell a love story that was also a story of political intrigue and infighting, but they were also trying to be reasonably faithful to history. For them, certain plot developments had to be there; the problem for historians was that certain agreed historical facts were eased out of the picture while others were reworked for the purposes of the story. If the film is regarded as simply another product of the entertainment industry, then this is hardly a problem:

Much of what happens in *Elizabeth* did not happen that way. . . . There are also several outright distortions of the historical record. . . . Ultimately, however, all of this is, if not irrelevant, then inconsequential. Those who want a factual account of Elizabeth's reign can read a history book; *Elizabeth* does what it sets out to do: provide a solidly entertaining two hours. . . . [Its] factual inaccuracies. . . really don't represent a flaw, especially to viewers who are only passingly conversant with English history.²⁵⁹

Of course, others will see this as the dumbing down of culture, the reduction of history to entertainment, a denial of the responsibility to ensure that viewers are more than passingly conversant with English history. The danger is that the naive and ignorant viewer will think that what they are watching is history, wish that 'history had been like this at school', or suggest that '*Elizabeth* is historical moviemaking the way it should be: swift, smart and sexy—anything but dry.'²⁶⁰ If, from this point of view, *Elizabeth* may suggest that 'education in action never looked so pretty, or packed such a punch', the worry is that anyone should think that education should be either pretty or punchy.²⁶¹ To put it mildly, the film is perhaps a little too insistent in the modern parallels it draws.²⁶²

Education was clearly not a primary concern of film-makers attempting to make a product that would sell. The educational value of a film may be one

²⁵⁷ Potter, 'Queen Size', from website. ²⁵⁸ Introduction to screenplay, 15.
²⁵⁹ Bernardelli, 'Elizabeth, A Film Review', from website.
²⁶⁰ McLeod, 'Best Movie', or Files, 'Elizabeth', from website.
²⁶¹ French, 'Another Hot Bed', or Files, 'Elizabeth', from website.
²⁶² French, 'Another Hot Bed', or Files, 'Elizabeth', from website.

marketing angle, but it must coexist with others. The discourse of authenticity was thus not discarded altogether, but it was not discarded, nor was it promoted above all other considerations, in particular, it had to compete with the discourse of irreverence and rule-breaking which was so carefully promoted by those marketing the film. If Kapur thought *Working Title* had asked him to direct this film because they knew I wasn't going to be all reverent,²⁴ then in interview after interview, other members of the cast and crew confirmed without any embarrassment or hesitation that they were not interested in 'historical accuracy'.²⁵

According to the official website and the Press Booklet, Kapur was chosen to direct the film because his 'lack of western baggage, and his fresh perspective, meant that he would bring a new approach to a period drama, and 'would really interpret [the script and] . . . not get bogged down with the sort of tradition that we have of our own history'. Kapur himself noted that his previous film, *Banda Queen*, had 'none of the formality of an English period drama'; he also claimed that 'I never wanted to do a traditional English period film . . . I've turned the period film on its head. I've made a contemporary film out of a 16th-century life'.²⁶ Elsewhere, he argued that 'the cinema has too many rules . . . the challenge is to break the rules'. If that meant breaking the 'rules' of history, then so be it: 'History is interpretation. And this is ours'.²⁷

A central part of that interpretation, for scriptwriter, director, and producers, was the effort to get to grips with the inner life of the characters, according to the conventions of twentieth-century psychological drama: 'Most historical characters are approached from the outside; we take what we know about how they dressed, spoke, behaved, and try to recreate them from these externals. Shekhar [Kapur] needed to know the characters from the inside'.²⁸ If this meant loosening the attachment to 'historical veracity', the film-makers still claimed the film was 'very true in spirit to the Tudor times'.²⁹ This is clearly a different conception of historical truth to that conventionally employed by the academic historian. Hirst felt he 'had to make a choice . . . whether I wanted the details of history or the emotions and essence of history to prevail'.³⁰ He suggested that the purpose of the film was to explore how the familiar 'white-faced, pearl-encrusted icon of [Elizabeth's] later years and of historical memory' was created. He wanted to get behind that historical mask, to recreate a living human being, to invest the icon with psychological depth, with desires and anxieties, to speculate about 'the motivations, political and personal, behind the myth of the Virgin Queen'. In a wonderful formulation, he explained that what had interested him as the scriptwriter

²⁴ Shekhar Kapur, quoted on official website and in Press Booklet.

²⁵ See e.g. D'Silva, 'Easy Sits the Crown', 4; Susman, 'Not Like a Virgin', from website; Sarah Gritwood, 'The New Nicole Kidman', *Evening Standard* (30 Sept. 1998), 30; Johnston, 'G Day to You Queen Best', 9; Imogen Edwards-Jones, 'Cooler Shekhar', *Times Metro* (25 Nov. 1997), 24.

