‘The People No-One Imagines Anything Of’: Teenage Responses to British Period Drama

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December 2019

Abstract

This thesis brings together the study of film and television period drama and audience research, looking at how teenagers from across England respond to recent examples of British period drama. The original audience research produced a wealth of primary data, including surveys and interviews, drawn from close to 100 participants.

The thesis begins with a literature survey, then assesses the methodological choices involved in constructing an audience research project. The audience research was organised around case studies of *Peaky Blinders*, *Belle*, *The Imitation Game*, *Downton Abbey* and *Far from the Madding Crowd*, chosen to represent the variety that exists within the period drama genre. Whilst the thesis includes some textual analysis of these, the focus is on the data that emerges from the audience research.

The main chapters consider the key themes that emerge from this data, including responses to the representation of women and minority groups in period drama; the complex ways in which audiences engage with characters and the values they represent; debates around the relationship between period drama and 'real history'; and young people's reactions to period dramas they perceive as more authentic or truthful.

The information gathered paints a portrait of 16-19 year olds in England in 2017/18, shedding light on their engagement with media, their consumption of historical sources and their lifestyle and attitudes more generally. The findings question negative assumptions that are frequently made about both the tastes and interests of young people and the nature of period drama, showing that these audiences can respond to the genre in surprising and diverse ways. The young participants emerge from the thesis as a diverse and lively group of people whose responses to period drama are both engaging and highly enlightening about how young audiences engage with screen media and period drama.

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Acknowledgements

My first thanks must be to WRoCAH for their generous funding. Their award of AHRC Competition funding has allowed me the space to dedicate my working life over the past three years to my studies, and for that I am immensely grateful. I must also thank Andrew Higson for his support and guidance. He has challenged me to be better, whilst also encouraging me to believe more in myself, and has therefore helped me to develop in both skills and confidence whilst we have been working together. Huge thanks are also due to Huw D Jones for his invaluable help with the development of the methodologies used in this study, and his very useful suggestions for how I might improve my writing. I must also thank the rest of the Department of Theatre, Film, Television and Interactive Media at the University of York for their support and encouragement, particularly Louise LePage and Kristyn Gorton for helpful comments at key points during the development of my project. Thanks too to my students, and Nick Jones, Agata Frymus and Tasos Giapoutzis for creating a stimulating teaching environment, and Rosemary Alexander-Jones, for being a constant source of interesting conversation about all things period drama!

I could not have carried out this project without the cooperation of all the schools and colleges that I worked with. I am hugely grateful to all the teachers who found time in their busy days to help facilitate this study. I am also incredibly grateful to all the young people who gave up their time to take part in the study, and who willingly shared their opinions with me. In a similar vein, I also owe thanks to all the people who took part in the pilot research, particularly those who gave up their time to take part in focus groups. Huge thanks are also owed to the Phoenix Cinema, East Finchley, who let me carry out pilot research there.

Thanks are also due to the many people who commented on this project during the period I was applying for funding, many of whom gave up their time to work with me on applications, and who made helpful and encouraging interventions at various points in the process. Particular thanks are due to Claire Monk and her colleagues at De Montfort University, who provided a lot of help and support in the early stages of the development of the project. I am also very grateful to Belén Vidal, whose encouragement at a crucial stage gave me the impetus to keep pursuing the project.

I have been something of a perpetual student, and owe a great deal to the departments of English and Victorian Studies at the University of Leicester, where I first studied in Higher Education. They provided an extremely nurturing environment that allowed me to develop a belief in my own abilities, and I could not have done any of my subsequent academic work without them. I am also grateful to Birkbeck College, where I studied for my film degree, and where I also received a great deal of encouragement. I must also thank all the wonderful young people that I had the privilege of working with in the years I spent working as a teacher. They were the inspiration for the project, and I literally would not have done it without them.

Thank you to my parents, my mum for introducing me to the joys of period drama, and my dad for pointing out their other qualities! Thank you to my sister for being the best friend anyone could have, and for always supporting me. Studying for a PhD inevitably takes a toll on the lives of those closest to the researcher. In my case, my partner, Darren Fairclough, has borne the brunt of this. I'm grateful for his support during this project, and his willingness for me to

follow my dreams in the pursuit of it. My children, Ivy and Jude, were too young to be part of the decision for me to do the PhD, and so I won't thank them for that. I also won't apologise for the times it has taken me away from my caring duties, as I firmly believe that until women are allowed to work on the same terms as men, there will be no equality for either sex. I hope to be able to pass onto them a world with greater equality of opportunity. I will thank them for being the wonderful people they are though, and I hope that one day they might feel a fraction of the pride in me that I feel in them.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

Some sections of Chapter 5 have been submitted to the Thomas Hardy Society Patrick Tolfree essay competition under the title ‘Making Her Own Choices: Teenage Responses to Bathsheba in Far from the Madding Crowd (2015)’.

Introduction

On February 4th 2018, at approximately 8 pm, the BBC ran adverts for two of its current drama series, *McMafia* (BBC, 2018) and *Hard Sun* (BBC, 2018). Following these, the BBC's continuity announcer stated 'yes… *Hard Sun* and *McMafia*, BBC One drama on the edge. Now though, this is more gentle. Nostalgia on a Sunday night.' The programme that followed was an episode of the long running BBC drama *Call the Midwife* (BBC, 2012-). The piece of 'nostalgia' on this particular evening featured a storyline following a mother who was diagnosed with an incurable degenerative disease, a condition which she was also found to have passed onto her teenage daughter in the course of the episode. A parallel narrative strand depicted a character attempting to perform an illegal abortion on herself having become pregnant whilst in an abusive relationship. Despite these hard-hitting themes, the BBC's own introduction to the show appears almost dismissive, explicitly characterising the series as 'gentle' and employing the comforting associations of nostalgia. These are invoked in comparison to the 'edgy' thriller-type narratives of the series advertised prior to the episode. *Call the Midwife* repeatedly manages to employ its historic setting to explore issues and life events that are familiar to many, including birth, death, disease, and a woman's rights over her own body. Conversely, the dramas *McMafia* and *Hard Sun* both depicted far less relatable events (respectively, a wealthy young man becoming embroiled with the Russian mafia and an apocalyptic solar event). However, this evident topicality does not appear to elevate the status of *Call the Midwife* in the eyes of the organisation distributing it. Despite its continued success in attracting huge audiences with its female-dominated narratives of healthcare in the mid-twentieth century, there is an implicit devaluing of the series in the description 'gentle', with this characterisation of the show obscuring recognition of the more challenging aspects of the series, or the ways in which it is relevant to contemporary life.

This reading of *Call the Midwife* is consistent with the observations of Louise FitzGerald, who notes that male critics have often seen the show as 'nothing more than sentimental, nostalgic claptrap'.[1] Indeed, such a dismissive statement is symptomatic of wider attitudes towards period drama, particularly when it is female dominated, with Leggott and Taddeo noting the '[entrenched] association of costume drama with "soapy" melodrama, and thus with a predominantly female reception'.[2] The description of costume drama as 'soapy' is not insignificant, with Charlotte Brunsdon identifying a clear 'gendering of… disdain' in relation to her first attempts to research the reception of soap operas.[3] Elsewhere, Brunsdon has also identified the value judgements that tend to be associated with male and female tastes:

> I have always been conscious of the way in which what women and girls like is somehow worse than the equivalent masculine

[1] Louise FitzGerald, 'Taking a Pregnant Pause: Interrogating the Feminist Potential of *Call the Midwife*', in *Upstairs and Downstairs: British Costume Drama Television from* The Forsyte Saga *to* Downton Abbey', ed. by James Leggott and Julie Anne Taddeo (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), p. 250.
[2] James Leggott and Julie Anne Taddeo, 'Introduction', in *Upstairs and Downstairs: British Costume Drama Television from* The Forsyte Saga *to* Downton Abbey', ed. by James Leggott and Julie Anne Taddeo (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), p. xvi.
[3] Charlotte Brunsdon, *The Feminist, the Housewife and the Soap Opera* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 9.

> pleasures…. Why does what girls like show that they are silly and frivolous, whereas what boys like shows seriousness and commitment? These questions recurred as I became involved with film studies and the academic study of popular culture. Why were westerns and gangster films somehow OK, whereas romances and melodramas were rubbish?[4]

I would suggest that the rather dismissive introduction to *Call the Midwife* is a product of exactly the entrenched value systems that Brunsdon describes here – despite the passage of almost two decades. The potential seriousness of the themes explored are devalued because of the show's association with female spectatorship, leading to it being characterised in far less weighty terms than many male-dominated dramas.

These attitudes towards period drama are also noticed by those working within the film industry. Speaking in an interview published in 2019, Keira Knightley, an actress associated with the genre throughout her career, comments,

> I do find it aggravating. The idea that [period dramas] are all the same, just because you're wearing a dress. I think they are looked down on, and I find that bizarre because a lot of them are very serious dramas. And they're not the same. I mean, I don't think you can say *A Dangerous Method* is the same as *Atonement* or the same as *The Duchess*, and that's not the same as *Pride and Prejudice*. They're very different stories. I wonder whether it's because, generally speaking, they are made for women. They have that female central role and don't have the violence that makes things cool and male.[5]

I share Knightley's aggravation with the rather dismissive generalisations made about period drama. Her suspicion that they are looked down upon because of the central female roles and lack of 'cool and male' violence appears to me to chime precisely with the gendered disdain identified by Brunsdon. The research discussed in this thesis is the product of my own dissatisfaction with the ways in which period dramas are marginalised within public, and to a certain extent, academic discourses around film and television genres. I have personally enjoyed many examples of films and television dramas set in the past and have long felt, with Knightley, that the term 'period drama' encapsulates a wide variety of different narratives, representations and styles. However, these are all too easily obscured by the rather patronising associations of the period drama genre with gentle nostalgia, as exemplified by the BBC announcer's quotation above.

Of course, when dealing with one specific genre, some form of generalisation is inevitable. The very act of categorizing texts into genres will involve taking distinct films, television shows, books etc, and presenting them as if they are somehow all the same. As a means of sidestepping this issue, Jason Mittell argues for genre formation to be considered as 'an

[4] Charlotte Brunsdon, *Screen Tastes: Soap Opera to Satellite Dishes* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1997), pp, 2-3.

[5] Keira Knightley, quoted in James Dyer, 'Sparky, Sweary, Straight-Talking: An Audience with Keira Knightley', *Empire* (February 2019), p. 101.

ongoing, multifaceted practice, rather than a textual component'.[6] Most significantly in terms of the focus of this thesis, Mittell stresses the range of ways in which the concept of genre impacts on how texts are regarded: 'genres can be seen as key ways that our media experiences are classified and organized into categories that have specific links to particular concepts like cultural value, assumed audience, and social function.'[7] Mittell's emphasis on the types of discourse that surround particular genres, such as the ways in which they are valued and the types of people who are associated with their consumption helps to shed light on the ways in which the period drama genre is conceptualised more generally. These dramas, with their perceived female audiences, are not considered to hold the same cultural value that other, more male-oriented dramas do. What Mittell identifies as the social function of genre is exemplified by the attitude of the BBC announcer introducing *Call the Midwife* (and by implication other dramas within the same genre) as a form of televisual comfort blanket. Any more substantial potential impacts are essentially hidden by the characterisation of the genre as insignificant feminine nostalgia.

The tendency to ascribe value and characteristics based on broad classifications does not only apply to film and television genres. Social demographics are also a significant way in which we use categorisation to make sense of the world around us. This thesis also draws on my experience as a teacher in London between 2006 and 2015. During this period I taught English and Media Studies to young people, mostly in what is known in the UK as Further Education, teaching students in the 16-19 age range. It was during these years of working closely with a range of different young people that I came to fully appreciate the diversity of this age group. Despite the diversity I observed, I also came to feel frustration with the ways in which society, and in some cases, those within the education system itself, generalise about the tastes and characteristics of young people. This frustration was compounded for me by an experience I had when preparing to teach a Media Studies class. At the beginning of the year, I was sat down by the course leader and given a pile of DVDs that I was told would work well with the students. Upon closer inspection, it became clear that the pile consisted entirely of male-dominated narratives that focussed on depictions of crime and violence. To use Knightley's phrase, they were 'cool and male'.

This experience troubled me for several reasons. Firstly, there was the lack of diversity; what is education for, after all, if not to introduce us to new experiences that we might not choose in our everyday life? Perhaps more crucial though, were the forms of representation that I was being encouraged to show to these young people. Although Media Studies was a popular subject with female students at the college, there appeared to be little attempt to screen material that might reflect their experiences, or provide them with female characters to whom they might look up or relate, or who might simply demonstrate the range of experiences and opportunities open to women in the modern western world. Instead there was a proliferation of what might these days be termed toxic masculinity, stories in which men solve problems by fighting other men. When I ignored the films recommended to me and chose to use a period drama, *Atonement* (Joe Wright, 2007), in my teaching, my choice was belittled by my (male) colleagues and jettisoned at the first opportunity. This was in spite of the fact that students in the class had enthusiastically discussed the various techniques employed in the design of the

[6] Jason Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. ix.
[7] Mittell, *Genre and Television*, p. ix.

film, and had expressed a desire to watch more in order to find out what happened in the story.

As well as annoying me, this experience also caused me to reflect. I had witnessed enjoyment of a period drama from the groups of teenagers that I was teaching, and yet this clearly flew in the face of the perceptions of my colleagues about the types of text that would be well-received by this age group. These experiences were consistent with a broader range of experiences that I had whilst working as a teacher. Having taught English for several years, I had a lot of experience of showing what might be termed period dramas to teenage audiences, usually when classes watched adaptations of canonical literary texts studied in class. This practice highlighted to me the range of responses that this material elicited in teenage audiences. Whereas one class were glued to *Northanger Abbey* (ITV, 2007), for instance, another group were bored by it. These experiences taught me to avoid predicting how my classes would react to the material I showed them, as they were constantly able to surprise me with either positive or negative reactions that went beyond what I might have expected. Observing this phenomenon compounded my dissatisfaction with the narrow range of material that I had been encouraged to use in teaching the young people in my classes.

This age group, and particularly young males, has long been perceived to be the most lucrative market in the film exhibition industry. Claire Monk, in a discussion of data gathered about the cinema-going habits of various demographic groups in the late 1990s, observes the high levels of interest in younger audiences, with less attention being paid to older cinema goers. Monk's analysis also suggests that this older age group is actually more economically significant.[8] She goes on to suggest that

> 'older' audiences (whether defined as 25-plus, 35-plus or 45-plus) were treated as relatively marginal not because they were objectively commercially insignificant, but because they did not fit the (in reality, outdated) archetype of the 'regular' or 'habitual' cinemagoer craved by the industry. This marginalisation was also coloured by a cultural bias which valorised young male audiences and masculine genres, while (discursively) exiling 'older' – and especially older female – audiences and their tastes outside the 'mainstream'.[9]

Whilst this analysis refers to data gathered some years ago, a glance at the proliferation of 'cinematic universes', led by the output of Marvel Studios, populating cinemas in recent years demonstrates that genres targeted at younger, predominantly male audiences, still reign in today's film industry. Monk's discussion of the marginalisation of older female audiences and their tastes returns us once again to the dismissive description of *Call the Midwife*, and Keira Knightley's aggravation at the patronising attitudes towards her work in period dramas. Although Roberta Garrett notes that earlier forms of cinema, such as classical Hollywood films, took potential female spectators seriously,[10] Monk is here, correctly in my opinion, identifying a more recent tendency in the film industry to dismiss female audiences and typically feminine

[8] Claire Monk, *Heritage Film Audiences: Period Films and Contemporary Audiences in the UK* (Edinburgh: EUP, 2011), p. 48.
[9] Monk, *Heritage Film Audiences*, p. 48 citing Claire Monk, 'Heritage Films and the British Cinema Audience in the 1990s', in *The Journal of Popular British Cinema*, 2 (1999), pp. 22-38.
[10] Roberta Garrett, *Postmodern Chick Flicks: The Return of the Woman's Film* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007), pp. 1-2.

genres as less important. In this thesis, I follow Mittell's argument that genre formation influences many of the discourses surrounding particular texts, and seek to push beyond perceptions of assumed audiences. I thus question the intuitive ways in which likely viewers are ascribed to particular genres and demographic characteristics are used as a broad brush to predict audience responses. I whole-heartedly agree that the film industry, including film journalism and quite possibly the academic study of film, marginalises female representation in films, and female audiences and interests, particularly when it comes to genres traditionally associated with female spectatorship. Yet in this thesis I also wish to interrogate the assumptions we make about these genres, and how demographically different audiences respond to them.

Whilst today's blockbusters circulate in multiplexes, often playing on multiple screens in the same venue, period drama feature films, although often finding some exposure in multiplexes, are associated much more with the art cinema circuit. Thus, these films find different audiences, with the younger multiplex attendee watching the film created with their audience demographic in mind, and the older arthouse audience member watching their lower budget, higher prestige productions. As the anecdotal evidence that I have proffered above suggests, however, these associations of demographics with particular genres may be reductive, leading to unhelpfully generalised conceptions of both audience groups and genres. In the study that follows, I question assumptions about how young people will respond to period dramas by reporting on research I undertook into the reactions of teenage audiences (aged 16-19) to a variety of recent examples of the period drama genre, drawn from both the film and television industries. However, it is worth pointing out here that, although I am dealing specifically with younger audiences and the period drama genre, problems of over-generalisation are likely to be relevant when considering a range of different audience groups and genres.

As will be clear, this study is the product of interests and dissatisfactions that have accumulated in my thoughts over the course of many years, but it was finally inspired by research that I carried out about the *Harry Potter* film cycle.[11] In the paper that came out of this work, I argue that the conceptualisation of these films as big budget blockbusters ignores the many aesthetic and thematic similarities that the series has with the period drama genre. Whilst reflecting on the popularity of the *Harry Potter* films with young audiences, it occurred to me that this highlighted an apparent contradiction that needed further interrogation. If young people can demonstrate such enthusiasm for the *Harry Potter* films, and (as I argued) these films contain many of the same characteristics as period dramas, why does the assumption that the period drama genre does not appeal to young audiences persist? Having read the research carried out by Monk into audience responses to the heritage film, I was familiar with this form of research,[12] and set out to construct a study that would gather empirical data on how young audiences respond to the period drama genre. By doing so, I also hoped to add to what Robert Stow notes is the relatively small amount of research carried out into audience responses to representations of history.[13]

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[11] Shelley Anne Galpin, 'Harry Potter and the Hidden Heritage Films: Genre Hybridity and the Power of the Past in the *Harry Potter* Film Cycle', *The Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 13 (3) (2016), pp. 430-449.