²⁶ Susman, 'Not Like a Virgin', from website; all other quotations from official website.

²⁷ Hughes, 'Bombay Director Tackles Tudor England', from website.

²⁸ Hirst, 'Introduction', 10. ²⁹ Owen, quoted on official website.

³⁰ Shekhar Kapur, quoted in Williams, 'Liz the Lionheart', 6.

had been the idea that the film should end with the moment at which Elizabeth became 'historical', an icon, a public image.³¹ Prior to that point where the myth was originated, the film should be free to speculate on a less familiar set of affairs. The promotional line was thus that the film was 'about a human being rather than a monarch'.³² For the less hidebound reviewers, this effort to create a psychological history could be regarded as a success, the film 'breath[ing] life into the revered historical figure, transforming her from an old picture on an encyclopaedia page to a flesh-and-blood individual whom an audience can root for and care about'.³³

Psychologizing a familiar image from the national heritage, transforming it into a living character with desires and anxieties, inserting that character into an engaging narrative: this was part and parcel of the effort to offer a modern film about a historical character. For celebrants of the film, this modernity was to be embraced and praised:

The time and place, we are reliably informed at the start, is England, 1554—a time associated in cinemagoers' minds with dusty history lessons at school, or some vintage piece of Hollywood swash and buckle. Nothing relevant; nothing for today. But *Elizabeth* is no dead slab of cinema. The film offers a new brand of history, styled to catch the attention of restless modern youth.³⁴

Of course this is not the only film 'to give history a kick in the pants' but what is remarkable about it is that it is 'a British film . . . and it is hard to stop us getting waggly reverential about our past'.³⁵ In other words, what is admired about the film is its modernist irreverence. America's *Time* magazine admired the film for the same reasons, delighting in the way 'a postcolonial cast and crew free England's Virgin Queen from the prison of historical reverence':

The weight of history can stultify the most well-intentioned of film biographies. Rather than releasing life, worthiness sometimes embalms famous figures in a formaldehyde of historical accuracy. Tudor England's Virgin Queen is no exception. Despite the merits of the 1971 BBC-TV series *Elizabeth R*, her image remains fixed in the pancake makeup, frilly night wig and imperious tones of Glenda Jackson's icy old-maid matriarch. It is one of the pleasures of *Elizabeth* to watch Indian director Shekhar Kapur remove that mask. . . . He lets down her hair, loosens her bodice and frees her from constraints.³⁶

Other commentators suggested that the achievement of *Elizabeth* was less about removing a mask and finding the real person, and more about reconstructing the person and creating a new mask in the light of contemporary mores and concerns. 'Period movies inevitably reflect more on the period in which they're made

Hirst, 'Introduction', 7.

Schwartz, quoted in Grove, 'Elizabeth: Crowning Gramercy Achievement', 8.

Peradinelli, 'Elizabeth: A Film Review', from website (see also Williams, 'Liz the Lionheart', 'For once the commitment to emotional truth appears to have incurred no penalty in terms of historical integrity').

Brown, *The Times* (1 Oct. 1998), 37. ³⁵ *Ibid.*

Michael Fitzgerald, 'Twentieth-Century Tudor', *Time* (2 Nov. 1998), from website Time.com.

than on the period of their subject, and rarely has that fact been more evident, or more distracting, than it is with . . . *Elizabeth*.²²⁷ Because Elizabeth is such a central figure in the national mythology, she is constantly reworked for each new generation, presented to that generation in ways that are meaningful to it. This process can be traced through the various cinematic impersonations of the queen, from Flora Robson and Bette Davis in the 1930s, via Glenda Jackson in the 1970s, to Cate Blanchett in the 1990s. 'Each age, and each great actress, has been able to reinvent her anew, always with something apposite to say to her own time.' From this point of view, *Elizabeth* could be seen by a sympathetic historian as 'contriv[ing] to be both true and timely'.²²⁸ The timeliness was twofold: on the one hand, the film chimed with the then-current post-feminist discourse of girl power; on the other hand, several commentators saw echoes of another unfolding narrative about the private life of a powerful public figure, since *Elizabeth* was released as revelations about President Clinton's sexual transgressions seemed about to bring him down.

Virginity, illegitimacy, politics, conspiracy . . . How could those elements go through the mental filters of a storyteller working at the end of the millennium and not emerge as an allegorical blend of sex, dysfunction, feminism and melodrama? Stubborn historians may insist that Elizabeth went to her grave a virgin, or that she at least deserves the benefit of the doubt. But this is not the Golden Age, or even a period of polite discretion. If we can unzip a sitting president, we can deflower a dead queen.²²⁹

AUTHENTICATING THE FICTION

How does the film's modernity accord with the discourse of authenticity? On the one hand, an authentic representation of the national past is surely at odds with a modernized pastiche. On the other hand, an authentic representation is still precisely that: nothing more than a representation. What passes as verisimilitudinous in such representations is often the conventional; that is to say, it is often designed to reproduce a familiar version of the past, to match audience expectations rather than scholarly rigour, to adhere to a pre-constructed vision. The codes of authenticity, the conventions for establishing a realistic representation of the past, are not fixed in stone but are subject to change. In this sense, a period film will tell us something about both the period represented and the period in which the film is made. In this sense, too, it is possible for *Elizabeth* to seem both 'true' and 'timely', both authentic and modern.²³⁰ A more common view is that period authenticity and modernity are at odds with each other.

²²⁷ Mathews, 'A Pridelful Queen Cuts to the Chaste', from website.

²²⁸ David Starkey, 'The Drama Queen', *Sunday Times*, section 4 (20 Sept. 1998), 5.

²²⁹ Mathews, 'A Pridelful Queen Cuts to the Chaste', from website.

²³⁰ Starkey, 'The Drama Queen', 5.

This tension . . . If the film-makers were proud to proclaim the distinctive irreverence of their modern interpretation of history and to deny any interest in historical accuracy, they were at the same time striving for a certain authenticity. The film's ambivalence towards history was clearly a part of the production process, with different members of the cast and crew pulling in different directions. According to several interviews and publicity put out by the distributors, Blanchett immersed herself in the Queen's letters, writings, portraits, and biographies ('the in-depth research [Blanchett] did for *Elizabeth* could have garnered her a . . . degree in Elizabethan social politics'²³¹). But if his leading lady 'was addicted to playing Elizabeth' then Kapur 'was addicted to telling my [his] story . . . she wanted to bring everything about Elizabeth into the role. I actually felt relieved that someone else was carrying that burden. I pulled her into my view of the story, and she clung to detail. So we're both in there.'²³²

Several commentators remarked on Blanchett's 'eerie resemblance to the portraiture images of Elizabeth'; 'Physically, she's so similar to the actual Elizabeth that it's like watching a ghost caught on film.'²³³ In fact, of course, what is being remarked on is less physicality and more the efforts of the make-up and wardrobe departments to create an authentic look, one which is familiar from paintings of the period. Kapur may suggest that Blanchett has 'a translucent quality that is ageless—not in terms of age, but in terms of century . . . There is something about her face that has the quality of being very modern yet very period'.²³⁴ We may respond by saying that period quality is a matter of convention, and that Blanchett's Elizabeth is clearly cloaked in the discourse of authenticity, while being given a modern twist at the same time: 'We were consistent with the look of the period. We went to the National Portrait gallery to find authentic pictures of Elizabeth. But we also had to make Elizabeth a "today" girl for earlier scenes.'²³⁵

We may also recall that, for many commentators 'the well-chosen castle locations' contributed 'to the authoritative tread of the production'.²³⁶ But we also noted that these locations very often had to be worked on in order to produce the desired authentic period look. Each location had to be prepared so that signs of modernity were erased by 'the foam matting that looked like slabs of stone, the polystyrene rocks to supplement the real ones, the care—and the brown paper—that went into covering up the signs'.²³⁷ Period films are about dressing up.

Quotation from Baz Bamigboye, 'Cate's Coronation', *Daily Mail* (11 Sept. 1998), 42; see also the official website and Press Booklet; D'Silva, 'Easy Sits the Crown', 4; Johnston, 'G'day to You Queen Bess', 4; Hughes, 'Bombay Director Tackles Tudor England', from website.

²³¹ Shekhar Kapur, quoted in Charity, 'Virgin Records', 16–18.

²³² Mathews, 'A Pridelful Queen Cuts to the Chaste', from website.

²³³ Kapur quoted on the official website.

²³⁴ Jenny Shircore, make-up artist, quoted in Benedict Carver, 'Benigni: Hold the Pope; Dench Stole Scene', *Variety Extra online*, at Variety.com (22 Mar. 1999).

²³⁵ Carr, 'Blanchett Portrays "Elizabeth" for the Ages', from website.