[12] See Monk, *Heritage Film Audiences*.

[13] Robert Stow, 'Popcorn and Circus: An Audience Expects', in *The Return of the Epic Film: Genre, Aesthetics and History in the 21st Century*, ed. by Andrew B R Elliott (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p. 74.

At its heart, this study is an attempt to capture data commensurate with the experiences I had over many years as a teacher, of showing period dramas to groups of teenagers and being surprised by the range of responses such material inspired in them. By researching a genre generally associated with more mature audiences, I am confronting David Buckingham and Mary Jane Kehily's suggestion that academic researchers are often unwilling to consider the possibility that 'young people are more like adults than we are prepared to admit'.[14] In order to gather information on this subject, I developed a study in which groups of teenagers were recruited and then shown five examples of the period drama genre over the course of several weeks or months. These period dramas consisted of full films or complete episodes from television series, and after each screening the participants were asked to complete individual online surveys recording their responses to the dramas. This survey data was then supported by focus groups held at the end of the study, in which participants were given the opportunity to discuss their responses in greater detail. The selection of five different examples of the period drama genre was designed to enable me to explore responses to the wide range of texts that fall under the umbrella of the term 'period drama'.

It is worth pausing here for a moment to dwell on the question of terminology. The texts included in the study could be variously described as costume dramas, period dramas, heritage dramas or historical dramas. I am aware that these terms will differ in meaning according to individual usage. Indeed, some of my participants even challenged my use of terminology, stating that some of the examples in the study were historical dramas, not period dramas. The more academic term of heritage drama has also been contested, with theorists of this genre not always in agreement about which films should be described as 'heritage'. In my first chapter, which deals with the academic background to my study, I shall discuss the 'heritage film debate' as it has played out in academic writing about period drama. For the majority of the thesis, however, I use the term 'period drama' to refer to all the texts considered in the study. The reason for this is largely that I needed to use terminology which would be accessible to participants who are unaware of the academic discourse about this type of film. As I needed to be able to discuss the genre with my teenage participants with a minimum level of explanation, I elected to use the term period drama to refer to all of the films and television series we considered. As Belén Vidal argues, the term 'period film' is 'the least connoted, the closest to a canvas capacious enough to embrace its multiple manifestations'.[15] By favouring this term, I do not seek to erase the differences that some viewers may understand between the terms listed above; indeed, in Chapter 6 I explicitly explore the perceived differences between costume drama and historical drama. However, in order for the study to proceed without becoming overly hampered by questions of terminology I use the term period drama to refer to a reasonably broad range of films and television series set in the past.

In addition to considering the ways in which the period drama is situated in academic discourse, Chapter 1 also considers the various academic debates that have influenced this study. These include research into young people's genres, and the ways in which young people themselves are often conceptualised in relation to debates around the media and its impact on wider society. I also consider the discipline of audience research, and some of the previous

[14] David Buckingham and Mary Jane Kehily, 'Introduction: Rethinking Youth Cultures in the Age of Global Media', in *Youth Cultures in the Age of Global Media*, ed. by David Buckingham, Sara Bragg and Mary Jane Kehily (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 5.
[15] Belén Vidal, *Figuring the Past: Period Film and the Mannerist Aesthetic* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), p. 10.

studies that impacted on the choices I made when designing my own study. This subject is then taken up in more detail in Chapter 2, in which I discuss the process of designing the study. Thus, I look in detail at the methodological choices made, and the reasoning behind these. I also detail the five dramas that were selected as case studies to be screened to the study participants, noting what I see as the key features of each drama, as well as the reasons behind their selection.

Chapter 3 introduces the study participants themselves. In the first stage of the study, I collected demographic data on these participants, including information about their consumption of media and of history, and their attitudes towards the period drama genre. Whilst this was gathered in order to provide insights into how these various factors might influence the participants' responses to the texts screened in the study, this survey data also proved to be a rich source of information in its own right. In discussing this data, I also explore what it indicates about young people in England in 2017/18, the period during which the study took place. Here, the participants emerge as a group of people occupying a transitional space between childhood and maturity, with the influences of both their family life and their wider social experiences in evidence as they develop into young adults.

Chapter 4 is perhaps the heart of the project, where I provide an overview of the responses of the participants to the five films and television shows screened, detailing the key points of discussion that came out of each screening. The chapter highlights the highly diverse reactions captured in the study data, and through these I consider what appear to be some of the key factors in determining how the young people responded to the various dramas. Key issues to emerge in this chapter include the perceived relevance of the dramas to the participants, their familiarity with and the extent of their inclination towards the characteristics of the period drama, and the reactions of their peers.

Chapter 5 focusses on one of the questions central to the original conception of the study, namely, how do young audiences respond to the representation of different social groups in period dramas? I chose the five case study dramas because they deal with a variety of very different characters, representing a range of demographic characteristics. This is because, as well as exploring the diverse range of stories depicted within the genre, I also intended to explore the extent to which different forms of representation impacted participants' responses to the genre. This research angle was also inspired by my experience as a teacher in London, working with classes made up of students from a range of different ethnic backgrounds. On one occasion I showed a clip from an episode of the television series *Garrow's Law* (BBC, 2009-2011), a courtroom drama set in eighteenth-century London. The extract featured a character of black African descent who appears dressed in the outfit of an English gentleman, as opposed to the slave dress more commonly worn by black characters within a period *mise en scène*. The responses of my students to this representation of a black character in the period dress of the upper classes was highly striking, with many so surprised by the character that they struggled to know how to talk about him.

It was around this time that the feature film *Belle* (Amma Asante, 2014) was released, a period drama featuring a bi-racial woman as the lead character. I found myself wondering how my black students would respond to a period drama featuring an aristocratic woman of mixed white and black ethnicity, and whether this would make the film more interesting to them, as my experience of showing a brief clip featuring a black character in a period setting had suggested it might. Therefore, in selecting case studies for the study, I sought representations of different ethnicities. However, I also wanted to explore the impact of the representation of

a range of other demographic groups, and so screened films and television shows that also explored the experiences of characters who represented different class and sexual identities, and characters of differing abilities, as well as identifying texts with both male and female protagonists. Chapter 5, therefore explores the effect of this range of representation, considering questions of identification and engagement between participants and characters, and examining the relationship between the demographic characteristics of the participants and the forms of representation in the films and television shows they watched for the study.

As with all projects, the focus of this research shifted over time. At the outset, I expected the focus of analysis to include issues such as the ways in which period dramas speak to the national identity of the country whose history they depict, but data gathered from the pilot study I carried out was not particularly fruitful on this topic. Instead, questions around the ways in which history should or shouldn't be represented came to the fore, with many participants expressing views on the extent to which representations of history have a responsibility to be accurate in their depiction. This was a line of research that continued to be prominent in the main study, and repeated references to it by various participants indicated that it is clearly an important issue in the minds of many when assessing the quality of individual period dramas. The increase in public discourse around the notion of truth, and the rise of the concept of 'fake news', also make questions around the authenticity of narratives purporting to be 'true stories' all the more vital in contemporary society. As a result, I have dedicated the final chapter (Chapter 6) of the thesis to this topic. In this chapter I consider both the case studies that adapt literary sources, and those that can be seen to 'adapt' history more generally, and explore some of the debates around these practices in relation to the responses of my participants on this subject.

As a whole, this study is intended to provide new insights into young people and how they engage with films and television by exploring their responses to the period drama genre, a genre that this age group is not typically associated with. In the execution of this study I also hoped to capture something of the diversity of young people, to demonstrate through my data that they are very far from being a homogenous group. As Mittell observes, audience voices, although sometimes difficult to capture, are a significant aspect of how genres are constituted.[16] Through this audience research project, I explore how the period drama genre is received and conceptualised by young people. As the scale of the study means that it cannot provide data that could be considered to be representative of the population of 16-19 years old in England as a whole, this thesis makes no claims to provide an accurate representation of the feelings of young people in England in their entirety about the genre. However, the geographical range in the distribution of the participants, as well as the range of ethnic and economic backgrounds they are drawn from, does mean that the study goes some way towards encapsulating the social differences that exist in England, and allowing for the influence of this on the data collected.

By carrying out audience research, I have sought to gather detailed qualitative data from a relatively small number of participants. Although the study was originally envisaged as something closer to the 'quali-quant' methodology, combining individualised qualitative responses with more broadly generalisable quantitative data, over the course of the study, the qualitative aspect of the research came to take on a greater significance, as I discuss in Chapter 2. As Matthew Reason notes, working with qualitative data in studies on a small scale means

[16] Mittell, *Genre and Television*, p. 24.

that generalisability is, to a certain extent, compromised.[17] However, as Reason goes on to suggest, the richness of data that these methods yield also allows for a more flexible approach to generalisation, in which the reader is empowered by the depth of the material to apply their own interpretations to it.[18] The study discussed in this thesis maintains an interest in the relatively small amount of quantitative data that was collected, with this information providing a useful foundation for the analysis of the qualitative data to build on, but the majority of the discussion explores the qualitative responses gathered from the surveys and focus group interviews.

Anyone who reads the entire thesis will notice that some participants are quoted at length several times, to the extent that the more active participants almost become 'characters' with distinct personalities. In quoting this material, I aim to evidence the depth and breadth of the participants' responses, which is clearly demonstrable, despite the data not being representative of the wider population. When quoting from participants, I draw out, or pull together, aspects of the responses that I consider to be particularly noteworthy. However, following Reason's arguments about the strength of qualitative data, it is impossible for me to fully consider all the potentially significant features of the data represented here, and I hope that readers will also be able to interpret the material in relation to their own experience and interests.

In quoting from surveys and focus groups, I have made no attempt to correct grammatical errors, and have presented the data as it was given to me, with the exception of suggesting corrections in squared brackets at points where I believe the meaning may be obscured by an error. Similarly, in quoting from focus groups I have maintained the fragmentary and often hesitant character of spoken language, and have not attempted to turn the speech of my participants, or indeed myself, into grammatical sentences. In doing so I intend to both maintain the integrity of the original data, and demonstrate that language does not have to adhere to traditional rules of grammar to be either comprehensible or useful. The survey responses were often submitted by participants on their phones, and therefore frequently demonstrate the relaxed attitude to language use that is characteristic of modern forms of communication. In allowing this to be reflected in my thesis I seek to highlight the extent to which language is a flexible and ever changing medium, whose usefulness lies precisely in its adaptability, rather than its rigid adherence to rules.

The inclusion of what might be perceived as errors should not be taken as any form of indication as to the education or intelligence of the participants who took part in my study. Indeed, I hope the following chapters show that many of them were thoughtful, perceptive and articulate. To that extent, what I present here might serve once again as a warning against making superficial judgements about young people. I should also note that, when quoting from the participants in my surveys, I provide brief demographic information about the participant in brackets, in order to contextualise the data. In extracts from focus groups, which often feature several participants, I have chosen to provide this information in footnotes, in order to make the material as readable as possible.

In addition to this study's focus on young people, it also aims to contribute to the already substantial body of academic work on period, or heritage, drama. By considering young people

[17] Matthew Reason, *The Young Audience: Exploring and Enhancing Children's Experiences of Theatre* (Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books, 2010), p. 57.
[18] Reason, *The Young Audience*, p. 57.

as a previously neglected audience group for this genre, the research detailed here aims to develop our understanding of the ways in which period dramas can hold significance for contemporary lives. The research also challenges the marginalisation of this genre as mere gentle nostalgia, by exploring responses to a range of examples of the genre, representing an array of different characters and experiences. In summary, this thesis seeks to find out how young audiences respond to the period drama genre, what their responses tell us about young people, and further to this, what their responses tell us about the period drama genre. Through the exploration of these areas, I consider the central role that genre formation has on how texts are received, as well as demonstrating the clear role that social groupings play in the development of judgements. I explore the complex ways in which concepts such as identification and emotional engagement can be seen to influence audience responses, and demonstrate the ways in which the young people's own values can be read as influencing their feelings about characters and stories. I also consider the ways in which concepts of authenticity and accuracy impact upon the reception of historical narratives, and show that these superficially compatible ideas can work in contradictory ways when it comes to meeting audience expectations of the representation of the past.

Perhaps most importantly, in the chapters that follow, I demonstrate that neither young people, nor the period drama genre, deserve to be patronised by dismissive statements that assume they exist as a uniform group. In each case, the differences between the sets of responses often outweigh the similarities, demonstrating that there is work to be done, academically and in wider society, to capture the diversity of both the period drama genre and young people today. This study aims to contribute towards this work, and to point the way towards more research in both areas.

Chapter 1

Period Drama and Young Audiences: The Foundations of the Research

In studying teenage responses to period drama, this thesis brings together a range of different areas of scholarship. This is, I believe, one of the strengths of the thesis. In this chapter, I explain the academic foundations for the study by discussing the key areas of thinking that informed the design of the research, and the analysis of the data gathered. Clearly it is impossible to describe in detail the full range of thinking that has gone into each of these subjects, so this chapter aims to provide an overview of the existing relevant scholarship. One key inspiration for the study was pre-existing scholarship on period drama, or the 'heritage film', as it is often conceptualised in academic discourse. I begin the chapter by considering some of the main debates about the politicisation of period drama, attitudes towards history on screen and its relationship to written historical texts, and audience engagement with period dramas. I then move on to consider the other central consideration of this research project, namely young people and their engagement with media texts. I first explore what I see as the links between period drama and the more traditionally youth-centred genre of the teen film, a comparison which I believe strengthens the rationale for researching young people's responses to the period drama genre. Following this, I look at research into young people's responses to the media in general, focussing on the history of 'media effects' research and the ways in which this conceptualises young audiences. Finally, I provide an overview of existing work on audience responses to media texts more generally and outline some of the studies that influenced the design of this thesis.

The 'Heritage Film' Debate

The period drama has long been treated with suspicion in academic discussions of the genre. As Belén Vidal observes, 'the critique of the heritage film is the most salient example of the way that an ambiguous, non-political aesthetic defaulted to a politically suspicious nostalgia that responds to contemporary cultural anxieties about our relationship with the past.[1] The concept of 'heritage film' referenced by Vidal is the terminology most commonly used since the early 1990s to conceptualise the period drama within academic debates about the genre. As Vidal notes, discussion around this genre has become almost inseparable from wider political debates, resulting in the genre itself being viewed as inherently political. As Andrew Higson argues, 'one central representational strategy of the heritage film is the reproduction of literary texts, artefacts and landscapes which already have a privileged status within the accepted definition of national heritage.'[2] This 'representational strategy' has been a key target of criticism of the genre, with Higson arguing in his influential essay on the heritage film, 'Re-presenting the National Past: Nostalgia and Pastiche in the Heritage Film', first published in 1993, that despite the apparently progressive narratives of many films in this genre, the effect

[1] Belén Vidal, *Figuring the Past: Period Film and the Mannerist Aesthetic* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), p. 18.
[2] Andrew Higson, *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 27.

of the lavish *mise en scène* is to obscure any liberal impulses contained within the narrative in favour of a more conservative celebration of the lifestyle of the aristocracy.[3]

These arguments were part of a wider critical discussion of the so-called heritage film, which developed in the 1990s in response to films such as *Chariots of Fire* (Hugh Hudson, 1981) and *A Room with a View* (James Ivory, 1986*)*. As the debate has been well-documented elsewhere, I do not intend to go over this history again here.[4] However, it is worth noting that politicised arguments regarding the ways in which heritage films obscure social diversity continue to be made. In an essay published in 2016, Daniela Berghahn supports this point of view by citing the work of Stuart Hall:

> the 'selective canonisation' of the nation's 'high points and memorable achievements' has a number of conspicuous blind spots and… these blind spots instantly reveal the hegemonic nature of heritage: 'It is always inflected by the power and authority of those who have colonised the past, whose versions of history matter.'[5]

I shall return to the question of different 'versions of history' below, but it is important to note here the continued attention paid to the ways in which heritage films are seen to effectively distort history in favour of more privileged members of society. There is an undoubted validity to many of these arguments, drawing attention to the ways that films, and particularly films representing the past, carefully construct images of place and culture, thus contributing to an artificially created national identity. However, this line of argument in turn sparked an equally vociferous school of thought that re-evaluated the representational features of heritage film precisely through their ability to give visibility to groups who are marginalised in other genres.

Discussing the impetus for her own research into the ways in which audiences engage with heritage film, Claire Monk notes that:

> heritage films themselves have often played a seemingly progressive role – compared to the male-centred and heterosexist norms of mainstream cinema – by 'represent[ing] the lives of women, lesbians and gay men, ethnic minorities and the disabled in the national past'. Indeed, they have frequently made women or gay characters their central protagonists, and are one of the few film genres with a record of giving substantial screen time, character complexity and agency to older women.[6]

This view of the heritage film as a locus of empowerment for more marginalised social groups has also become central to the conceptualisation of this genre, with Higson acknowledging the

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[3] See Andrew Higson, 'Re-presenting the National Past: Nostalgia and Pastiche in the Heritage Film', in *Fires Were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism*, ed, by Lester D. Friedman (London: Wallflower Press, 2006), pp. 91-109.

[4] See for example the opening chapter of Claire Monk, *Heritage Film Audiences: Period Films and Contemporary Audiences in the UK* (Edinburgh: EUP, 2011).

[5] Stuart Hall, 'Whose Heritage? Unsettling 'the Heritage', Re-imagining Post-Nation', *Third Text*, 49 (1999), pp. 2-13, cited in Daniela Berghahn, 'Rewriting History from the Margins: Diasporic Memory, Shabby Chic and Archival Footage', in *Screening European Heritage: Creating and Consuming History on Film*, ed. by Paul Cooke and Rob Stone (London: Palgrave, 2016), p. 86.

[6] Monk, *Heritage Film Audiences*, p. 19, citing Richard Dyer and Ginette Vincendeau from a leaflet publicising *The European 'Heritage' Film: A Workshop Conference*, University of Warwick, 24 June 1995.

importance of this generic feature for many viewers.[7] As identified in the quotation from Vidal, heritage films can be seen as ambiguous with regards to the meanings they suggest. This undermines earlier work on the genre that appeared to assume the presence of clear, underlying political messages, such as Cairns Craig's conclusion that heritage films 'satiris[e] [conservative] values which are in the end endorsed'.[8] This ambiguity is central to Monk's own research, discussed in more depth below, which explores the ways in which the heritage film can provide a range of different pleasures for different people. The representation of women and minority groups identified by Monk provide pleasure for many viewers of the heritage form, a pleasure unrelated to the genre's much-discussed display of upper-class property. These ideas are also developed by Roberta Garrett, who states that period dramas possess a 'radical potential to readdress historical gender inequalities with a contemporary eye.'[9] Considering the aesthetic features of period drama, specifically the lavish costuming, Garrett suggests that:

> recent forms of costume drama do not reject the sartorial ostentation of the form, [but] they often use this in an exploratory or symbolic sense, drawing attention to its significance in carrying the weight of social status and signifying the boundaries of gendered behaviour.[10]

Through this re-evaluation, the genre emerges as an important site in which contemporary issues around the position of women in society, as well as the treatment of other under-represented groups, can be explored. The features that often led to it being criticised or dismissed as too concerned with surface detail, are here shown to operate in far more meaningful ways, providing visual information about the social and political context that is crucial to an understanding of the narrative themes at work in many period dramas.

As Altman has noted, ascribing specific texts to generic categories is not a straightforward task, with many genres containing examples whose place within the corpus is disputed.[11] The heritage film is an example of what Mittell refers to as 'theoretical genre creation', following Todorov's distinction between historical genres (those developed by wider cultural discourse) and theoretical genres (developed by and often restricted to scholarship).[12] As such, the term has little currency within general public discourse, a consideration which was a significant factor in my choice to adopt the term 'period drama' in my thesis. With regards to the process of designing audience research on this, or any, genre, considering how to classify texts that might be considered to belong within it is clearly important. The precise definition of the heritage film is difficult to pin down, with Vidal noting that it is 'constantly reconfiguring its

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[7] Andrew Higson, 'The Heritage Film and British Cinema', in *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema*, ed. by Andrew Higson (London: Cassell, 1996), p. 244.
[8] Cairns Craig, 'Rooms Without a View', in *Film/Literature/Heritage: A Sight and Sound Reader*, ed. by Ginette Vincendeau (London: BFI, 2001), p. 6.
[9] Roberta Garrett, *Postmodern Chick Flicks: The Return of the Woman's Film* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007), p. 153.
[10] Garrett, *Postmodern Chick Flicks*, p. 53.
[11] Rick Altman, 'A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre', in *Film Genre Reader III*, ed. by Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), p. 29.
[12] Jason Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 17, citing Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Ithaca: Cornel University Press, 1975), pp. 13-14.

generic borders'.[13] As Monk notes, the labelling of films as 'heritage' or otherwise has not been straightforward, with some films being seen to belong to this category by some critics, but not by others.[14] In terms of its generic traits, heritage cinema has often been associated with a literary form of filmmaking, due in part, no doubt, to its early association with adaptations of canonical literature. As Higson notes, the word 'literate' is often used to describe films in the period drama genre, being invoked 'as a means of both praising what [critics] perceive as 'good' cinema, and recommending that cinema to well educated, 'literate' audiences.'[15]

The mode of storytelling adopted by various films and television series contributes to the association of heritage drama with literariness, with Sarah Cardwell discussing the distinctive leisurely pace of the television series *Brideshead Revisited* (ITV, 1981):

> the sedate pace of the narrative in *Brideshead*, though arising from fidelity to the source book, was subsequently adopted as a generic stylistic trait, along with other peculiarities of style such as its particular use of framing and editing. In its pace there is a textual resonance of its connection with literature, which is seen as a more leisurely, measured and thoughtful pursuit…[16]

This perception of period drama as sharing key characteristics with classic literature is central to its association with older, middle class audiences and, hence, its dissociation from audiences who consume more action-oriented blockbuster fare (such as teenagers). Cardwell also raises another key question in defining the genre: the slippage between film and television in discussions of heritage dramas. Whilst Cardwell is here discussing a television series, elsewhere she links *Brideshead* with the conventions of the heritage film which emerged a few years later, arguing that both film and television adaptations of classic novels contributed to the generic features that later became standard.[17] In recent years the boundaries between television and film have blurred, with many television series now attracting bigger budgets, adopting a more 'cinematic' style and featuring stars previously known for their film work. However, in the genre of heritage drama this boundary can be seen to have been perforated long before more recent industry changes, with some of the most iconic heritage dramas having been made for television.[18] This, along with the clear generic traits that operate across both television and film heritage dramas means that the distinction between feature films and television dramas that was a mainstay of the entertainment industry until recently has long been complicated by the heritage genre.

The perception of 'quality' in many television adaptations of literary works may provide some explanation for the blurring of boundaries between television heritage drama and the more prestigious mode of feature film production. As I have already noted, the period drama has long been associated with the more highbrow art form of canonical literature, resulting in both films and television series in this genre accruing more prestige than is often afforded to other generic modes. In addition, budget sizes may also have contributed to the relative closeness in

[13] Belén Vidal, *Heritage Film: Nation, Genre and Representation* (London: Wallflower, 2012), p. 4.
[14] See Monk, *Heritage Film Audiences*, pp. 13-16.
[15] Andrew Higson, 'Brit-lit Biopics, 1990-2010', in *The Writer on Film: Screening Literary Authorship*, ed. by Judith Buchanan (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 108.
[16] Sarah Cardwell, *Adaptation Revisited: Television and the Classic Novel* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 112.
[17] Cardwell, *Adaptation Revisited*, pp. 118-123.
[18] For example, the aforementioned *Brideshead Revisited* or *Pride and Prejudice* (BBC, 1995).

quality between feature films and heritage dramas on television. Compared to the big budgets of mainstream blockbuster cinema, the budgets required by feature films to create a period 'look' are much smaller. However, such dramas can be relatively expensive in relation to other television dramas because of the need to construct a coherent historical diegesis. In any case, it is worth noting the slippage that occurs between discussion of heritage films and television dramas. Whilst I am, in this chapter, largely considering the heritage *film* debate, this is due more to its higher profile in academic publications, although I would suggest these ideas are equally applicable to television drama. Although Cardwell's book is specifically focussed on the medium of television, she frequently references film theory to develop her arguments. It is this blurring of the lines between film and television in discussions of period drama that led, in part, to the study detailed here including both film and television examples.

History on Screen

As well as the politicised debates regarding whether or not the heritage film obscures the lives of the less privileged, the very practice of putting history on screen has also attracted considerable debate. Seeking to present a more positive reading of the heritage film, Alan O'Leary argues that heritage texts have a legitimate value in encouraging identification with the past. O' Leary notes Eckart Voigts-Virchow's contention that 'heritage is not history (which seeks knowledge about the past), it is the "modern-day use of elements of the past"'.[19] However, he counters this by arguing that 'heritage culture may more effectively be thought of in terms of *establishing a relationship with the past* and in terms of *registering the persistence of the past in the present*. In heritage cinema, pleasure is the vehicle of such activity.'[20] This distinction between heritage and 'real' history is well established in debates about the representation of the past. As Marnie Hughes-Warrington notes, many historians have distinguished what they see as authentic attempts to explore history on screen from other forms of historical representation. One such example is this reference to the work of Frederic Jameson, who, she writes,

> asks us not to confuse the historical film with the 'nostalgia film', arguing that in the latter 'the surface sheen of a period' is transformed into a commodity…. Historical films, on the other hand, have 'holes' or are 'perforated', leaving us to navigate through gaps and to work at meaning making.[21]

Here again we see period dramas being discussed with suspicion. Vidal notes the essential paradox, whereby the opulent aesthetic style is considered to detract from the films' '(semiotic) potential', with the 'pastness' of the texts 'appear[ing] disconnected from the (historical) past by an aesthetic of surfaces'.[22] In short, the presence of too much period detail

[19]Eckart Voigts-Virchow, 'Heritage and Literature on Screen: *Heimat* and Heritage', in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen*, ed. by Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 123-37, cited in Alan O'Leary, 'Towards World Heritage Cinema (Starting from the Negative)', in *Screening European Heritage: Creating and Consuming History on Film*, ed. by Paul Cooke and Rob Stone (London: Palgrave, 2016), p. 65.
[20] O'Leary, 'Towards World Heritage Cinema', p. 65, italics in original.
[21] Frederic Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (London: Routledge, 1992), cited in Marnie Hughes-Warrington, 'Introduction: History on Film: Theory, Production, Reception', in *The History on Film Reader*, ed. by Marnie Hughes-Warrington (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), p. 3.
[22] Vidal, *Figuring the Past*, p. 18.

is somehow seen to detract from the ability of these films to communicate effectively about the past. Since I discuss this 'style over substance' argument in more depth in Chapter 6, I will not dwell on it here. However, it is worth noting the consistency with which the attractive visual style of many period dramas is employed to serve as evidence for their lack of consequence, and their insignificance as discourses on history.

The representation of history on screen has long been recognised for the tension between the accessibility of films and television on the one hand, and the requirement for that history to be streamlined, on the other hand, in order to create coherent narratives from historical sources.[23] As O'Leary notes, the watching of narratives set in the past can serve to encourage viewers to feel more connected to the lives and stories of people who lived long ago, and can serve to highlight the relevance of historical events to contemporary times. Considering how this tension plays out in the eyes of general viewers, Hughes-Warrington asserts that 'ours is a world in which films rank second only to photographs as the means by which people claim to connect with the past. For all their contact with films, however, people appear to be sceptical about what they see.'[24] She goes on to note that 'history educators… see film as playing a role in the development of young people's historical consciousness, but school and university syllabuses are still heavily focused on the handling of written texts.'[25] As this demonstrates, written historical texts have traditionally been, and still are, considered as more authoritative sources, able to capture the nuanced and unstable nature of historical 'facts'. In contrast, screen representations of historical periods are often seen as more interested in factors such as commercial viability and the importance of a good, coherent narrative line, which for many commentators renders them less worthy as historical texts.

Considering the status of screen representations of history, historians such as Robert Rosenstone and Hayden White have suggested that, rather than automatically dismissing them as inherently less reliable sources, we instead need to re-evaluate our relationship with the written word.[26] Despite attempts to problematise the distinction between 'reliable' written history and 'unreliable' history on screen, suspicion as to the value of dramatic historical representations persists. As Pam Cook notes, historical dramatisations have been accused of creating

> prosthetic memor[ies]… whereby reconstructions of the past produce replacement memories that simulate first-hand experience. Such enterprises lay themselves open to charges of a lack of authenticity, of substituting a degraded popular version for the 'real' event, and to

[23] See Pam Cook, *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), p. 3, and Pierre Sorlin, 'Television and Our Understanding of History: A Distant Conversation', in *Screening the Past: Film and the Representation of History*, ed. by Tony Barta (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1998), p. 209.

[24] Hughes-Warrington, 'Introduction', p. 1, citing Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, 'The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life', in *The History on Film Reader*, ed. by Marnie Hughes-Warrington (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), pp. 239-48.

[25] Hughes-Warrington, 'Introduction', p. 2.

[26] Robert A Rosenstone, 'History in Images / History in Words', in *The History on Film Reader*, ed. by Marnie Hughes-Warrington (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), pp. 39-40, and Hayden White, 'Historiography and Historiophoty', in *The History on Film Reader*, ed. by Marnie Hughes-Warrington (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), pp. 55-6. .

> accusations that by presenting history as a dramatic spectacle they obscure our understanding of social, political and cultural forces.[27]

Cook also notes that dramatisations of historical events are perceived by some as ethically questionable, 'in that audiences are deemed to have been duped into accepting inauthentic versions and forgetting the 'truth''.[28]

Alison Landsberg, who developed the concept of prosthetic memories, sees a more optimistic potential in this phenomenon. Although Cook observes that this process has been characterised as unethically obfuscating the 'real', this contrasts with Landsberg's position, who specifically states that she 'call[s] these memories prosthetic to underscore their usefulness. Because they feel real, they help condition how a person thinks about the world and might be instrumental in articulating an ethical relation to the other.'[29] In the same vein as O'Leary's argument, Landsberg sees the ability of historical representations to encourage imaginative empathy as having the potential to build connections between different social groups within contemporary society. Cook herself also argues that 'modern-day reconstructions [of the past]…. can… inspire viewers to seek further knowledge and understanding.'[30] Thus, the narratives that Cook identifies as having been accused of over-simplifying the complexities of society, have also been read as having the power to positively impact the citizenship of viewers and even 'enabl[ing] the larger political project of advancing egalitarian social goals'.[31]

As I noted in my introduction, there is a widespread perception of the period drama genre as inextricably linked with the idea of nostalgia. This again causes problems, with Cook explaining that 'nostalgia is generally associated with fantasy and regarded as even more inauthentic than memory.'[32] She goes on to counter this position by arguing that 'where history supresses the element of disavowal or fantasy in its re-presentation of the past, nostalgia foregrounds those elements, and in effect lays bare the processes at the heart of remembrance.'[33] Similarly, Vidal has also used the paradigm of fantasy to explore period drama in a way that does not seek to devalue the appeal of either fantasy or the period drama genre,[34] and I have also made this link, arguing that the *Harry Potter* film cycle mirrors techniques used by many heritage films.[35] However, as Cook identifies, it is clear that, for some, the association of nostalgia with fantasy, and therefore period drama with the same, serves as further evidence for the notion of period dramas as inauthentic reconstructions of historical periods. Despite attempts to problematise the binary opposition between 'good' written history and 'bad' screen history, according to Cook, screen representations are often seen as inauthentic, or even unethical in their distortion of a perceived historical truth.

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[27] Cook, *Screening the Past*, p.2.
[28] Cook, *Screening the Past*, p. 3.
[29] Alison Landsberg, 'Memory, Empathy and the Politics of Identification', *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, 22 (2) (2009), p. 222.
[30] Cook, *Screening the Past*, p. 2-3.
[31] Landsberg, 'Memory, Empathy and the Politics of Identification', p. 222.
[32] Cook, *Screening the Past*, p. 3.
[33] Cook, *Screening the Past*, p. 4.
[34] See Vidal, *Figuring the Past*, pp. 43-4.
[35] See Shelley Anne Galpin, 'Harry Potter and the Hidden Heritage Films: Genre Hybridity and the Power of the Past in the *Harry Potter* Film Cycle', *The Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 13 (3) (2016), pp. 430-449.

Considering the arguments for and against the treatment of films as viable historical texts, Mike Chopra-Gant argues that many films very deliberately depart from the historical information available to the filmmakers in order to adhere to the artistic conception of the production. Referencing *Gangs of New York* (Martin Scorsese, 2003), Chopra-Gant suggests that this film, 'although apparently rich in historical detail, finally owes a great deal more to cinema than to history and consistently subordinates historical concerns to its cinematic imperatives.'[36] Indeed, audience research by Robert Stow on historical epics suggests that, far from expecting historical accuracy, at least some audience members are happy for this to be compromised in the pursuit of a more entertaining storyline.[37] Even if we do assume films or television series set in the past have an interest in creating authentic representations of history, the tendency to recreate what audiences believe to be accurate depictions has also been noted. Marcia Landy argues that 'films themselves… have played an increasingly important role in reshaping representations of history. Rather than reflecting history through verisimilitude, films reflect our received notions of the past….'[38] Similarly, Pierre Sorlin has commented that history on film reinforces dominant ways of thinking about the past, minimising perceptions of historical sources as inherently subjective and therefore not necessarily reliable.[39] Thus, historical representations on screen are seen to represent the past as we already believe it was, rather than drawing attention to potentially contradictory interpretations available from primary historical sources.

Producers of period dramas need to recreate a version of the past that feels authentic to contemporary audiences with a preconceived notion of what the past was like. However, they simultaneously need to present narratives which are accessible to modern audiences if they wish the product to be commercially successful. Considering the treatment of footman Thomas's (Rob James Collier) homosexuality in *Downton Abbey* (ITV, 2010-2015), Lucy Brown notes that the writers of the show have clearly chosen to employ twenty-first century sensibilities in the handling of this narrative theme.[40] This is not a new practice; writing about the cultural significance of heritage, Higson states that 'the construction of the national heritage – an ideological space as much as anything else – involves not so much the selecting of only certain values from the past, as the transference of present values on to the past as imaginary object.'[41] In practice, therefore, our relationship with the past is always governed by the contemporary filter through which we understand it. As Higson indicates, recreating the past is always an ideological act, as we construct stories that reflect the values considered most significant at the time of the recreation. In the example given by Brown, the representation of historically plausible early twentieth century attitudes towards homosexuality in a (highly) popular television series is unlikely to be well received by the

[36] Mike Chopra-Gant, *Cinema and History: The Telling of Stories* (London: Wallflower, 2008), p. 71.
[37] Robert Stow, 'Popcorn and Circus: An Audience Expects', in *The Return of the Epic Film: Genre, Aesthetics and History in the 21st Century*, ed. by Andrew B R Elliott (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p 77.
[38] Marcia Landy, 'The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media', in *The History on Film Reader*, ed. by Marnie Hughes-Warrington (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), p. 45.
[39] Pierre Sorlin, 'Television and Our Understanding of History', p. 209.
[40] Lucy Brown, 'Homosexual Lives: Representation and Reinterpretation in *Upstairs Downstairs* and *Downton Abbey*', in *Upstairs and Downstairs: British Costume Drama Television from* The Forsyte Saga *to* Downton Abbey', ed. by James Leggott and Julie Anne Taddeo (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), p. 268.
[41] Higson, *Waving the Flag*, p. 41, citing Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (London: Verso, 1985).

audience it is intended to appeal to. Therefore, in creating the show, the writers deliberately forewent historical accuracy in order to create characters that might be more sympathetic to modern audiences in their tolerance of Thomas's sexuality. Indeed, it could be argued that this does not end with the representation of homosexuality. Despite paying lip service to the class divide at the centre of the series, *Downton Abbey* generally portrays the aristocratic Crawley family as remarkably good employers, treating the servant characters more like friends than a hired workforce.

These issues go to the heart of the questions raised by the construction of narratives set in a historical period. As Tony Barta notes, historical dramatisations represent 'the paradox of history…: the past we regard as strange must become familiar.'[42] This tension has also been commented on by Janet Staiger, with reference to the film *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Daniel Vigne, 1984), who notes that American film critics were keen to emphasise what they saw as its authentic representation of the past, alongside a perceived timelessness and universality in the narrative's transcendence of the specific time and place.[43] In short, representations of history, on film or television, are often judged on the extent to which they construct an authentic reproduction of the period they purport to depict. However, this must be done in such a way that the events of the story, and the attitudes of characters within it, are clearly understood by modern audiences, and are unlikely to be offensive or incoherent to contemporary viewers. Furthermore, to avoid the accusations of being stylish but insubstantial, in the manner noted by Garrett, representations of historical periods need to be consistent enough to construct a believable diegesis, but not so lavish as to invite accusations of an excessive concern with surfaces that detracts from real historical interrogation.