²³⁶ Macaskill, 'A Castle Fit for a Celluloid Queen', 7.

pretending to be someone else, and even the castles had to enter into the spirit of the game, with Alwick Castle masquerading as Mary of Guise's Scottish stronghold, for instance.²²⁸ There was also the problem of matching twelve different locations with scenes to be shot at Shepperton Studios. 'On the screen, it needed to be one cohesive whole. To achieve this, Myhre and his art department team created sculptural elements and large carved wall pieces, which were integrated into both location and studio settings. Historical accuracy was an important goal: 'We started out doing the period research to find out exactly what was correct for the period, deciding on the areas that we were going to keep absolutely authentic'. But it was not the only goal: they also wanted to use the locations thematically, 'to create a more interesting atmosphere'. For the purposes of the drama, the Tower of London, for instance, needed to 'look darker, danker, and more claustrophobic than it really was'.²²⁹

Other special effects were used to enhance the production design of the film, further underlining the extent to which the past was recreated in *Elizabeth*, but also the extent to which historical authenticity was achieved through illusion. Certain Hollywood blockbusters are sold on the visibility of their special effects—this is one of their main attractions. For a period film like *Elizabeth*, it was *invisible* special effects which were required, since they 'allow filmmakers to achieve higher production values for less money, while at the same time not drawing attention to the means by which the effects are achieved'. *Elizabeth* is a good example of the use of invisible effects to enhance the narrative and the [period] setting rather than as a basis for the movie itself.²³⁰

A special effects company, Men in White Coats, used techniques such as crowd replication and two-dimensional composites to create vast crowd scenes by shooting much smaller crowds in different positions and putting them together at the post-production stage: 'For the coronation sequence in *Elizabeth*, Men in White Coats put 20 layers over original footage, adding stained glass, additional sunlight, raised seating tiers and removing a non-period organ, turning 'a sparsely populated York Cathedral into a full-to-bursting Westminster Abbey'.²³¹ One of the ways in which they created these effects was through Domino, a Quantel computer software package providing creative compositing for films. A full-page advertisement in a British trade publication celebrated the way in which Domino had been used 'to recreate this bygone age... The result is a movie of immense style and dramatic impact, bringing to life the queen's coronation, set-piece battles, and royal pageants—all with stunning authenticity. And throughout, Domino is transparent, enhancing production values and building an epic story'.²³²

²²⁸ Macaskill, 'A Castle Fit for a Celluloid Queen', 7.

²²⁹ Extracts from the section on John Myhre, on the official website and in the Press Booklet.

²³⁰ Anon., 'Staying Alive', *Screen International* (23 Oct. 1998), 28; Anon., 'Men in White Coats Apply Invisible Effects to *Elizabeth*', *Broadcast* (9 Oct. 1998), B+ supplement, 518.

²³¹ Anon., 'Staying Alive', 28; Anon., 'Men in White Coats', 518.



30. Costumes on display: Elizabeth with her ladies-in-waiting.

Authenticity and illusionism, historical artefact and modern technology: the past was thus recreated, to produce both a functional space in which the narrative might unfold, and something that matched the film-makers' ideas of how the past would have looked, both a narrative space and a historical space. This same blend of narrative requirement and period look can be seen in the design of the costumes for the film, but that blend also created a tension around the discourse of authenticity (Fig. 30). On the one hand, costume designer Alexandra Byrne wanted to research the period thoroughly; on the other hand, 'every time I was reading a reference book... Shekhar would tell me to close it and throw it away, because he didn't want us to be tied to the fact and reality of it'. Byrne felt the research was important, however: 'I felt that I needed to initially make the audience feel safe in a world they would be expecting from a period film'. Period authenticity in this sense is thus precisely about recreating the familiar, working conventionally, trying to meet audience expectations. For the purposes of dramatic cinema, those conventions and expectations had to allow space for narrative requirements to be fulfilled. Thus 'with Cate [Blanchett] as Elizabeth, we had certain clear codes to what we were doing', Byrne explained. For example, the neckline starts low and gradually closes up and up, working towards that final icon look.²³³

²³³ Alexandra Byrne, quoted on official website and in Press Booklet.

If Byrne's work was in some ways conventional, and deliberately so, in another way it was unconventional: a film of this particular period had not been done for so long. . . . *Elizabeth* was a chance to re-examine the period, interpret it, and not get caught up in a set way of doing it.²⁴⁴ As with the choice of locations, so with the costumes: there was a partial bid for a transgressive realism, in which some familiar conventions might be adhered to, while others might be broken to create a sense of freshness in the representation. Byrne's working method is explained on the official website and in the Press Booklet:

The only reference is the portraiture, and, being rich people, they would have had new clothes made purely for the portraits. So, that reference has nothing to do with real life and the practicality of the clothes. . . . I usually work by doing a lot of reading and looking at paintings, trying to understand the period enough so that I can then almost stop looking at it. I tried to find out what was the 'T-shirt and jeans' of Elizabethan times—what they would have worn when they weren't formally dressed but were formal enough to meet and greet people. It's that kind of thing I really enjoy in making the clothes. There is no reference for it. No one is going to say, 'That's wrong.' Providing you can create a world that is believable, you can be much more theatrical within that world, and make a statement about the character without being distracting.

The bid for authenticity comes through very strongly, but so does the desire to make the costumes narratively and thematically functional. Unfortunately for Byrne, there were some prepared to say 'That's wrong.' Costume expert Betty Goodwin, for instance, complained about the lack of historical accuracy in an article on costumes in the *LA Times*, arguing that only the gold brocade dress from the coronation scene approaches authenticity, that no white gown was ever worn by Elizabeth, regardless of what the final scene shows, and that the curved corsets worn by women in the film did not become standard until three centuries later—true Elizabethan corsets were ruler straight.²⁴⁵ The question is, did such details detract from the believability of the world created by the film? For Goodwin, clearly they did. For most audiences, that is unlikely to be the case: there is enough in the costumes that meets the expectations of most audiences about the details of period dress. Still, the tension between historical accuracy and a modern approach was clearly felt in the production of the film and, for all her own background research, Byrne could still remark that 'all the actors were very hooked into the research they were doing on their characters. They would come in with all this academic research, which I had to gradually unbutton, as it were.'²⁴⁶

It was important not to undo too many buttons, since the film-makers had decided to use certain standard historical references: 'we knew there were moments of portraiture that we were going to achieve, like the Coronation and the icon, so those were landmarks.'²⁴⁷ The use of paintings as historical reference

²⁴⁴ Byrne, quoted on official website.

²⁴⁵ Betty Goodwin, 'Costume', *LA Times* (13 Nov. 1998), cutting.

²⁴⁶ Byrne, quoted on official website and in Press Booklet. ²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

points lends the film a strong sense of art-historical realism.²⁴⁸ The invocation of this principle underlines the extent to which we know history through previous representations. One of the pitfalls of such an approach is that the reference points are not pure versions of history—they are precisely representations, and in the case of the portrait, as Byrne has already explained, this was a special event, not a depiction of everyday dress. Further, one set of representations may be laid over another—the representations congeal, become conventional. Thus for many audiences, the historical reference points, the means by which we know the past, are less the paintings of the period, more previous films (or even the waxwork museum, another populist version of history²⁴⁹). While numerous commentators enjoyed the way in which the bulk of the film broke with convention by depicting Elizabeth *before* she became the familiar icon, they also saw the finale of the film through filmic eyes: 'only at the end does she reinvent herself as the immaculate, forbidding figurehead. . . . we're familiar with from Glenda Jackson, Flora Robson or Bette Davis.' The Elizabeth I we usually see in engravings and movies is the later Elizabeth, the one who had locked herself into a certain image and never let the facade chip. (Think Bette Davis in *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex*.)²⁵⁰ The use of such familiar historical reference points is a way of situating the film's audiences, though some found this superficial and preferred the irreverent side of *Elizabeth*: 'Occasionally Kapur seems to fall back on research in order to reassert the historical basis of the story, simplistically using famous portraits and miniatures as the basis for costumes and compositions. . . . But much of the time he approaches his subject with fresh eyes, and gives the film a dynamism rooted in difference.'²⁵¹

The mix of the familiar and the different caused more upset with the music, with several commentators bemoaning the mix of authentic sixteenth-century music (Thomas Tallis, William Byrd, Tielman Susato) with music from later periods: the use of 'some misplaced Mozart (wrong century, I think)' was 'very unfortunate'; and while some found the use of Elgar 'inspired', others thought it 'rum' at best, 'hopelessly inappropriate' at worst.²⁵² Few however commented on the music specially written for the film by David Hirschfelder, though one musical connoisseur thought it 'a pastiche of a pastiche, with all the lumbering dullness of so many bad period costume dramas of the past.'²⁵³ The eclectic mix of musics

²⁴⁸ For further discussion of this issue, see Lockett, 'Image and Nation', 88–99; and Kara McKechnie, 'Taking Liberties with the Monarch: The Royal Bio-pic in the 1990s', in Claire Monk and Amy Sargeant (eds.), *British Historical Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2002), 215–16.

²⁴⁹ See e.g. Walker, 'Ruff Justice', 27.

²⁵⁰ Charity, 'Virgin Records', 18; Bernard, 'Elizabeth, Queen of Hearts', from website.

²⁵¹ Bruzzi, 'Elizabeth', 48.

²⁵² Wills, 'Elizabeth', 12; Anon., 'Elizabeth' (user review), posted on Internet Movie Database, at IMDb.com, 7 Nov. 1998; Williams, 'Liz the Lionheart', 7; Kaufman, 'Royal Flush', 36–7; Agm, 'Elizabeth' (user comment), posted on IMDb.com, 26 Oct. 1998; see also Ross W. Duffin, 'Early Music Gets Short Shrift in *Elizabeth*', *LA Times*, 21 Dec. 1998 (cutting).