Period Drama Audiences

This thesis details my study into the ways in which 16-19 year olds respond to examples of the period drama genre. The concept of audience response is at the heart of much genre theory. As Andrew Tudor observes, 'the notion that someone utilizes a genre suggests something about audience response. It implies that any given film works in a particular way because the audience has certain expectations of the genre.'[44] As we have seen, scholars such as Monk and Vidal have commented on the various ways in which the period, or heritage, drama could be interpreted by audiences. This complicates Tudor's assertion by highlighting that, although genres may operate by tapping into audience expectations of how texts will unfold, these expectations may not be the same for all audiences. As Mittell suggests, when discussing genres of any kind we should 'avoid dubious assertions about audiences', a requirement that necessitates us 'look[ing] beyond the text itself'.[45] Higson argues in his early work on the heritage film that, despite apparently liberal and progressive narrative themes, the overall effect of these films is ultimately a far more conservative celebration of an already privileged way of life.[46] The argument is based on textual analysis, however, rather than research into

[42] Tony Barta, 'Screening the Past: History Since the Cinema', in *Screening the Past: Film and the Representation of History*, ed. by Tony Barta (Westport: Praeger, 1998), p. 13.
[43] Janet Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* (New York: NYU Press, 2000), p. 192.
[44] Andrew Tudor, 'Genre', in *Film Genre Reader III*, ed. by Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), p. 8.
[45] Mittell, *Genre and Television*, p. 3.
[46] See Higson, 'Re-presenting the National Past'.

how audiences actually respond to the texts. In *Waving the Flag*, Higson acknowledges that there is scope for further interrogation of this issue, suggesting that

> It would… be useful to be able to take into account the whole range of sociologically specific audiences for different types of film, and how these audiences use these films in particular exhibition circumstances. That is to say, we need to take into account the historically constituted reading practices and modes of spectatorship and subjectivity, the mental machinery and relative cultural power or readerly competences of different audiences.[47]

Higson is thus acknowledging the possibility, indeed the likelihood, that the meanings contained within heritage films will vary from person to person, dependent on their own background and inclinations. Ten years after his initial publications, he observes that statistics suggest that 'period dramas were overwhelmingly favoured by women, by older cinemagoers, and by more upmarket cinemagoers',[48] while in more recent work he draws on box office statistics to argue that heritage films are 'niche' products that lack wider appeal.[49] But even in his later work on the genre, Higson does little to engage with actual audiences. The challenge to investigate the varied ways in which actual audiences engage with heritage film was taken up in earnest by Claire Monk, in the research described in her book *Heritage Film Audiences*.[50]

Monk sought information on how actual audience members engage with and understand heritage films by surveying different groups of viewers of these texts about the particular pleasures they gained from consuming them. As such, her study, carried out in the late 1990s but not published until 2011, represents the first attempt at audience research with a dedicated focus on the consumption of heritage films. For this project, Monk recruited two distinct groups of heritage film viewers, one through the National Trust, a British organisation dedicated to the preservation of sites of historical or natural significance, and the other through the London listings magazine *Time Out*, a publication aimed at urban audiences interested in diverse cultural experiences. The group recruited through the National Trust were typically older and more conservative, whereas the *Time Out* cohort were younger and likely to be more liberal. Each participant filled out a questionnaire, and *Heritage Film Audiences* explores in detail the similarities and differences that Monk noted between responses of the two groups. Whilst identifying many differences between the pleasures that each cohort reported finding in their viewing of the period drama genre, significantly Monk is able to show that members of both of these cohorts find sources of enjoyment in the consumption of this genre. This complicates suggestions of a more homogenous form of pleasure suggested by earlier scholars of the heritage film drawing on the methodologies of textual analysis, rather than audience research.

The research I describe in this thesis is something of a successor to Monk's research in *Heritage Film Audiences*, although we employ different methodologies for understanding audiences. Whilst Monk's work explored two distinct demographics, her sample did not

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[47] Higson, *Waving the Flag*, p. 278.
[48] Andrew Higson, *English Heritage, English Cinema: Costume Drama since 1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 102.
[49] Andrew Higson, *Film England: Culturally English Filmmaking since the 1990s* (London: I B Tauris, 2011), p. 207.
[50] Monk, *Heritage Film Audiences*.

involve any respondents under the age of 25. The research carried out for my project on teenage responses to period drama thus allows for the exploration of a much more specific age group, and one that did not feature at all in Monk's research. It should be noted, however, that Monk's more recent work on fandom has addressed the ways in which some viewers, including younger audiences, use their passion for heritage texts to develop fantasies around particular narrative details or characters.[51]

Reflecting on her initial research project, Monk commented in a follow up article, 'Heritage Film Audiences 2.0', that one of the disappointments of working with the *Time Out* cohort in her original research was that they were often 'too knowing' about the issues she was investigating, due to their advanced educational background. The result was that their survey answers were influenced by their knowledge of existing debates.[52] My research explores the responses of audiences who have not yet reached such high levels of education and come from a wider cross-section of society than Monk's cohorts. The result of this is that the data gathered from the participants is less likely to be influenced by existing political debates around ideas of history and heritage. My research into teenage responses also explores the responses of young people who wouldn't usually choose to watch this genre. By employing the methodology of screening material specifically for the study, my research not only surveys the pleasures that teenage audiences might find in watching period drama, but also captures a range of other reactions as well.

Whilst my research and Monk's study both deal with relatively small numbers of participants, research carried out for the BFI provides a larger scale look at some of these issues. The *Opening Our Eyes* report collected data from over 2000 people in Britain, spanning a large range of different ages and chosen to provide a representative sample of adults in Britain in 2011, the year in which the research was carried out.[53] It found that young people were more likely to think that too many British films were set in the past, suggesting a lack of inclination in younger viewers towards historical narratives. However, in the following section, I consider a genre with a more direct link to young audiences with the intention of questioning the perceived differences between period dramas, and films for teenage audiences. By exploring the links between the period drama and teen films, I demonstrate that the arguments for considering period dramas to be a genre with appeal for younger audiences are more compelling than is generally acknowledged.

Period Drama and Teen Film

This chapter provides an overview of some of the relevant scholarship that has informed the development of my study. The teen film may not appear to have an obvious link to the project discussed here. However, in this section, as well as presenting the work of key scholars on the genre of teen film, I also identify what I see as significant points of comparison between it and the period drama. By identifying parallels between teen films and period dramas, I seek to

[51] See, for example, Claire Monk, 'Heritage Film Audiences 2.0: Period Film Audiences and Online Fan Cultures', *Participations*, 8 (2) (2011), pp. 431-77.
[52] Monk, 'Heritage Film Audiences 2.0', pp. 443-4.
[53] Northern Alliance and Ipsos MediaCT , *Opening Our Eyes: How Film Contributes to the Culture of the UK* (London: BFI, July 2011), p. 13 http://www.bfi.org.uk/sites/bfi.org.uk/files/downloads/bfi-opening-our-eyes-2011-07_0.pdf [accessed 18 December 2019].

further develop the rationale for my study by suggesting that there are underacknowledged reasons for seeing period dramas as having appeal for younger audiences.

In arguing for the teen film to be viewed as a legitimate subject of study, Timothy Shary argues that these films 'are imbued with a cultural significance unique to the genre: they question our evolving identities from youth to adulthood while simultaneously shaping and maintaining those identities.'[54] Expanding upon this topic, Shary notes that experiences 'such as how we come to be accepted by society, discover romance, have sex, gain employment, make moral decisions, and learn about the world and who we are in it' are highly significant in the lives of most people.[55] He goes on to argue that,

> These are the experiences that most of us first encounter in our adolescence, and how we handle them largely determines how we live the rest of our lives. The gravity of adolescence thus makes for compelling drama… because understanding how we learn and grow in our youth is integral to understanding who we become as adults.[56]

In the context of this thesis, what is most crucial to note about this description is the extent to which this description could also be applied to many period dramas.

Whilst the period drama is not a genre many would readily associate with teenage audiences, this is obviously not the case for teen films. In these, as Shary highlights, the experiences of teenagers are foregrounded in the narrative, often within the context of the US high school. Although period dramas and teen films would appear to be very different genres, aimed at distinctly different demographics, as the above description shows, they share more similarities than might initially be apparent. Whilst period dramas don't typically employ the location of a US high school, they do often centre around young people and frequently provide 'coming of age' narratives. A film such as Greta Gerwig's highly acclaimed *Lady Bird* (2018) considers the experiences of its teenage protagonist (played by Saoirse Ronan) as she navigates her relationships with her parents, first romantic encounters and college applications. Similarly, many period dramas also feature young protagonists who are learning to negotiate parental expectations, their own first experiences of romantic love and the social realities of the marriage market. The latter aspect, within the context of period drama plotlines, often represents the significant choices made by protagonists about their future. In a similar way, young protagonists in films with a more modern setting also often make choices about their future careers and education, or the direction in which they wish their life to lead. The many adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice* or the Merchant Ivory classic *A Room with a View* (James Ivory, 1986) represent some examples of the many films that follow this pattern. Indeed, Shary himself links the success of the big-budget period drama *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1998) to its featuring of teen romance, and the consequent appeal to the teen audience.[57]

Consistent with Shary's assessment of teen films as telling the story of how we become our adult selves, in his documentary on the 'coming-of-age' movie, Mark Kermode suggests that all protagonists in this genre are 'on a quest for identity'.[58] Many teen films utilise the tribal

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[54] Timothy Shary, 'Teen Films: the Cinematic Image of Youth', in *Film Genre Reader III*, ed. by Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), p. 492.
[55] Shary, 'Teen Films', p. 491.
[56] Shary, 'Teen Films', p. 491.
[57] Shary, 'Teen Films', p. 511.
[58] 'Coming of Age', *Mark Kermode's Secrets of Cinema*, BBC Four, 31 July 2018, 9 pm.

nature of school to explore the difficulties young people experience in finding their place in the world. This idea is frequently introduced in teen films through the eyes of a new student being shown around the school and introduced to the various cliques that exist within its walls. One example of this technique can be found in *Mean Girls* (Mark Waters, 2004), in which the protagonist's first experience of high school is wittily compared to her previous life amongst the animals of Africa. In these films, the issue of identity is often foregrounded, with students struggling to find their place in society, represented in microcosm through the varied social groupings in the school, whilst staying true to themselves.

The search for identity is one of the issues often explored in period dramas, with protagonists frequently having to confront established social orders in order to find personal fulfilment. Examples of films featuring this thematic trope include *Belle*, in which the protagonist has to reconcile her racial and class identity with her romantic ambitions, and *Atonement*, in which the narrative is driven by class-based prejudice. In these films, and many others in the genre, protagonists are forced, in the words of Shary, to 'learn about the world, and who [they] are in it', in order to resolve the difficulties they face during the course of the narrative. Whilst teen films explore this process of self-discovery largely on an individual level, the period drama confronts it in a two-fold manner. Whilst also exploring many of the same processes of personal development that teen films dramatise, period dramas also provide space for societies to consider how they too 'learn and grow'. To return to Shary's arguments about the cultural significance of teen films, the period drama, through its representation of the past, also allows cultures as a whole to 'question [their] evolving identities… while simultaneously shaping and maintaining those identities'.[59] When developing the research project, I had originally envisaged that this issue would also be central to my research, although, as the next chapter will show, it proved less fruitful than expected.

Although I have argued that there are similarities between the period drama and teen film that may not be apparent at first glance, there is one key trend in teen film production that makes this less surprising than may first appear. Roz Kaveney notes that 'a significant part of the history of the teen movie genre is the creation of works solidly within that genre which adapt classic novels, Shakespeare's plays or, indeed, material from films in genres already taken seriously.'[60] Kaveney goes on to argue that through this appropriation of 'higher' forms of culture, the teen film makes a claim to be treated as a more serious art form, aspiring to something more like the prestige that many period dramas are accorded.[61] Notable examples of this trend include *Clueless* (Amy Heckerling, 1995), based on the Jane Austen novel *Emma*, *10 Things I Hate About You* (Gil Junger, 1999), based on Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *Easy A* (Will Gluck, 2010) which self-consciously draws on both Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and John Hughes teen films of the 1980s. These examples serve as evidence that the canonical literature that provides source material for so many period dramas can be adapted into narratives that speak to a teenage audience with relative ease.

Discussing the use of canonical literature as sources for teen films, Catherine Driscoll argues that films such as those referenced above

[59] For a more developed discussion of period drama in relation to English cultural identity, see, for example, Andrew Higson, *Film England*, p. 141-45.
[60] Roz Kaveney, *Teen Dreams: Reading Teen Film and Television from* Heathers *to* Veronica Mars (London: I B Tauris, 2006), p. 110.
[61] Kaveney, *Teen Dreams*, p. 110.

> [use] the canon to represent adolescence as a field of transhistorical and transcultural truths…. the standard process of adapting a classic text for teenagers both embeds the story in contemporary youth culture and draws from comparison between past and present a story about how adolescence works.[62]

Driscoll is here noting the ways in which the experiences of adolescents might be considered to have a universality that transcends historical period and culture. Teen films can easily adapt stories written in other historical periods without losing the inherent nature of the experiences of the central (teenage) characters. As scholars such as O'Leary and Landsberg have suggested, watching stories set in the past can aid us in gaining a greater understanding of our own lives, and how our experiences can be related to those of people from past historical periods. Similarly, by highlighting the similarities between past experiences and those of young people in modern times, Driscoll is here demonstrating how relatable experiences of adolescence are across time and culture. Building on this argument, it is logical to suggest that, not only do stories of adolescence translate effectively in modernisations of more classic stories, but that stories of similar experiences set within different cultures or historical periods also hold the potential to 'speak to' younger contemporary audiences.

Of course, one key difference between the teen film and the period drama is the treatment of subjects such as marriage. Driscoll notes that

> many teen films symbolise coming of age with a formal ritual, but this is rarely a literal passage to adulthood…. Teen film focuses rather on ceremonies marking the achievement of some limited independence which, at the same time, does not produce adulthood…. Social markers like the right to vote… and marriage… are rarely referenced in teen film. Instead, teen film uses and further ritualizes markers that remain internal to adolescence and yet open up new possible experiences.[63]

Whilst teen films don't typically see their protagonists making truly 'grown up' choices such as getting married, marriage is a frequent feature of the lives of young protagonists in period dramas. Indeed, this contrast is highlighted in *Clueless*. Jane Austen's novel *Emma*, on which the film is based, concludes with the eponymous protagonist marrying Mr Knightley, the man with whom she has only just realised she has been in love all along. The final scene of *Clueless* appears to suggest a wedding between protagonist Cher (Alicia Silverstone) and her step-brother, for whom she had similarly suppressed feelings (this is not as uncomfortable as it sounds!). However, the film quickly undermines this apparently traditional ending with Cher's indignant voiceover 'As if! I am only 16, and this is California, not Kentucky!', revealing that the couple getting married are in fact Cher's older teachers, for whom she has played 'match-maker'. The ending of this cross-genre adaptation therefore explicitly draws attention to the different expectations audiences have of a 'happy ending' in teen films, compared with period drama.

The differences between the treatment of marriage in these genres arises largely from the changing cultural position of marriage in much of contemporary western society, rather than

[62] Catherine Driscoll, *Teen Film: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Berg, 2011), p. 144.
[63] Driscoll, *Teen Film*, p. 70.

from inherently different generic structures. As Driscoll notes, Hindi films set in contemporary times 'have often thematically resembled teen films in other countries, except that the transition to adulthood… routinely involves questions of marriage'.[64] This is clearly due to the more central position held by marriage in much of Indian culture, and different expectations of the age at which people choose or are expected to get married in these different cultures. Whilst the rituals depicted are different, the emotional processes involved in falling in love and coming to understand which potential partner is likely to lead the protagonist to find personal happiness, are very similar. Although without the finality of marriage, many teen films conclude with the protagonist beginning (or continuing) a relationship with someone that the audience has been led to believe in as a worthy partner. Thus, we are also encouraged to believe in the longevity of the promised relationship, just as we do when we see characters in a period drama marry, or promise to marry, each other.

Another, perhaps less obvious point of comparison between the teen film and period drama is the role of nostalgia. As Mark Kermode comments, because they are made by older filmmakers, about adolescents, 'all coming of age movies are, by their nature, set in the past. If not the literal past, then the past of the film-makers experience', going on to point out that this often results in the film being imbued with 'a hefty dose of nostalgia'.[65] Again, the transhistorical nature of adolescence is emphasised, with Kermode claiming that, in *Lady Bird*, Greta Gerwig 'speaks to the audience's experience of youth by working hard to recreate [her] experience'.[66] As noted in a previous section, nostalgia is often seen as a fatal flaw in the credibility of the period drama, leading it to produce superficial and inauthentic depictions of the past. However, in this case Kermode suggests that the nostalgic impulse lends the film an authenticity it might not otherwise have.

Although nostalgia is often seen as distinctly ahistorical by nature, Kermode's discussion of *Lady Bird*, which is set in the period of Gerwig's own youth, treats the film's nostalgic tendencies as inextricably linked to the historical period in which it is set. Clearly, the film gains an added sense of authenticity through its depiction of experiences associated with those of the director (not to mention the added impression of quality through the association that an 'auteur' has masterminded the production). Period dramas, which generally take place at a greater temporal remove, are less likely to be able to assert such a direct form of authenticity, although many do claim to be based on documented events in order to increase their perceived historical value (a subject I explore in more depth in Chapter 6). It is also worth noting that the use of the pleasures of nostalgia in this film problematises their association with a distorted or inauthentic sense of the past. As we have seen, both the teen film and the period drama explore the tension arising from the ways in which the past informs the present, although the period drama often does this in a more complex way, looking at the ways in which individuals develop within their society, and the way in which society has itself evolved. Although they can appear to be very different genres, the teen film and the period drama both exploit the pleasures of looking back to past experiences as well as utilising the dramatic potential of doing so.

[64] Driscoll, *Teen Film*, p. 158.
[65] 'Coming of Age', *Mark Kermode's Secrets of Cinema*.
[66] 'Coming of Age', *Mark Kermode's Secrets of Cinema*.