²⁵³ Agm, 'Elizabeth', from website.

is a symptom of both the period film as a genre and the ambivalence of this particular film towards historical accuracy. The period film will routinely employ specially written mood music to enhance narrative effect and emotional tone, but it will also frequently nod towards historical authenticity, either in the form of pastiche or by including extracts from appropriately period music. The irreverence of *Elizabeth* meant that it could find space for both sixteenth-century music and period music from other centuries: if Mozart and Elgar seemed appropriate, then they could be included. Such music may thus signify the archaic, the classical, and the tasteful, in a general sense; it may also signify both the regal (Mozart) and the English (Elgar).

THE DANGERS OF POP HISTORY: CREATING A MORAL PANIC

If *Elizabeth*'s irreverent 'reinvention of history', meant 'an Oliver Stone-like stance towards the facts', and 'gaping historical errors' then it was, at the very least, 'unlikely to please historians or historical purists'. This was 'historical drama for anyone whose idea of history is back issues of *Vogue*'. But even non-historians were advised to 'close your eyes when the last scene fades; to know what Lizzie did next, find a decent textbook.'²⁵⁴ The right-wing press were not slow to respond, not simply to the question of historical inaccuracies, but also to what they saw as distinctly unpatriotic behaviour, especially the depiction of Elizabeth I, national icon, Virgin Queen, engaging in a passionate sexual relationship. Both the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Mail on Sunday* went out of their way to brand the film controversial, to generate a moral panic. In a piece on the news pages rather than the arts pages of the *Daily Telegraph*, and some months before the film was released, a headline blazed 'Film changes sexual history of Elizabeth I, the Virgin Queen'. The reporter explained that 'the reputation of Elizabeth I as the Virgin Queen is called into question by a new . . . film depicting her life, to the chagrin of many historians of the period. . . . That [Kapur] has now seen fit to tamper with English history is going down badly with some eminent British historians. Dr Simon Adams, a senior lecturer at Strathclyde University and an expert on the Tudor period, was quoted as saying that the 'treatment of Elizabeth I's sexual antics [was] "fiction" . . . There is no doubt among serious historians that Elizabeth I died *virgo intacta*'. The problem was that 'many popular films gave the impression of being historically accurate. "That is why they are so dangerous".'²⁵⁵

The struggle was continued by the paper in an editorial comment on the same day:

²⁵⁴ D'Silva, 'Easy Sits the Crown', 4; Susman, 'Not Like a Virgin', from website; Richards, 'Long Live the Queen', 72; French, 'Another Fine Boss', 6; Maslin, 'Amour and High Dudgeon in a Castle of One's Own', E16; Wyman, 'Elizabeth', 20.

²⁵⁵ Amit Roy, 'Film Changes Sexual History of Elizabeth I, the Virgin Queen', *Daily Telegraph* (9 Mar. 1998), 3.

A new film denying Elizabeth I's chastity says rather more about our morals than hers. The obsession with sully the reputations of dead heroes and heroines is one of the ugliest features of our age. This is bad enough when there is actual proof of their transgressions, but all the evidence suggests that Elizabeth went intact to her grave. . . . The patriotism of Elizabethan Englishmen was imbued with a sense of gallantry towards their Queen. Elizabeth used her virginity as an instrument of statecraft, flirting with continental noblemen as the national interest dictated. . . . To question Elizabeth's virtue 400 years after her death is not just a blackguardly slur upon a good, Christian woman, but an insult to our fathers who fought for her. It should rouse England to chivalrous anger.²⁵⁶

It certainly roused the *Mail on Sunday*'s version of middle England into action:

The two bodies are naked, intertwined. Young lovers in the heat of passion, cocooned in the intimacy of a double bed from which the curtains cascade. It's the sort of scene that is only too familiar in Hollywood and at first glance it would be no more shocking than most. But what is truly startling is that the woman on the screen is Elizabeth I, the 'Virgin Queen'. The sex scenes form a key part of a controversial film. . . . Such graphic scenes may stick in the throat of historians and anyone who remembers their history lessons. . . . For all the undoubted glamour and vivid drama of the film, . . . there will be many who resent the explicit reinterpretation of the life of one of England's most cherished monarchs.²⁵⁷

Education, in the form of history lessons, is good; popular culture, in the form of Hollywood sex scenes, is bad, however glamorous and dramatic it is made out to be. In fact, the reporter in this case seems to quite like the film, though this did not hold her back from suggesting that 'the interpretation will stun audiences', from reporting that the film 'has already attracted criticism from historians, or from finding her own friendly expert to quote: 'Historian Alison Weir, who has just published a book about Elizabeth and her courtiers, thinks Kapur has taken "a lot of liberties with the truth" and dismisses some of his claims as "nonsense". . . . [She] maintains there is no evidence to support the film's reinterpretation of history.'²⁵⁸

Somewhat surprisingly, this struggle over the meaning of the film and the interpretation of history took a slightly different form in the *Daily Mail*, a newspaper that could usually be relied upon to take a similar critical line. Rather than chastizing the film for its irreverent deviation from what is conventionally regarded as the historical facts, the *Mail* claimed the film for a conservative vision of nationhood and national identity. It commended the film-makers for dealing with a great British hero, and for the way they 'neatly avoid an anachronistically feminist reading of history, for they make it clear that in order to become "a strong woman" and a sixteenth century equivalent to *The Godfather*, Elizabeth had to sacrifice important, feminine areas of her personality'. As noted earlier, the *Mail* also celebrated the Englishness of the film's landscapes and architecture.²⁵⁹

Where other conservative commentators expressed concern over the moder-

²⁵⁶ Anon., 'Elizabeth Intacta', *Daily Telegraph* (9 Mar. 1998), 21.

²⁵⁷ Brook, 'Elizabeth I is Known as the Virgin Queen', 52-3.

²⁵⁹ Tookey, 'Tonic for Heroine Addicts', 44-5.

nity of the film, the *Mail* found a different, more positive interpretation of the film, one more in keeping with the presumed interests of its readers.

The film avoids becoming a history lesson; yet its messages for the present are instructive. One is that the neat division of a ruler's life between public and private is an impractical one. The public always takes precedence, whether one likes it or not. This is a lesson younger members of our Royal Family, and those who feel called to high government, may do well to ponder. It has clearly come too late for President Clinton.

Here, apparently, was a film that could speak to the great and the good, and to all right-thinking people. This seems a risky line for the *Daily Mail* to have taken, given the danger signs so many others had felt it necessary to erect in order to warn audiences of what was in store for them. In fact, there were some danger signs: the film 'will irritate some historians'; it was 'certainly no masterpiece and not to be taken altogether seriously as history'; it was marked by 'occasional errors of taste and imprecision in story-telling'; and it 'play[ed] fast and loose with chronology, compressing events that took years to unfold'. The overall tone, however, was that *Elizabeth* was to be welcomed, that it remained 'commendably true to the spirit of its heroine', and indeed that it could be used as an object-lesson for the British film industry as a whole:

it is high time that our film industry made more movies about Britain's heroes. It is ridiculous that only in wartime do the British produce films about their great commanders, such as Nelson, when the French and Americans make film after film about their national heroes. Why are there no halfway decent pictures about such fascinating figures as Wellington or Sir Francis Drake? Feminism, pacifism, Marxism and just plain cynicism have all contributed to British filmmakers' habit of heckling our heroes, or simply ignoring them . . .

The title of this article—'Tonic for heroine addicts'—suggests it should be seen in part as a riposte to the success of *Trainspotting*. On the one hand, *Elizabeth* is a film which will appeal to those who want to see their national heroines depicted on the screen. On the other hand, it is the perfect antidote for a country that first produces a film about heroin addiction (*Trainspotting*), then allows it to become one of its biggest ever box-office successes. It seems almost perverse that the *Daily Mail* should both advance such an interpretation of *Elizabeth*, and use that interpretation for such old-fashioned, patriotic ends. For cultural historians of a different persuasion, it was the film's old-fashioned qualities, and its attachment to well-trodden myth which were its downfall. For such commentators, the film did not do enough by way of developing a revisionist historical perspective. 'This film's queen is predictably and uninterestingly "normal"', suggested one critic:

if the writers had stuck to it, and been willing to sift the sources creatively, they might have come out with a genuinely modern psychodrama . . . An emotionally damaged young queen, daughter of a psychopath, who had suffered sexual abuse and was herself strongly suspected of complicity in murder, would have made a far more interesting heroine for today . . .²⁶⁶

²⁶⁶ Duncan-Jones, 'Why Then, O Brawling Love!', 18.

It should by now be clear that, if some found *Elizabeth* dangerously irreverent, others found it delightfully so. That a progressive cultural historian might find aspects of the film 'uninterestingly normal' adds to the complexity of the debate, as does the *Daily Mail* finding a way of interpreting the film as a celebration of an uncomplicated Englishness. All this is surely testament to the ambivalence of the film and to the way in which meanings and interpretations are negotiated between reader and text. What this study of the critical reception of a film thus reveals is the extent to which any film is open to alternative readings, the extent to which a text is a contested terrain.