Teenagers, the Media and 'Media Effects'

In his discussion of the teen film genre, Shary observes that

> the twentieth century produced a series of 'moral panics' around young people and social behavior, and the cinema has been a perennial source of those panics, not only due to its function as a social gathering place, but more so in generating concerns about the ways that popular media influence youth.[67]

A central concern at the heart of this thesis is the way in which research into young people's relationships with media texts tends to respond to this longstanding perception that young people are particularly susceptible to negative influences from the media. Considering the ways in which studies of the genre tend to proceed, Driscoll notes that writing on teen films

> tend[s] to judge films in the genre as good or bad in terms of a responsibility to represent adolescence in ways that would be *good for* adolescents. This tendency to moral judgement reflects a tendency in the genre itself to take a moral tone that understands adolescence as both object in training and subject of crisis.[68]

The abject nature of adolescence, neither fully child nor adult, can be read as one explanation for the heightened level of moral panic that surrounds anything perceived as having the potential to influence the behaviour of young people. Discussing the teen horror film, Driscoll draws a link between the 'monsters' of these films and their teenage victims, arguing that

> the genre developed an increasing focus on monsters with a human or almost-human appearance. None of the villains in the famous slasher series is entirely human – even if that means they are more than one person – and in fact they resemble their victims in insistent in-between-ness.'[69]

What Driscoll is identifying here is a form of 'othering' which occurs in relation to adolescence, with teenagers being seen as fundamentally different on the basis of the significant changes faced by most people during this stage in their life. This may be one explanation for the tendency to rush to negative conclusions when confronted with new or challenging behaviours from this age group. Driscoll implies that the in-between-ness of adolescence, with its resulting instability of identity, leads to them being perceived as particularly vulnerable to negative influences. The perception of teenagers as particularly in need of instruction, or conversely as being constantly at risk of being pushed into delinquency by negative influences, is ingrained into society, as Shary notes. This is a further example of the ways in which adolescents are looked upon as a homogenous group by contemporary western society, in this case also resulting in a consequent suspicion of young people and a perception that they need careful management. Indeed, it is precisely this perception that leads to the intergenerational tensions that drive the narrative of so many teen films (and period dramas) and forces the protagonists to confront their own coming of age through their quest for identity.

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[67] Shary, 'Teen Films', p. 495-6.
[68] Driscoll, *Teen Film*, p. 4.
[69] Driscoll, *Teen Film*, p. 89.

Suspicion has also long surrounded the development of new media formats, meaning that the combination of young people and the media leads to something of a perfect storm of societal anxiety. Consistent with Shary's description of the association of film with moral panics, Ian Christie notes that concern over the potential negative effects of film and television viewing, particularly on the young, dates back to the early years of cinema,[70] and it has proven difficult to shake from the public imagination. These fears have contributed to what is often referred to as the 'media effects' tradition, in which the consuming of films or video games is argued to have a causal relationship to the enacting of negative behaviours. Thus, violent media are considered to encourage violent behaviour in viewers, who are believed to imitate what they see on screen.

The resulting debates, in which those in academia, the media, and wider society by turn condemn the media for its negative impact or seek to problematise these simplistic conclusions, are extremely long-running. Despite much work to disprove popular perceptions of negative media effects, many of these arguments still hold much power within public discourse.[71] In their book *Ill Effects: The Media/Violence Debate*, Martin Barker and Julian Petley bring together contributions from a number of academics to question the supposedly 'common sense' links between the consumption of violent media and the enacting of violence itself. *Ill Effects* specifically responds to the Newson Report and its damning claims about the 'effects' of media violence.[72] In turn, this report is most associated with the shocking murder of James Bulger and the popular perception that his killers were led to their horrific behaviour through watching the film *Child's Play 3* (Jack Bender, 1992). Despite many media theorists being quick to question the claims of this report, its clear argument and its consistency with the many moral panics that have accompanied the development of cinema meant that these arguments were quick to become embedded. This was particularly so in the public outcry surrounding the murder of James Bulger, when the claims chimed with the easy explanation given for why the horrific crime might have taken place.

In their introduction to *Ill Effects*, Barker and Petley link the moral panics that surround questions of media effects to a longer 'history of respectable fears'.[73] Here, Barker and Petley highlight the ideological basis behind the suspicion of media effects:

> Upon whom are the media supposed to have their 'effects'? Not the 'educated' and 'cultured' middle classes, who either don't watch such rubbish, or else are fully able to deal with it if they do so. No, those who are most 'affected' are the young, and especially the working-class young…. The language of generational fear and class dislike peppers a good deal of 'effects' literature…[74]

As with Driscoll's discussion of the 'monstrous' nature of adolescence, Barker and Petley are also commenting on the perceived 'otherness' of the young. They highlight the class dimension

[70] Ian Christie, 'Introduction: In Search of Audiences', in *Audiences: Defining and Researching Screen Entertainment Reception*, ed. by Ian Christie (Amsterdam University Press, 2012), p.12.
[71] See, for example, the recent controversy surrounding the series *13 Reasons Why* (Netflix, 2017-)
[72] Elizabeth Newson, 'Video Violence and the Protection of Children', in *Report of the Home Affairs Committee* (London: HMSO, 1994), pp. 45-9.
[73] Geoffrey Pearson, *Hooligan: A History of Respectable Fears* (London: Macmillan, 1983), quoted in Martin Barker and Julian Petley, 'Introduction', in *Ill Effects: The Media / Violence Debate*, ed. by Martin Barker and Julian Petley (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 5.
[74] Barker and Petley, 'Introduction', p. 5.

of these discussions, with commentators in elevated social positions often passing judgement on the moral dubiousness of the less privileged. Barker and Petley thus draw attention to the ways in which the media effects discussion has been distorted by focusing on the perceived negative effects of supposedly vulnerable young people engaging with supposedly morally dubious media experiences.

Another much more benign example of the impact of the film and television industry might be the effect it has had on heritage tourism. They suggest the rise in visitors to the National Trust property of Lyme Park (responding to its use in the 1995 BBC adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*) as a clear piece of evidence for the possibility of the media influencing the behaviour and decisions of viewers.[75] A more contemporary example might be the popularity of Highclere Castle, setting of *Downton Abbey* (both the ITV series and the more recent film, Michael Engler, 2019), as a point of pilgrimage for *Downton* fans. But such behaviour has not been treated to the moral panic that always surrounds the arguments about the supposed effects of violent media on young people. Even so, as Barker and Petley note, these heritage tourism phenomena are clear examples of one way in which the media can 'affect' viewers and their subsequent choices. That this form of behaviour is never considered in relation to questions of media effects indicates a clear class prejudice in the ways in which media effects are conceptualised. The implication is that the more middle class, and probably older, viewers who spend their leisure time visiting filming locations are more able to make rational decisions following their consumption of media texts than younger, working class viewers. As Barker argues, that the media has some form of 'effect' on those who consume it is obvious.[76] What *Ill Effects* seeks to question is the exact nature of these effects, and the ways in which simplistic links are made which demonise both certain media texts, and those who are seen to fall under their spell because they are not mature or intelligent enough to resist their influence.

With regard to young people, David Buckingham notes that media effects debates tend to define children by what they 'lack', just as I have noted occurs with adolescents, arguing that children 'are defined as quintessentially 'other''.[77] Buckingham continues,

> Historically, academic research on children's relationship with television and other media has tended to reproduce many… assumptions [about imitative violence]. Particularly when it comes to 'violence', the central aim has been to seek evidence of direct behavioural effects. While media violence could conceivably be seen to produce many different kinds of effect – to generate fear, for example, or to encourage particular beliefs about the nature of crime and authority – the central preoccupation has been with its ability to produce aggressive behaviour, particularly among children.[78]

Such fears are not restricted to the impact of watching violence. Buckingham has also carried out work looking at how the media can impact on young people's understanding of sexual relationships. Once again, Buckingham and Sara Bragg observe that:

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[75] Barker and Petley, 'Introduction', p. 6.
[76] Martin Barker, 'The Newson Report: A Case Study in Common Sense', in *Ill Effects: The Media / Violence Debate*, ed. by Martin Barker and Julian Petley (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 21-2.
[77] David Buckingham, 'Electronic Child Abuse? Rethinking the Media's Effects on Children', in *Ill Effects: The Media / Violence Debate*, ed. by Martin Barker and Julian Petley (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 33.
[78] Buckingham, 'Electronic Child Abuse?', p. 33.

> Much of [the research into young people's engagement with media representations of sex] has focused on what are seen to be 'negative' effects, such as promiscuity, premature sexual activity and unsafe sexual practices. Most of it seems to be based on the notion of 'role modelling' – that is, the idea that young people identify with 'glamorous' media characters or personalities, and are therefore led to copy their behaviour, or to develop what researchers deem to be 'unrealistic' expectations or attitudes about sexual behaviour in real life.[79]

I consider the question of the extent to which viewers 'identify' with media characters in some detail in Chapter 5 and will therefore not dwell on this particular issue here. However, it is pertinent to note that research into young people's engagement with the media is once again taking as its starting point the assumption that engagement with media texts is likely to influence behaviour in negative ways. In a similar way to that noted with media violence, Buckingham and Bragg point out that the research into young people's viewing of representations of sex 'tends to oversimplify complex questions to do with the meanings and pleasures people derive from the media'.[80]

Whilst it is possible to argue that viewers of any age might be influenced by media representations, Buckingham and Bragg highlight the fact that the impact of representations of sex appears to hold added import when considered in relation to younger audiences. They cite Judith Levine's observation that 'the notion that young minds are particularly vulnerable to influence in… respect [of sexual content] is one of the founding principles of obscenity law.'[81] The fear that young people are constantly on the brink of being led astray is again in evidence. Questioning the teen film's 'reputation for triviality', Driscoll cites Shary's argument 'that adolescence is… frequently used to represent "our deepest social and personal concerns"'. [82] Similarly, Buckingham and Bragg state that 'as with the debate about media violence, invoking concerns about children, sex and the media seems to serve as a powerful means of mobilising more general anxieties about social and moral decline.'[83] Just as adolescents are in a state of change, moving into the purportedly more stable state of adulthood, fears that during this change something more sinister may emerge reflect generational fears about the state of society as younger generations come to prominence.

The media effects tradition characterises engagement with the media as a simplistic process in which viewers have little agency. In essence, it approaches the study of audiences and the media by asking what media texts do to those who consume them. A different approach, and one which I adopt in my study, is to explore how audiences use media texts in their everyday lives. This approach is similar to that adopted by Buckingham and Bragg, who approach the topic of young people and the media by starting with an outlook that does not assume that

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[79] David Buckingham and Sara Bragg, *Young People, Sex and the Media: The Facts of Life?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 10.
[80] Buckingham and Bragg, *Young People, Sex and the Media*, p. 11.
[81] Judith Levine, *Harmful to Minors: The Perils of Protecting Children from Sex* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), cited in Buckingham and Bragg, *Young People, Sex and the Media*, p. 3.
[82] Driscoll, *Teen Film*, p. 66, citing Timothy Shary, *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in Contemporary American Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).
[83] Buckingham and Bragg, *Young People, Sex and the Media*, p. 9.

negative influences are inherent in all media texts.[84] This approach, which carefully attempts to avoid demonising young people, or minimising the importance of their own experiences of the media, is also taken by Helen Manchester and Emma Pett. In researching the cultural experiences of young people in Bristol, Manchester and Pett state that they moved away from more formal conceptualisations of the arts and

> aimed to start from a different position to explore what young people themselves understand as culture, how they value it (and why) and to challenge taken-for-granted accounts of "where" young people engage in arts and cultural activity and who or what influences this engagement.[85]

Research such as this, which rejects a 'top-down' approach, imposing longstanding values and beliefs onto the younger generation, represents a movement away from the sort of thinking that produced the media effects tradition, in which young people are seen as subject to the media.

Manchester and Pett note that 'to account for the complexities of young people's take on cultural value' they needed to move away from 'normative definitions of culture and cultural value'.[86] It is in a similar spirit that I undertook the research discussed in this thesis. Although Manchester and Pett are working with a broader framework of the arts, central to the rationale for carrying out my research was the desire to question traditional approaches to young people and the media. Just as with Buckingham and Bragg, I do not assume that all young people are liable to be negatively influenced by the media. By exploring the responses of young people in relation to the period drama genre I aim to gather information on how young people engage with and respond to media texts in a rich variety of ways without presupposing a negative influence. Manchester and Pett note that one of the aims of their research was to rectify the fact that in 'contemporary accounts of cultural value young people's voices and accounts have been largely ignored.'[87] The aim of giving a voice to marginalised audiences was also central to Monk's research, particularly those who have not previously been heard despite 'being frequently stereotyped' by the debates.[88] Similarly, the project detailed here was designed to allow young people to speak in their own words about their experiences of watching historical representations, and thus refute simplistic generalisations that might be made about young people and this genre.

Audience Research: History and Methodologies

In this final section, I move on from considering the specific nature of the media effects tradition of research and its interest in young audiences, to consider more general research approaches to audience engagement with media texts. I provide a brief overview of some of the main features of audience research and briefly discuss some key audience studies from the past and the methodological issues they highlight. In doing this, I make some passing

[84] Buckingham and Bragg, *Young People, Sex and the Media*, p. 12.
[85] Helen Manchester and Emma Pett, 'Teenage Kicks: Exploring Cultural Value from a Youth Perspective' *Cultural Trends*, 24 (3) (2015), p. 223.
[86] Manchester and Pett, 'Teenage Kicks', p. 229.
[87] Manchester and Pett, 'Teenage Kicks', p. 223.
[88] Monk, *Heritage Film Audiences*, p. 80.

references to my own approach, but this subject will be taken up in more detail in the next chapter, in which I discuss in depth the methodological choices made during the development of my study. I noted in the previous section that historically much research into audience responses to media texts has been preoccupied with identifying sociological impacts. As Biltereyst and Meers identify, in recent years, the study of film reception has expanded to incorporate methodologies and theoretical perspectives from a wide range of disciplines, including those with roots in sociology.[89] They note that the approach to television audiences has a somewhat different history, with television research from the outset deriving from sociological approaches that saw this medium as largely social. In comparison, the aesthetics-dominated approach to film derived from the textual analysis approach favoured by scholars of literature, with audience engagement with film historically being less central to the discipline.[90] Given the varied ways in which audience engagement with media texts has been addressed, in this section I draw on scholars from different traditions, in order to provide a broad introduction to the ways in which 'the audience' has been studied and conceptualised. Nonetheless, I don't intend my survey to be comprehensive, and concentrate on examples of audience research that have informed or have links with my own study, as well as providing a brief overview of the subject more generally.

The history of audience studies is inseparable from considerations about the appropriate methodologies for assessing audience responses to media texts. Andy Ruddock explains that the tension between the valuing of qualitative and quantitative data has long been a key factor in the development of audience research methodologies. Ruddock notes that early research into young people's engagement with the media such as the Payne Fund studies, published in 1932 and overseen by W W Charters, were carried out by psychologists and sociologists. He observes that the fact that these studies were led by social scientists resulted in the research being 'dominated by a social-scientific orientation, where the only effects that were worth talking about were those that could be measured'.[91] Ruddock compares this to other research carried out in the 1930s by sociologist Herbert Blumer, in which an anecdotal approach was adopted, gathering qualitative data from young people about what watching movies meant for them.[92] The latter approach, with its emphasis on the collection of qualitative responses, has tended to dominate film and television audience research in more recent years. As Ellen Seiter noted in 1998, in 'the new audience studies…. sample sizes tend to be much smaller than those required for survey research…. Thus statistical generalisability is sacrificed; the model for such research is the case study, rather than the survey.'[93] Larger scale surveys which aim to capture a response representative of a particular population, such as the BFI's *Opening Our Eyes* study which claims to be representative of the UK population aged 15-74, do take place.[94] However, approaches such as that taken by Monk in her *Heritage Film Audiences* study, are more commonly used to research audience responses in disciplines such as film and television studies. Monk collected a relatively small sample of 92 eligible respondents, but sought

[89] Daniel Biltereyst and Philip Meers, 'Film, Cinema and Reception Studies: Revisiting Research on Audience's Filmic and Cinematic Experiences', in *Reception Studies and Audiovisual Translation*, ed. by Elena Di Giovanni and Yves Gambier (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2018), p. 23.
[90] Biltereyst and Meers, 'Film, Cinema and Reception Studies', p. 21-2.
[91] Andy Ruddock, *Youth and Media* (London: Sage, 2013), p. 24.
[92] Ruddock, *Youth and Media*, p. 24.
[93] Ellen Seiter, 'Qualitative Audience Research' [1998], reprinted in *The Television Studies Reader*, ed. by Robert C Allen and Annette Hill (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), pp. pp.463-4.
[94] Northern Alliance and Ipsos MediaCT, *Opening Our Eyes*, p. 13.

participants through two organisations that were likely to yield significant differences in terms of demographics.

Discovering how the demographic characteristics of audiences can influence how media texts are read has been a key aspect of audience research for many years. In *The Export of Meaning*, Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz detail their research exploring how the television show *Dallas* (CBS, 1978-91) was received by viewers in different national and cultural contexts. Citing Blumler et al's description of 'a dialogue of the deaf', Liebes and Katz observe that

> The division of labour in communications research was such that some had been studying the texts of popular culture while others were studying their effects on audiences…. The former ascribed influence to the text without knowing anything about the audience, while the latter, more surprisingly perhaps, did not know anything about the text.[95]

By observing participants in different countries watching *Dallas*, Liebes and Katz take the approach of considering how the show operates on a textual level, but also explore significant differences between the ways their viewers in different national contexts find meanings within the text. Consistent with Seiter's description of audience research, this study focuses on qualitative data, collecting information from participants by recording their watching of an episode of *Dallas* in a group in the home of one of the group members. This was followed immediately by interviews which also took place in the same domestic setting and used the same groups of participants.

Liebes and Katz deliberately use group interviews, in order to replicate what they see as the social influences that govern how we respond to media texts.[96] This is another common issue in the study of media audiences. As Janet Staiger argues

> Contextual factors, more than textual ones, account for the experiences that spectators have watching films and television and for the uses to which those experiences are put to navigating our everyday lives. These contextual factors are social formations and constructed identities of the self in relation to historical conditions. These contexts involve intertextual knowledges… personal psychologies, and sociological dynamics.[97]

The study by Liebes and Katz aims to capture many of these different influences at work in determining the experience of watching *Dallas* for international audiences.

Other audience research projects have used similar models. The *Nationwide* (BBC, 1969-83) studies carried out by David Morley also analysed the content of this magazine television programme and then screened it for groups seen as coming from different demographics. Whilst Liebes and Katz selected groups based on national and cultural differences, Morley's groups were all UK based, and selected on the basis of perceived differences in social class.

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[95] Tamar Liebes, and Elihu Katz, *The Export of Meaning: Cross-Cultural Readings of* Dallas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 17-8, citing Jay Blumler, Michael Gurevitch and Elihu Katz, 'Reaching Out: A Future for Gratifications Research', in *Media Gratifications Research: Current Perspectives*, ed. by Karl E Rosengren, Lawrence A Wenner and Philip Palmgreen (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1986).
[96] Liebes and Katz, *The Export of Meaning*, pp. 28-30.
[97] Staiger, *Perverse Spectators*, p. 1.

These groups consisted of students pursuing different forms of study, and were recruited through an educational establishment, using the institution as the research venue. As I discuss in more depth in Chapter 2, this is very similar to the approach used to facilitate my study into teenage responses to period drama. This research design is open to accusations of artificiality, due to the institutional setting in which screenings and other research activities were carried out, which obviously differs somewhat from the usual environment in which television is consumed. However, Morley suggests that these factors can be overstated, citing John Fiske's argument that 'much ethnographic data is produced specifically for an occasion constructed and controlled by the researcher, but while that certainly necessitates a degree of caution and self-awareness in the interpretation of that data, it does not, *per se*, invalidate it.'[98] As Liebes and Katz acknowledge, all audience research is hampered to some extent by the fact that it *is* research.[99] Capturing the natural and uninhibited responses of audiences remains a significant challenge in the study of media reception, a consideration that I return to in Chapter 2. Although Liebes and Katz carried out research in domestic settings using groups of participants who were already friendly with each other, the presence of a researcher is always going to destabilise the naturalism to a certain degree. However, as Morley argues, while this shouldn't be ignored, the gathering of useful data is still possible, even within artificially constructed conditions.

Morley's research has also been accused of obscuring individual responses in favour of the description of a group consensus.[100] As with Liebes and Katz, Morley also argues for the importance of social influences on the formation of opinions, noting that in his groups of participants, the more vocal members tended to dominate the discussion of the media texts screened, as they were likely to dominate other situations that the group encountered.[101] Even in a more artificial research setting, with materials screened in an educational institution, Morley argues that it is entirely valid for social influences to be allowed to play out in the collecting of responses to media texts. Essentially, this suggests that while the physical location in which the research takes place is less important in influencing data collection, social influences need to be captured in order for the research to be considered realistic.

Whilst the collecting of qualitative data from groups with perceived demographic differences remains a popular method of audience research, some more recent studies of film and television audiences have attempted a larger scale approach, in which quantitative data is collected alongside qualitative, via surveys which are usually disseminated online. Perhaps the most significant example of this is The World *Lord of the Rings* Project, which looked at audience responses to the trilogy of *Lord of the Rings* films (Peter Jackson, 2001-3), and its follow-up project which looked at responses to the prequels, the trilogy of *Hobbit* films (Peter Jackson, 2012-14). In both cases the surveys were timed to coincide with the release of the final film in the trilogy. Whilst these studies typically collect thousands of responses from viewers of these films all over the world, they do not aim for responses that can be generalised

[98] John Fiske, 'Ethnosemiotics', *Cultural Studies*, 4 (1) (1990), cited in David Morley, *Television Audiences and Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 14.
[99] Liebes and Katz, *The Export of Meaning*, p.20.
[100] See Morley, *Television Audiences and Cultural Studies*, p. 17.
[101] Morley, *Television Audiences and Cultural Studies*, p. 17.

to entire national populations. Rather, they seek a volume of responses that allows them to explore the different ways in which these films have been responded to.[102]

Seiter notes that a drawback of mass communication research, the mode of research about media audiences that became dominant in the US, was that there was 'a preference for reducing answers to easily codified categories or taking subjects' answers at face value'. [103] Barker, Egan, Jones and Mathijs note this as a potential issue when discussing their designing of the *Lord of the Rings* (*LOTR*) project, stating that they wished to 'preserve the complexity, but still be able to generalise from it', and give this as the key reason for combining qualitative and quantitative data. [104] This method allows for the collection of data that can be encapsulated into the description of general statistical patterns, but also allows for the richness of individual responses to be explored. Unlike the study by Liebes and Katz, which also operated on a global scale (although with a far smaller number of participants), the perception that participants from different national contexts can be explored and compared with each other is questioned by Barker, who argues that the processes of cultural influence are more complex, and therefore complicate the process of making cross-cultural comparisons.[105]

Unlike some of the other studies discussed above, these global surveys place less emphasis on making comparisons between perceived demographic groups, and instead place the concept of genre at the centre of the project. Just as some commentary on the period drama genre has sought to complicate the ways in which the audience is situated in relation to its generic features, the *LOTR* project used audience research techniques to explore the fantasy genre. In *Watching The Lord of the Rings*, Barker notes that one of the key aims of the *LOTR* project was to 'discover the functions of film fantasy in the lives of different kinds of audiences'.[106] Developing this idea, with reference to data from The World *Hobbit* Project, Hasebrink and Paus-Hasebrink state their intention to explore the ways in which 'viewers of *The Hobbit* link the symbolic material of *The Hobbit* to their everyday lives'.[107] Although on a much smaller scale, the project detailed in this thesis engages with similar concepts through its exploration of the ways in which audiences in contemporary society create meanings from heritage, or period, drama. Although not fantasy in the sense that *The Lord of the Rings* or *The Hobbit* films are, as noted above, Vidal argues that period dramas can be read as operating in much the same way as this genre. [108] This is particularly evident through period drama's transportation of audiences to historical periods and often unobtainable lifestyles.

In recent years the focus of research into audience engagement has shifted to consider the more internal responses of audiences to media texts. Most media theorists now agree that the

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[102] Martin Barker, Ernest Mathijs and Alberto Trobia, 'Our Methodological Challenges and Solutions', in *Watching The Lord of the Rings: Tolkien's World Audiences*, ed. by Martin Barker and Ernest Mathijs (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), pp. 221-3.
[103] Seiter, 'Qualitative Audience Research', p, 463.
[104] Martin Barker, Kate Egan, Stan Jones and Ernest Mathijs, 'Introduction: Researching *The Lord of the Rings*: Audiences and Contexts', in *Watching The Lord of the Rings: Tolkien's World Audiences*, ed. by Martin Barker and Ernest Mathijs (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), p, 9.
[105] Martin Barker, 'The Functions of Fantasy: A comparison of audiences for *The Lord of the Rings* in Twelve Countries', in *Watching The Lord of the Rings: Tolkien's World Audiences*, ed. by Martin Barker and Ernest Mathijs (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), p. 176.
[106] Barker, 'The Functions of Fantasy', p. 149.
[107] Uwe Hasebrink and Ingrid Paus-Hasebrink, 'Linking Fantasy to Everyday Life: Patterns of Orientation and Connections to Reality in the Case of *The Hobbit*', *Participations*, 13 (2) (2016), p.225.
[108] Vidal, *Figuring the Past*, p. 27.

potential for media texts to influence audiences manifests itself in a rather more complex way than the 'common sense' approach discussed by Barker and Petley above, although these ideas may prove more difficult to shake from the public imagination. However, the exact nature of audience engagement with films and television texts continues to be a thriving area for research and debate. As noted above, the BFI's *Opening Our Eyes* report found evidence that watching films can alter people's attitudes and behaviour, and the potential for media texts to have an effect on audiences is still a central feature of audience research. More recent research focusses on the concept of 'affect', that is, the emotional impact of texts. As Roy Stafford observes, when the focus of research shifts to consider the experiences of 'real audiences' then the concept of pleasure takes on increased emphasis.[109] This idea was key to Monk's audience research which explored the possibility that the same genre, in this case period drama, could provide a range of pleasures for audiences, who engage with the texts in different ways.

The question of how media texts create emotional engagement also begins to hold more value when considered in the context of individualised reactions. As Sue Turnbull observes, emotional reactions to films are often considered as less worthy than supposedly more rational or intellectual responses.[110] However, the BFI's report comments on the importance of emotional engagement in determining the ways audiences respond to films, noting that 'both the entertaining and the intellectually stimulating aspects of film begin with the emotional 'hit' delivered by the story'.[111] Feminist scholars have sought to validate the subjective emotional experiences of viewers to texts, by emphasising the value of this form of reaction, and downplaying associations of this form of response with irrationality. Kristyn Gorton observes that 'the either / or position' that figures responses to media texts as either emotional or rational has been broken down in recent years, with 'recent work on emotion… fundamentally challeng[ing] the notion that knowledge is gained solely through rational distance and… substantiat[ing] the place of emotion in rational decision making.'[112]

This binary opposition between rational, intellectual responses and those that are driven by emotions is also something questioned by Beverley Skeggs and Helen Wood in their study of audience responses to reality television. This study again collected qualitative data from small groups of participants, all female in this case, who were observed watching and talking about examples of the reality television genre. Similar to the earlier study by Morley, the groups were also recruited based on a desire to capture the responses of both middle class and working-class viewers. Consistent with Gorton's emphasis on the breaking down of perceptions of rational or emotional responses, Skeggs and Wood observe that their participants 'move between affective reactions to cognitive judgement', and cite Mankekar's argument that 'responses can be both emotional and critical, one does not exclude the other'.[113] This study is one example of the growing emphasis on the relationship between

[109] Roy Stafford, *Understanding Audiences and the Film Industry* (London: BFI, 2007), p. 84.
[110] Sue Turnbull, 'Beyond Words: *The Return of the King* and the Pleasures of the Text', in *Watching The Lord of the Rings: Tolkien's World Audiences*, ed. by Martin Barker and Ernest Mathijs (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), p. 187.
[111] Northern Alliance and Ipsos MediaCT, *Opening Our Eyes*, p. 68.
[112] Kristyn Gorton, *Media Audiences: Television, Meaning and Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 39.
[113] Beverley Skeggs and Helen Wood, *Reacting to Reality Television: Performance, Audience and Value* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), p. 14 and 72.

emotion and meaning in the consumption of media texts. Through my own research, I also sought to valorise emotional responses, by encouraging my participants to share their feelings about the period dramas they watched in the study, often using these as a starting point for discussion. In doing so, my research continues the feminist tradition of seeing emotional and intellectual responses as being intimately connected, as well as both holding value.

Conclusion

As the different sections in this chapter have illustrated, this project self-consciously engages with a range of different approaches to the study of film and television, and seeks to intervene in debates covering a wide range of issues, from the heritage film to media effects. This chapter has served to introduce the key debates and areas of scholarship that informed this study. In some cases, the material discussed here provided the foundation for the development of the study, but in others its value came later in the project, serving to illuminate the analysis of the data collected in the later chapters. This chapter has not sought to provide a comprehensive introduction to these areas. Indeed, with the broad range of different issues covered, it would be impossible to fully cover all the relevant developments in scholarship in these areas. Whilst providing broad introductions to key concepts in all of the different sections, I have also selected sources and topics of discussion which felt most pertinent to my own interests in the development of the study discussed in this thesis.

Building on the existing audience research principles and methodologies discussed in this chapter, I sought to create a study that would provide insights into how teenagers respond to the period drama genre. Through this, I aimed to gather new information on how young people engage with media texts, inspired partly by my own experiences of working with young people, as well as what I perceived to be the dominance of negative assumptions in media research into young people, as evidenced by the 'effects' school of thought. This line of thinking also draws on the 'othering' of young people, and the demonising of adolescence that has been discussed here. In my view, the consequent perception that the media needs to take an instructive approach to young people both patronises young people and negates the agency that audiences have when interacting with film and television texts. In developing this study, I have followed research methodologies that prioritise the gathering of qualitative data, with a focus on allowing the participants to express their feelings in their own words. Drawing on the concept of 'affect', I see reports of subjective and emotional experiences of engaging with media texts as providing important insights into how viewers make sense of and use media texts.

Additionally, I hoped to add further information to the already richly debated field of research into the period drama, and the meanings that audiences can draw from this genre. By introducing the possibility that period dramas have a lot of potential to resonate with the experiences of young audiences, I seek to further challenge the way in which this genre is conceptualised, both in terms of the meanings it is held to represent and the audiences that it is seen to address. In doing so, I sought to contribute to the debates about the tensions between progressive and conservative ideologies at play within the texts, an issue I also address by exploring young people's responses to the range of social groups depicted in this genre. These debates relate closely to perceptions of representing the past on screen, and the ways in which the period drama has been accused of obscuring the 'truth' about history through a fascination with surfaces. In exploring the process of presenting history onscreen,

and audience responses to and expectations of this process, my research also responds to what I see as ideologically driven value assumptions about the genre of period drama.

Chapter 2

Study Design and Data Collection

Reflecting on the relationship between film and history, Tony Barta argues that both filmmakers and historians

> practice disciplines that lure them close to the presence of their subjects and seduce them into the ambition of making those subjects present to others. Historians know they approach the past with the eyes of a stranger and then try to conjure familiarity. Filmmakers expect the camera eye first of all to render the world as it naturally appears, yet they have known since the beginning that there is nothing natural in the photographed rendition the viewer translates into recognitions.[1]

The relationship between film and history became a defining tension in the data collected as part of this study, and in the final chapter of this thesis I look at this in detail. However, I introduce this issue here in order to suggest that, just as historians and filmmakers attempt to present as authentic that which has been mediated, so do audience researchers. As Andy Ruddock argues, 'media studies… is, in and of itself, a representational form: that is, the way that media scholars set about conceiving and studying young media users exerts its own influence on how young people are represented to society.'[2] My sincere wish in designing this research project was to allow young people to speak in their own words about their experiences of watching period drama. However, in collecting their words and using them selectively to support the discussion in this thesis, I am of course mediating between the subjects of the research and its audience, even whilst I try to bring readers closer to these subjects. As David Morley notes, citing Ellen Seiter, 'the researcher does extensive editing, attributes feelings and intentions to their subjects and bolsters generalizations with the 'authenticity' of 'the real empirical subject'.[3] In the analysis of the data collected, I have attempted to reflect on this process where it was particularly pertinent. However, it should be borne in mind that an element of this representational practice will exist as a characteristic feature of both the methodological design of the study, and of the analysis of the data. In the rendering of the apparently natural from the inherently unnatural, therefore, the thesis has something in common with the genre it examines.

This study was born out of a frustration with the assumptions made about young people and the period drama genre. When considering how best to gather information about how young people respond to period dramas, one of the key challenges was to design the study in such a way that the impact of any such assumptions would be minimised. It is, however, clearly impossible to prevent my own interests, and influences such as wider social perceptions, from

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[1] Tony Barta, 'Screening the Past: History Since the Cinema', in *Screening the Past: Film and the Representation of History*, ed. by Tony Barta (Westport: Praeger, 1998), p. 15.
[2] Andy Ruddock, *Youth and Media* (London: Sage, 2013), p. 8.
[3] David Morley, *Television Audiences and Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 32, citing Ellen Seiter, 'Making Distinctions in Television Audience Research', *Cultural Studies*, 4 (1) (1990), pp. 68-9.

impacting on the data collected and the analysis of it. In planning my research, I attempted to construct the questionnaires in such a way that questioning was open and allowed the participants to tell me what they felt the dramas were really about. In this chapter I explain in detail the design for the main study, including discussion of ways that I attempted to minimise the impact of my own bias and social influences.

I begin by detailing the pilot research that was carried out, and the ways in which this influenced the design and direction of the main study. I then discuss the construction of the main study, which was informed by my reading around other audience research studies as detailed in Chapter 1, as well as the experience and data gathered through the pilot. Inevitably, the study design was also informed by the limited time and resources available to me, some of which I was able to anticipate while others only became apparent during the process of carrying out the research. This meant some aspects of the planning and design were altered during the process of data collection, something that I also discuss in this chapter. The research involved the screening of five case study films and television dramas, each followed by a short online questionnaire. Participants were also asked to complete a further two questionnaires, at the beginning and end of the process, with some also taking part in focus group discussions following the final screening. Here I outline the five dramas chosen for the study and explain in some detail the primary areas of interest in each one. I then outline the content of the questionnaires, with reference to the key areas of exploration for the research. Finally, I discuss the process of recruiting the participants, and the particular difficulties associated with carrying out audience research with this age group.

Pilot Study

Although the purpose of the main study was to explore the responses of young people to period dramas, prior to carrying this research I piloted some research techniques with a less specific group of respondents. As I intended to screen examples of period dramas to groups of young people, the data that I gained would necessarily be greatly determined by the examples of period dramas I chose as case studies. Consequently, one of the key functions of my pilot was to help me narrow down the large number of period dramas released in recent years to five case studies. I also used the pilot as an opportunity to test methodologies and explore lines of questioning that might yield fruitful answers in the main study. In total the pilot involved two surveys, one on general responses to period dramas and the other on one specific film, the 2017 film *Viceroy's House*, directed by Gurinder Chadha. I also carried out three focus groups, two of which had a more general focus, and the third of which again explored responses to *Viceroy's House*.

General Survey

In this survey I sought information on responses to some recent examples of period drama, to help me narrow down the options for my case studies. I also sought information on the ways in which people used their consumption of period drama in their own lives, and their views on aspects such as the representation of women and minority groups in period dramas, and the relationship between period drama and history. I distributed this survey using a snowball method, sending the survey to people I knew and asking them to forward it to others who they thought might be interested. This method has the advantage of being relatively quick and

inexpensive, although these benefits come with some significant disadvantages. I ultimately received 82 responses to this survey, although as a result of the opportunistic recruitment strategy, I did not attract a particularly diverse set of respondents. The typical respondent was a white British female in the 25-34 age range, often in the lower managerial / professional occupation bracket. Given that I myself would have largely fitted this description at the time of the survey, it is unsurprising that an opportunistic sampling strategy such as the one used yielded this type of respondent.

Whilst the survey was more general in its targeting of participants than the main study would ultimately be, this research did provide me with useful information. In asking participants to indicate which recent period dramas they had seen, and how much they had enjoyed them, I was able to identify which potential case studies would be most likely to yield useful and interesting data. This information was enhanced by the questions through which I gave my pilot respondents the opportunity to provide qualitative data on how they have used period dramas to reflect on their own lives and the society they inhabit. As I indicate in the section on the case studies below, the examples singled out by pilot participants as having made a particular impact on them were invaluable in assisting me in selecting five relatively diverse examples of the genre to screen for my teenage participants. Whilst the pilot would ideally have sought information from participants closer in age to the target group of my main study, due to the difficulties in attracting responses from this age range, it was impractical to do this at this stage in the research. However, whilst there were some notable differences in the approach of the pilot respondents, compared the participants in the main study, the data gathered here was valuable in allowing me to assess the usefulness of various dramas that could potentially have been used as case studies.