The discourses circulating around the film provide a series of takes on the film, a series of routes into, through, and away from the film itself. Heritage tourist brochure; upmarket historical drama with an artistic bent;²⁶⁷ controversial talk-piece; conspiracy thriller for the boys; costume romance for the girls: each of these 'versions' of *Elizabeth* constitutes at the same time an interpretation of the text and a selling-point, an audience engaged with the film and a means of generating revenue. To some extent the film has to be open to alternative readings, to be able to appease different audience interests, to be accessible in different markets. The details of the production and marketing of the film confirm the extent to which these different versions of the film were explicitly encouraged by those responsible for the success of the film, in their efforts to create a mid-budget crossover film. Their goal was to produce a film that could appeal to the core heritage cinema audience while at the same time attracting new audiences.

So is it still appropriate to label *Elizabeth* a heritage film? Labelling is a key means of containing the polysemy of a text—though it can also be used to open the text up to other interpretations. In this case, to label *Elizabeth* a heritage film is both to limit our understanding of the way the film operates, and to offer an explanation about how the film works, as a text, but also as a commodity. The label limits our understanding of *Elizabeth* since there are other ways in which the film can be taken up which do not situate it as a part of the heritage industry or link it to heritage discourses. The reading of the film in terms of girl power is perhaps the most obvious example. That is not to deny that the Merchant Ivory adaptations of E. M. Forster or film versions of Jane Austen also have strong female protagonists, or work on a romantic level, or appeal to female audiences. It is to acknowledge simply that the heritage label foregrounds an aspect of the film but does not exhaust the meaningfulness of the film. To discuss *Elizabeth* in the context of a debate about heritage does however help us to understand another aspect of the appeal of the film. It draws attention to the film's relationship to the tourist industry, to the ongoing fascination with the past, to the concern for period authenticity, and to discourses of national identity and nationhood.

Elizabeth's eclecticism, its hybridizing of elements from different filmic

²⁶⁷ Handling, quoted in Tilkson, *Elizabeth Bows in Toronto*.

traditions, is not simply a matter of critical debate, however. It was also an important part of the process of producing a widely marketable commodity. What the phenomenon of *Elizabeth* demonstrates is that to define popularity in terms of the capacity of a cultural product to reach a mass audience is misleading. The mass is always a collection of niches. *Elizabeth* was a specialized product designed to exploit that fact by bringing together attractions that appealed to different audience groups and interests. The relatively large budget enabled the producers to develop the film on a scale that was extravagant by the standards of much European film-making. That extravagance is itself an acknowledgement of the increasing interdependency of the major Hollywood studios and the tradition of the specialized European film.

Conclusion

At the time of writing, a new English heritage film is doing excellent business at the box office in both the USA and the UK. The film is *Gosford Park* (2001), about an elaborate weekend party at a grand country house in the early 1930s, but also about the last of aristocratic England. We see as much of the enormous army of servants as we see of the hosts and guests, allowing the film to focus on relations between the different classes. If we are looking for an engrossing story, then we should surely concentrate on the narrative that emerges around Sir William McCordle, owner of the country estate and host of the house party. It turns out that he had several affairs with working-class girls who worked in his factories, two of whom are now on the staff at his estate. One of these affairs produced a son, who turns up at the house party as valet to one of the guests. The son apparently murders the father, although in fact his mother, now Sir William's housekeeper, has already poisoned him.

But there are many other little narratives circling around this one, and one of the great attractions of the film is its huge number of protagonists, its enormous ensemble cast of mainly British thespians, including such heritage film stalwarts as Kristin Scott Thomas, James Wilby, Maggie Smith, and Jeremy Northam. There are many other familiar ingredients of the heritage film too: the narrative revelations about the seedy underside to the aristocratic veneer; the sense of class exploitation; the transgressive, cross-class sexual relationships; the ennui and eccentricity of the financially troubled upper classes; aristocratic concerns about society interlopers—Americans, media types, 'new money'; and so on. Narratively, England is in flux. Visually, though, it looks splendid, even if the country house is only ever seen in bad weather. The heritage iconography is all in place, the dressing of the sets and the costumes of the characters is thoroughly picturesque. And the shooting style is languid, affording plenty of opportunities to display the cast, their costumes, and the production design.

It should come as no surprise to learn that the film won BAFTA Awards for Best British Film and Best Costume Design. Indeed, the film has been positively garlanded with prestigious nominations and prizes and celebrated by critics on both sides of the Atlantic. There is nothing new here, either—nor is there anything new in the fact that the film was directed by veteran *American* film-maker Robert Altman, whose preferred shooting style perfectly matches the standard aesthetics of the heritage film. Once again, an outsider's view seems both to capture an authentic version of the English national character and to dissect it ruthlessly.

There is much that is familiar about the funding and marketing of the film too. The film was in part financed by lottery money, in the form of the Film Council's Premiere Fund, set up to support popular, commercially viable, mainstream films.