In the initial stages of planning the study, I had considered the concept of national identity in some depth. This seemed of particular interest due to the arguments surrounding the privileging of conservative views of Britishness, and the obscuring of more progressive approaches that I noted in the previous chapter as having been long associated with the period drama. In addition, the ways in which the period drama allows for reflection on the evolving identity of the nation, in the same way that teen films do for individuals, also made this an area of exploration that I was keen to explore. With reference to the target age range of the research, the issue also seemed to be because of the questions it might raise over young people's own sense of national identity, and their feelings about their place within the British national story. Responses to questions on this subject in the pilot study didn't produce particularly compelling data, however, and although a limited amount of data was collected on this topic in the main study as well, the focus of the study ultimately shifted away from this area towards issues that appeared more pertinent to the pilot study participants.

The question of the relationship between film (and television) drama and history, although not being a driving force in the early stages of the project's development, took on increasing significance as the study progressed. This trajectory was signalled early in the pilot, when the issue of the extent to which drama should accurately represent historical events and periods provoked a large number of responses. This question was asked in proximity to other questions about the representation of women, minority groups and different social classes in British period dramas, and for many pilot participants these topics became inextricably linked. Whilst many respondents expressed strong opinions that depictions of history should strive for accuracy, many were also concerned that this would lead to various social groups, such as women, the working classes or ethnic minorities, being represented in negative ways that

would be unhelpful or even offensive to modern audiences. It became clear that few pilot participants believed it was possible for period dramas to represent these social groups in ways that might would be positive or empowering to viewers identifying with those demographic characteristics today. Even more significantly, several people expressed views indicative of a suspicion of politically correct agendas, that might see historically inaccurate character depictions artificially inserted into period dramas in order to conform to modern standards of diversity. Given the strength of feeling surrounding these issues, they became more prominent in the main study than I had initially expected. I therefore explore some of these issues in more detail in subsequent chapters, considering debates around the ways in which history can be authentically, and inauthentically, represented.

General Focus Groups

Following the pilot survey, I carried out two focus group discussions to further explore the main areas of interest in the study. The first was carried out with a small group of participants in their thirties, all of whom were personal acquaintances, and the second with a group of first year undergraduate film students. The latter group were all aged either 18 or 19, and were therefore the closest I was able to come to piloting my research with the target age group of the main study.

In these discussions I experimented with different ways of stimulating discussion, such as asking my participants to design a poster for an imaginary period drama, which encouraged members of the groups to talk about their views of the period drama genre, including its typical themes, aesthetic style and target audience. In addition to this, I also asked the group of teenagers to sort a pile of ten DVDs, all examples of recent films that could be described as period dramas, ordering them by which they felt would be most appealing to the 15-19 age group. In addition to these activities, I also showed clips from films that I was considering using as case studies in my main study to explore the types of discussion that arose from them, and asked the participants to talk about their feelings about the period drama genre more generally.

These discussions were also highly useful in assisting me in developing my thinking about the main study. In considering which texts to select for the main study, the sorting activity was invaluable. Films such as *The Imitation Game* (Morten Tyldum, 2014), which was spoken about enthusiastically by several pilot survey respondents, was rated highly, with the teenage participants talking about their admiration for the actor Benedict Cumberbatch, and how 'cool' they thought the film's story was. Other films, such as *Belle*, which had long been one of the forerunners in my selection of case studies, was less popular with this group, the discussion indicating that they felt the cover looked too generically 'period' for the film to be of interest to their peers. Obviously, these views were based mainly on the cover and synopsis of the film, as only one of the group had seen this film. Even so, it surprised me that the engagement with issues of racial equality didn't serve to increase the interest the film held for them. The film adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (Burr Steers, 2016) was also highly off-putting to the undergraduates, whilst acknowledging that it probably would be appealing to general teenagers, they strongly emphasised that it did not meet their own personal standards of film quality. This film was also the subject of discussion in the thirtysomething focus group, who seemed to find it amusing, but didn't feel that it was close enough to the conventions of the period drama to be compared to other films in this genre. Given that this film was clearly felt

by both groups to be anomalous in the context of a discussion about period drama, I decided that there was little benefit in expanding the definition of period dramas to include genre hybrids in the main study.

Whilst the topic of national identity yielded little useful material in the pilot survey, it did become the subject of some extended discussion in these two focus groups, due in part to both groups containing some members with non-British national identities. Whilst this topic was largely abandoned in the analysis of the main study data due to the lack of detailed responses, the focus groups did indicate that there is scope for interesting discussion around the ways in which period dramas influence feelings of national identity and national pride. As with the survey, the tension between historical accuracy and modern values was also the subject of discussion. Through these discussions it emerged that viewers may be more willing to forgive inaccuracies and the insertion of contemporary values in texts they find particularly enjoyable. Both groups appeared willing to forgive *The Imitation Game* for inserting characters who express more tolerance of homosexuality than would seem to be likely in the period in which the film is set. However, the teenage group were much more suspicious of *Belle*, which they had already decided was less appealing to their age group, for what they saw as the artificial imposition of modern values. The continued dominance of this subject in the pilot research further cemented this topic as a key area of interest moving into the development of the main study.

Viceroy's House

In addition to the general survey on period dramas, I was also keen to pilot the process of surveying responses to a particular film, as I intended that the main study would be structured around a series of screenings followed by immediate data collection. To avoid the practical difficulties of having to arrange screenings and identify participants who were able to attend them, I selected a pre-existing screening at the Phoenix Cinema in East Finchley, a well-known independent cinema in my local area. The staff there very kindly agreed to allow me to come and survey their customers, and with their help I identified the film most suitable for this stage of the pilot. In principal, I could have used any film that they were showing, as the primary purpose of the exercise was to test the process of using a questionnaire to gather data on one film. However, I judged that it would be more useful to select a period drama if possible, as this would allow me to ask questions that would more closely reflect the issues that I was likely to be exploring in my main study. For this reason, the film *Viceroy's House* was concluded to be the most appropriate, a choice largely determined by issues of timing, as it was the only period drama released when I was carrying out this stage of my pilot.

Compared to director Gurinder Chadha's previous work, which has tended to explore British Asian experience through more light-hearted films such as the highly successful *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002), *Viceroy's House* is a relatively hard-hitting drama. Depicting the Partition of India, the film explores this historical moment from the perspective of both British and Indian characters, making it an example of the sub-genre of British period drama exploring the British Raj. The film is set entirely in India and explores an arguably more contentious area of British history than is usually tackled in British period films. Although *Viceroy's House* features a range of different characterisations, with many historical figures being depicted in a largely positive light, some of the British actions are portrayed as harmful, unnecessary and cynically motivated. Winston Churchill, although not directly portrayed in the film, is spoken of by

characters in such a way as to call into question the hegemonic view of him as a heroic figure in Britain's national story. For some audiences in Britain, these factors could therefore make the film uncomfortable viewing at times. However, although aspects of the history portrayed may be less familiar, the structure employed in *Viceroy's House* would be much more so for viewers conversant with the conventions of the period drama. The film aims to give equal representation of the process of Partition from the points of view of both the British establishment figures who are managing the shift to Indian independence (and therefore also the process of Partition) and the Indian residents who work in the titular 'Viceroy's House', therefore employing the 'upstairs downstairs' structure familiar to viewers of *Downton Abbey*. Even more familiar would be leading actor Hugh Bonneville, who plays Lord Mountbatten and is well-known for his role in *Downton Abbey*. The film is therefore an interesting mixture of familiar genre characteristics and some less common aesthetic and cultural features.

The experience of carrying out this research was highly influential on the design of my main study in a number of ways. It proved to be difficult to gather data on the audiences' responses to the film. I had initially planned to attend just one screening, but after this I had received only five survey responses, despite the auditorium being largely full. As a consequence, I then attended as many screenings as I could over the course of that week, although this still only attracted 35 responses. This emphasised to me the importance of ensuring participants complete the surveys immediately after the screening. A large number of people assured me that they would complete the survey at home, but this translated into a very small number of actual responses received. The majority of the responses I did receive were handed in immediately after the screenings, before the participants left the cinema. Whilst this was disappointing in the context of the pilot, it was hugely valuable in helping me to maximise the number of responses received in my main study, by insisting that responses were completed before participants left each screening. In addition, the *Viceroy's House* survey gave participants the option of completing handwritten surveys or submitting responses online. Whilst the handwritten option was preferable for some pilot respondents, these responses were time consuming to digitise and, more importantly, often missed important information, something which is easier to avoid when using online surveys. For this reason, the main study exclusively used online surveys to collect data.

Despite the presence of well-known actors, including Gillian Anderson and Michael Gambon, as well as Hugh Bonneville, the audience members surveyed indicated that they were mainly attracted to the film by the period drama genre and by interest in the specific events depicted in the narrative. Respondents to the survey generally enjoyed the film, with many indicating that they found the depiction of Partition interesting and moving, although some had little time for a fictionalised love story that functioned as the film's major sub-plot. These findings indicate that, as with the research carried out in the earlier phases of the pilot, the issue of the relationship between film and history was again prominent. The appeal of the genre indicates that the pleasures of having a historical period represented for them was a strong factor in the decision of many of the respondents to attend these screenings. Further to this, many also felt that the film had an important educational purpose, with some expressing surprise and disappointment that they had not previously been made aware of Partition and its consequences. Others commented on the accuracy of the film, and in some cases compared the actors with the real-life figures they played, judging them on how close a resemblance they achieved. Much of the dissatisfaction with the love story appeared to arise from perceptions that it was less authentic than the narrative elements that were more closely rooted in fact.

Although the respondents in this research were largely significantly older than the target age group of my main study, later chapters will show that this concern with historical accuracy and authenticity was also important to younger viewers of the period drama genre.

Main Study Design

I used the experience and data gathered from the pilot to inform the design of the main study, focussing on how teenagers aged 16-19 respond to period dramas. From the early stages of planning, I had intended to construct the study around screenings of pre-selected material. This is clearly not the only way to gather data on young people's thoughts about period drama. I could have adopted an approach similar to that taken in the general pilot survey, disseminating a questionnaire about period dramas amongst young people, and asking them to give their thoughts on this genre. Such an approach would have been similar to the methodology adopted by Claire Monk for her *Heritage Film Audiences* study, discussed in the previous chapter.[4] Monk's particular study targeted relatively small numbers of participants who both self-identified as viewers of period drama and belonged to the two specific cohorts (National Trust members or *Time Out* readers) that her comparative approach utilised. However, many larger scale audience studies also adopt this approach, using online surveys to gather data from a broad range of participants, often internationally.[5] These studies are often designed to investigate responses to a particular film, franchise or genre, and are publicised in locations where viewers of such films are likely to see the information.

Disseminating online surveys to as many people as possible can be an effective strategy. The studies of *The Lord of the Rings* and *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011-19) referenced above both attracted thousands of responses. However, this approach also has a few significant drawbacks. Firstly, the respondents tend to be self-selecting, meaning that the responses received are generally from people who already self-identify as viewers of the genre, films or television shows. Furthermore, if they have chosen to complete a survey, this suggests the likelihood of pre-existing investment in the subject of the survey. Secondly, with a genre such as period drama, the exact definition of which tends to be contested, using an open survey to solicit responses would make it difficult to control which particular examples of period drama I received responses about. Linked to this is the issue that my research focusses on a very narrow age range, teenagers aged 16-19 years. The use of an open survey, disseminated through online platforms, would have made it very difficult to control the ages of the participants. Even if I specified that the respondents needed to be within the age range, there is no guarantee that this would be adhered to by all people who completed the survey. Given these drawbacks, I chose to adopt a different methodology.

There was another factor that also helped shape my approach. As noted in the Introduction, one of the original inspirations for this research was my interest in how young people might respond to the representation of demographic groups less typical for the genre, and whether this would cause them to respond more positively. In order to explore this, I needed to record

[4] Claire Monk, *Heritage Film Audiences: Period Films and Contemporary Audiences in the UK* (Edinburgh: EUP, 2011).
[5] See for example, Martin Barker and Ernest Mathijs, eds., *Watching The Lord of the Rings: Tolkien's World Audiences* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008) or the ongoing research into audience responses to *Game of Thrones*, led by Barker, at https://gameofthronesresearchproject.wordpress.com/ [accessed 18 December 2019].

the responses of my participants to a range of period dramas, featuring significantly different character types. I therefore decided to select five different period dramas to be watched by all participants, allowing me to track their responses across the five examples. In contrast to studies which rely on the participants having prior knowledge of the films and simply completing a questionnaire about them, the requirement to watch five dramas made the study a rather more time-consuming commitment.

As each participant was required to watch five full television episodes or films, the practicalities of running the study meant that participant numbers were likely to be far lower than studies which use snowballing to recruit as large a number of respondents as possible. My approach sought to compensate for relatively low numbers of participants by gathering in-depth qualitative data from each participant. Thus, in addition to watching the films and television episodes, each participant completed a questionnaire after each screening, plus two additional questionnaires, one prior to beginning the study and the other after they had watched all five screenings. Some participants also took part in optional focus group interviews which took place after all five dramas had been watched. The full time commitment for taking part in the study was therefore approximately ten hours, including the time spent watching the five screenings and completing all seven questionnaires. Whilst, as Matthew Reason has noted, smaller numbers of participants mean that the ability to consider the data as being representative of the wider population is removed,[6] Beverly Skeggs and Helen Wood argue that in-depth data of this kind is valuable for its 'indicative' potential.[7] As Seiter notes, this approach sacrifices 'statistical generalizability…; the model for such research is the case study'.[8] Thus, each of the young people recruited, and the distinct groups they belong to, exist as a form of case study within the overall study, providing detailed information on their thoughts about the examples of period drama they watch.

Despite its time-consuming nature, the approach adopted had another significant benefit. Whilst many audience research projects tend to use a self-selecting group of participants who have chosen to watch the particular film or genre for themselves, the design of this study meant that many participants would be watching material they may not have previously encountered, or that they have even purposely avoided. This study therefore presents an opportunity to explore what audiences say about material that they do not enjoy, or at least had not previously thought they might enjoy. Studies such as The World *Lord of the Rings* Project will generally attract far more positive responses than negative for the basic reason that audience members are far less likely to choose to engage with a questionnaire about a film in which they feel no investment. Thus, the raw data from this *Lord of the Rings* study shows that 70.8% of the participants rated the film as 'extremely enjoyable', whereas only 0.8% rated it as 'not enjoyable at all'.[9] Screening material for participants, regardless of whether they would typically choose to watch it, provides a far rarer opportunity to find out from audiences the processes that contribute to their negative responses, as well as the positive.

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[6] Matthew Reason, *The Young Audience: Exploring and Enhancing Children's Experiences of Theatre* (Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books, 2010), p. 57.
[7] Beverley Skeggs, and Helen Wood, *Reacting to Reality Television: Performance, Audience and Value* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), p. 31.
[8] Ellen Seiter, 'Qualitative Audience Research', in *The Television Studies Reader*, ed. by Robert C Allen and Annette Hill (Oxford: Routledge, 2004), p. 464.
[9] Barker and Mathijs, *Watching The Lord of the Rings*, p. 241.

As the study required the watching of a significant amount of material, it necessarily took on a longitudinal dimension, with the study running over an extended period of time, during which all five screenings could be held. With this in mind, I targeted smaller groups of participants who could be recruited through educational institutions, in a similar way to Morley's *Nationwide* study.[10] This allowed me to maintain control over who participated in the study and oversee each group's participation. These groups were recruited from various locations across England, and are identified by their geographical area when they are referred to in the following chapters. Working with schools and colleges to recruit participants also made it logical for the time frame of the study to align with the academic year. I therefore started the data collection at the beginning of the academic year 2017/18, continuing to collect data until the end of this year, in July 2018. This gave the participating institutions maximum flexibility in timing the screenings to suit their own schedules.

Building on the experience gained while carrying out the pilot study, I recorded the initial impressions of the participants to each film and television drama for the study through questionnaires that they filled in individually, usually immediately following the screenings. As discussed in the previous chapter, the varied social influences on how opinions are formed has been the subject of some discussion in previous audience studies. Some studies, such as the aforementioned work by Morley, and Tamar Liebes' and Elihu Katz's study on audience responses to *Dallas*, have tended to privilege the capturing of a group consensus over individual opinions, with both studies using the focus group as their primary mode of data collection.[11] However, in this study I attempted to allow my participants to express their thoughts privately before they had the opportunity to discuss each case study after the screening.

The debate around the appropriateness of carrying out audience research within group situations is longstanding. Morley notes that his *Nationwide* study, was criticised for an over-reliance on the responses of some group members to represent the views of the whole group.[12] The notion of a 'consensualising process' was suggested as obscuring differences of opinion within the groups, and assuming that all members of the participating groups adhere to similar ideological positions in relation to their reading, or decoding, of the television show.[13] However, in defending his use of the group screening and interview, Morley cites Friedrich Pollock, arguing that

> We should not think of every individual as a monad whose opinions crystallize in isolation, or as being in a social vacuum (from which processes of group dynamics, for example, are absent). Rather, 'realistic…research would have to come as close as possible, in its methods of research, to those conditions in which actual opinions are

[10] See David Morley, 'Interpreting Television: The *Nationwide* Audience', in *Television Audiences and Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1992).
[11] Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz, *The Export of Meaning: Cross-Cultural Readings of* Dallas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 156.
[12] David Morley, *The Nationwide Audience* (London: BFI, 1980).
[13] Graeme Turner, *British Cultural Studies* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990), quoted in David Morley, *Television Audiences and Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 17.

> formed, held and modified' – the condition within the groups of which the individual is a member, for instance.[14]

The importance of group interaction in forming our opinions is also used by Liebes and Katz as justification for the use of their focus group methodology in their study of *Dallas*:

> The… objection… that our method observes groups in action and cannot, therefore, generalize to individuals taken one at a time… is also a strength in that people happen to live in groups… and their opinions are shaped and anchored in these social and stratified contexts.[15]

I fully agree with Morley and Liebes and Katz, in their arguments that the social influences on how we respond to texts are too important to ignore. Citing Pollock again, Morley goes as far as to suggest that it may be naïve to believe that all individuals even have their own independently formed points of view.[16] However, in designing my study, I was also aware that period drama as a genre (as with many genres that are traditionally coded feminine) may be considered by some people, particularly young people, as stigmatised. It was my instinct that this might make the young participants less likely to admit publicly to liking a screening, even if they had experienced personal enjoyment during it. For this reason, I used online questionnaires as the initial method of gathering data on my participants' reactions, emphasising that all responses would be anonymised, in order to provide a forum in which the young people taking part could give opinions without worrying whether their response was in line with their peers. Time constraints meant that ensuring that all surveys were completed as soon as the screening had ended was not always practical, but this was achieved in many cases. This allowed responses to be submitted before the participants had had an opportunity to discuss the screening in detail.

Whilst I was aware that these measures would not completely neutralise any influence their peers might have on the responses given by participants, I felt that the use of individual surveys was my best chance of capturing the individual responses of each participant to the screenings. As I will discuss in later chapters, the patterns in responses suggest that respondents were indeed influenced by each other; despite the surveys being completed individually there were notable variations in responses from one group to another. These group dynamics are, of course, even more evident in the data collected from the focus group discussions carried out with some groups, as by the point these took place the participants had had ample time to discuss the earlier screenings and reach a group consensus.

Given the sizeable time commitment that would need to be made by participants, it was most practical to hold the screenings at the colleges or schools that they attended, to make participating as easy and accessible as possible. I was aware that this lent an element of artificiality to the study, as the classroom is far from the typical environment in which the participants would generally watch films and television programmes. Whilst it would have

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[14] Friedrich Pollock, 'Empirical Research into Public Opinion' [1955], reprinted in *Critical Sociology*, ed. by Paul Connerton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), quoted in Morley, *Television Audiences and Cultural Studies*, p. 17.

[15] Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz, *The Export of Meaning: Cross-Cultural Readings of* Dallas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 156.

[16] Pollock, 'Empirical Research into Public Opinion', cited in Morley, *Television Audiences and Cultural Studies*, p. 17.

been preferable to hold the screenings in an environment closer to that in which they would usually consume screen media, as Liebes and Katz did in their *Dallas* study,[17] the practicalities of this, particularly combined with the age group of my participants, made this virtually impossible with the limited resources at my disposal. As we have seen, the strategy I adopted is not new, with Morley also using the convenience of an educational establishment to facilitate his research, and arguing that this environmental artificiality was not as significant as some might suggest.[18]

An alternative design would have been to request that the participants source and watch the films themselves, and then complete the questionnaires to provide their responses. This would have returned the study design to something more closely resembling the research on *Lord of the Rings* and *Game of Thrones*. However, this approach might have required the participants to spend money on purchasing or renting the five titles chosen for the study, or alternatively to use less legal means of obtaining the required titles. As the participants were unlikely to have chosen to watch the films or episodes independent of their participation in the study, it would have been unethical to require them to spend money in order to participate, particularly in a study dealing with teenagers. In practice, it is also unlikely that they would have been sufficiently motivated to spend their leisure time sourcing and watching material that they may not feel inclined to watch, purely for the sake of a research study. I therefore concluded that holding prearranged screenings in an easily accessible location was the most practical and ethical way of having participants view the material.

Screening the dramas in the educational establishments the participants attended meant that I could be sure that the participants had indeed watched the case studies. It also allowed me to attend some screenings and observe their reactions while they were watching them. However, the practice of showing full films or television episodes within an educational environment also raised a number of practical problems. Whilst the length of time required is one, particularly when it involved getting a number of young people with different timetables and commitments together at the same time, another was the issue of copyright. Without applying for highly expensive licences to hold individual screenings, it was difficult to find a way to make this manageable. However, with the help of the organisation Learning on Screen, I was able to source case study films and television episodes that could be shown under the ERA licence held by schools and colleges, meaning that I was able to use the existing licences held by the institutions to cover the showing of this material. This did, of course, place limits on the titles that I could choose for my case studies, a subject I discuss in more depth below.

A final consideration in the design of the study was the need to ensure that the work adhered to ethical guidelines. I have already alluded to the fact that I needed to be mindful of this when considering what was required of the participants, in order to facilitate their participation. This was also a consideration when determining the material to be screened in the study, as it would clearly be unethical to require the institutions to screen any material which would break copyright law. In addition to these considerations, I also adhered to standard ethical requirements, such as providing all participants with information on the study and assuring them of their right to leave the study at any time – a right that many availed themselves of, as the next chapter will show! I gained written consent from all participants, but, as all those taking part were a minimum of 16 years of age, I did not seek parental consent. It is worth

[17] Liebes and Katz, *The Export of Meaning*, p. 6.
[18] David Morley, *Television Audiences and Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 14, citing John Fiske, 'Ethnosemiotics', *Cultural Studies*, 4 (1) (1990).

noting, however, that all activities took place with the full knowledge and permission of at least one staff member in each of the institutions that took part.

As is standard in many audience research studies, all references to data collected from participants is anonymised. Rather than attempt to give pseudonyms to each participant, I have chosen to identify them numerically. Thus, references to main study participants use the prefix (MSP), followed by a number identifying the individual participant. On the few occasions on which I also refer to pilot participants, I use the prefix PFG (Pilot Focus Group). The use of anonymity in the reporting of the data, as well as being good practice, hopefully allowed the participants to speak more freely. As I elaborate on in Chapter 5, when I discuss some potentially misogynistic remarks made by some participants, the considerations of ethical practice do not end at the planning stage. I have been very aware of the possible ethical issues presented when interpreting the words of participants, particularly those of a young age. Where relevant, I have sought to explore any potentially contentious data by considering it as the product of environmental factors as much as the individuals, whilst also not minimising what I see as the significance of the data provided.

The Case Studies

One of the defining issues that inspired this study was diversity, and the ways in which young people and period dramas are often characterised as homogenous groups, lacking diverse features. I have already noted that a key question in the earliest stages of planning this study was how young people would respond to period dramas featuring less typical character representations, such as ethnic minority characters. In order to explore this subject further, a key consideration in deciding on the five case studies was therefore the need to find examples of period drama that featured a range of different representations. In some ways, of course, this could be argued to be a very inexact science, as all the period dramas featured are inherently different in style, tone and content. The only way of achieving an exact comparison would be to somehow show the participants the exact same drama but with a different aspect of the character representation manipulated each time. As this would clearly be impossible, not to mention entirely removed from the usual experience of watching drama, I instead elected to choose five examples which I felt represented a diverse range of character types and experiences. These included dramas with both male and female lead characters, as well as those with significant characters from minority groups. This approach allowed me to explore the participants' responses to a range of different types of representation, and how that diversity appeared to impact on the responses of the participants. The analysis of that impact cannot however be separated from the fact that each example represents much more than just one simple representational feature. To keep the study as relevant to the contemporary industry, and to the experiences of the participants themselves, I also selected examples from recent years, limiting the selection to those released from 2010 onwards.

I noted above that the need to adhere to copyright laws impacted on the choices I was able to make regarding the films and television dramas that I chose for the study. As I was showing the material under the ERA licence, I had to choose examples that had previously been shown on broadcast television, and could therefore be sourced through Learning on Screen's archive of recordings from the main British television channels. This meant that all the films that I was able to use were likely to be at least two years old, as it still takes some time for films to go from cinema release to being broadcast on non-subscription channels. For obvious reasons,

this did not apply to television programmes. In terms of the selection of the individual case study dramas, the major impact of this restriction was that I was unable to use the film *Suffragette* (Sarah Gavron, 2015), which I had previously identified as a potentially useful case study. This film is a relatively rare example of a period drama focusing on the lives of working class characters. The lead actress, Carey Mulligan, a familiar face in British period dramas, plays a young laundry worker with a notably cockney accent. Many of the locations are deliberately grim, highlighting the double disadvantage faced by some of the characters as being both female and working class. I felt that this highly unsanitised representation of the British past would provide a very useful opportunity to explore the responses of the participants to depictions of working class history. In addition, the subject matter of the film, as suggested by the title, explores the still topical issue of gender inequality, which I felt would also make this an interesting example to explore in relation to the meanings it held for young people. However, it was not to be. *Suffragette* was not shown on any of the main UK channels prior to the beginning of the study and was therefore unavailable for use in this study.

The absence of *Suffragette* meant that I needed to find another example of a recent period drama that featured working class characters prominently. I had intended to use one episode of *Downton Abbey*, as I considered this to be the most archetypal period drama of recent years. Whilst this drama does feature working class characters through its utilisation of the 'upstairs, downstairs' structure, the working-class servant characters are not the central focus of the drama. *Downton Abbey* did not, therefore, meet my criteria of a drama that focusses on the lives of working-class characters as its primary concern. Whilst there are many examples of period dramas with some working-class characters, it was notably difficult to identify examples where these were the focus of the narrative, rather than operating as satellites of a more wealthy protagonist. I ultimately decided on the BBC drama *Peaky Blinders* (2013-) as another example of working-class representation, and I discuss the series in more detail below.

The fact that I had intended from the outset of the study to include *Downton Abbey*, as the most definitive example of period drama of recent years, raised another issue: should my study include just television dramas, or both television and films. Both approaches have inherent problems. Serial television dramas such as *Downton Abbey*, by their nature, tell stories over an extended period of time, making it more difficult to assess responses to the drama based on a single episode that captures only a fraction of the overall story arc. Whilst this has been done previously, as in Liebes' and Katz's study of *Dallas*, I felt that the inclusion of feature films that concluded their narratives within a two-hour timespan would be vital. In any case, to have excluded the many examples of period drama films made in recent years would be unnecessarily limiting, particularly as much academic work on period drama in recent years takes film as the primary medium of discussion. For these reasons, I chose to combine examples of television drama series and one-off films. Inevitably, this meant that some of the case study screenings provided the participants with a complete story arc, whereas others represented only an excerpt from a continuing story. This will, undoubtedly have had some impact on how the participants responded to the texts, as I believe some of the data collected shows. However, I felt this would still allow the participants to respond to the characters and themes depicted in a useful way. With this in mind, I also ensured that the television examples were screened before the final week of the study, giving the participants the opportunity to source and continue to watch the series in their own time if they chose to. As the study concluded with a final survey asking for the participants' responses to all the case studies, the participants had the opportunity here to say if they had continued to watch any more episodes of the television series' and to give their responses to these.

As a final consideration, I was also aware that recruiting participants through schools and colleges meant that I needed to be mindful of the appropriateness of the material, particularly as I was asking the institutions to screen it on their premises. The participants that I was working with were aged 16-19, and therefore I considered it reasonable to use material rated 15 by the British Board of Film Classification, meaning they were judged suitable for viewers aged 15 and older, although I excluded anything with an 18 rating. Even with this in mind, I avoided anything that included particularly gory, horrific or explicitly sexual content, as I was conscious of the need to ensure that both the participants, and the staff responsible for them, felt comfortable with the material. The need to find a range of different subject matters and character types did mean that some of the case study dramas contained violent or sexual content, but I judged these to be relatively mild. In practice, only one of the case studies was rated 15, with the four others all rated 12.

Having considered all these factors, I decided on a selection of five case study dramas, made up of episodes from two television series and three complete feature films. I decided that all participants would watch the case studies in the same order, so that all participants had the same experience of the study. (It should be borne in mind, however, that some participants would very likely have seen some of the examples before they watched them as part of the study.) I generally aimed to reveal the drama or film being watched only on the day of the screening, so that the participants couldn't research it beforehand, and therefore prejudge it. However, given that I was working with various different groups, including their teachers, all of whom had their own approaches to running the study, I couldn't guarantee that this was the case for every screening. Below, I outline the five case studies that I settled on, in the order in which they were screened for the study. Avoiding the 'dialogue of the deaf' cited by Liebes and Katz, in discussing the case studies I do engage in light textual analysis, highlighting what I see as some of the most significant features.[19] In doing so I emphasise that, although this research primarily engages with the ways in which the participants react to the case studies, in presenting this data I am inevitably going to also be informed by my own readings of the case studies.

Peaky Blinders (series 1, episode 1)

The BBC television series, *Peaky Blinders* (2013-), is set amongst the gangs of Birmingham in the early decades of the twentieth century. Given that I couldn't assume the participants would come to the screening with any prior knowledge of the series, the most obvious episode to use was the first episode of the first series. As might be expected from the opening episode of a television series, it introduces the main characters in the drama, in this case the Shelby family who head up the titular 'Peaky Blinders', a gang from the Small Heath area of Birmingham who accrue money and power through illegal gambling. In addition to the various members of the Shelby family, the episode also introduces the characters of Inspector Campbell (Sam Neill), an Irish detective who has come to Birmingham in search of stolen Irish guns which have (unbeknownst to him) accidentally fallen into the hands of the Peaky

[19] Liebes and Katz, *The Export of Meaning*, p. 17-8, citing Jay Blumler, Michael Gurevitch and Elihu Katz, 'Reaching Out: A Future for Gratifications Research', in *Media Gratifications Research: Current Perspectives*, ed. by Karl E Rosengren, Lawrence A Wenner and Philip Palmgreen (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1986).

Blinders; and Grace (Annabelle Wallis), an undercover Irish agent whose 'cover' is working as a barmaid in the Peaky Blinders' local pub.

As already noted, I chose *Peaky Blinders* primarily because it is set amongst the urban working classes, and therefore acts as a substitute for *Suffragette*, at least in its focus on working-class characters. Whereas *Suffragette* focuses heavily on female experience, *Peaky Blinders*, although being something of an ensemble piece in its range of characters, has the character of Tommy Shelby, played by Cillian Murphy, as the clear protagonist. An actor with a substantial body of work in the film industry behind him, Murphy is relied on heavily in the marketing of the series, and therefore can be considered the 'star', making this an example of a male-led period drama. The opening episode is set in 1919, and the series' post-war setting is extensively referenced through narrative details such as the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders experienced by several characters, allusions to the war records of the central male characters, and the implications that Inspector Campbell's failure to serve in the war has resulted in him being stigmatised. This episode is therefore rooted in a specific historical period, making a clear case for its inclusion as an example of the period drama genre. However, with its urban, working-class setting and characters, as well as its frequent scenes of violence, it also departs from some of the traits most commonly associated with the genre, making this an interesting case study with which to open the study. As a reasonably 'untypical' example of the period drama genre I hoped it would encourage the participants to let go of any preconceptions they might have, early in the study, about what they were going to watch.

As a television drama, it was also advantageous to screen the episode early, as this allowed the participants time to seek out more episodes if they wanted to. On the other hand, the fact that this is the opening episode of a television series does result in some disadvantages regarding its use in assessing participants' responses to the series. As *Peaky Blinders* features complex plotlines, involving several different characters, it is difficult for the opening episode to get very far with establishing these. Clearly, an important role played by the first instalment of any series is that it must be sufficiently interesting or enjoyable to encourage viewers to 'tune in' for the next episode, and therefore any series opener is likely to contain a reasonable amount of engaging material. In this episode the climactic point is the moment in which Tommy apparently shoots his friend 'Danny Whizz Bang' (Samuel Edward-Cook), only for it to be revealed that Tommy has faked the shooting. The revelation that the character of Grace, apparently a simple a barmaid, is in fact an undercover agent, also comes late in the episode, adding further intrigue. However, when compared with a typical feature film, which contains a full story arc within a two-hour running time, there is a disadvantage in judging the effectiveness of these storytelling elements, which only hint at much of the drama to come. As discussed, whilst I considered it appropriate to combine film and television examples, the differences between the two need to be considered when looking at the responses of participants to this episode in later chapters.

Belle

For the second case study I chose the feature film *Belle*. This tells the story of Dido Belle Lindsay (played by Gugu Mbatha-Raw), a historical figure brought up as a member of the aristocracy despite being of mixed ethnicity and illegitimate. As previously noted, this film was the first case study to be chosen because it was a rare example of a period drama with an ethnic minority character in a central role. *Belle* is particularly interesting as, unlike *Peaky*

Blinders, it conforms in many ways to the typical conventions of the period drama. The characters are largely from aristocratic backgrounds, and indicators of wealth, such as elaborate costumes and large, lavishly decorated houses, feature prominently in the aesthetics of the film. The narrative also focuses on the female characters, Dido and her cousin Elizabeth Murray, or Bett, played by Sarah Gadon. Paula Byrne, author of the tie-in biography of Dido Belle, notes that 'the latter part of the eighteenth century [when Dido Belle lived] witnessed a flourishing of heroine-centred novels that explored female consciousness and identity. Questions of marriage and money, propriety and property, were constant themes.'[20] The eighteenth-century writer whose 'heroine-centred novels' continue to be most celebrated today is Jane Austen, and the film plays out in many ways very like an Austen adaptation. The marriage prospects of the two young women are a central concern, with these being complicated by Dido's ethnicity and Bett's lack of inheritance, resulting in the need for both women to find suitors willing to love them without reference to financial or familial objections. The potential familial objections relating to Dido's mixed ethnicity are a less typically Austenian touch, although Byrne does note that Austen's final, unfinished work contains a 'mulatto' woman.[21]

While *Belle* clearly adopts many of the familiar aesthetic and narrative motifs of the Austenian period drama, it also departs from the typical period drama in its focus on Dido's ethnic heritage, which is explored through two narrative strands. The first is the emphasis placed on Dido's ambiguous marriage prospects, and the casual racism that the character frequently encounters. It is worth noting, however, that her relationships with her immediate family are portrayed as extremely positive. The Murray family act as her adoptive parents, with her cousin referred to as a 'sister-cousin', and any objections they have to her ethnicity are overcome within a matter of moments. The Murray family are portrayed in the film as extremely enlightened about race relations, at least in private. Dido's public role within the family is shown to be more constrained, however, with emphasis placed on the fact that she is not allowed to eat with her family in company. This is complicated by Dido's illegitimacy, which also compromises her position in society. The film maintains the focus on her ethnicity, though, perhaps because as an issue it is more easily conveyed to contemporary audiences, for many of whom this subject will seem highly topical in the early twenty-first century.

The second way in which the film highlights the significance of Dido's ethnicity is through a sub-plot organised around William Murray, Lord Mansfield (Tom Wilkinson), Dido's guardian and Lord Chief Justice, who is ruling on the case of a potentially fraudulent insurance case involving slaves on the Zong slave ship. This storyline allows the film to explore various characters' attitudes towards the concept of slavery, and the film climaxes with Lord Mansfield ruling against the slave-owners and making an impassioned statement against the principles of slavery. The film therefore adheres to some very familiar period drama features, whilst also exploring the issue of racism at an institutional and personal level. In the context of my study, this provided an opportunity to explore the impact of the focus on race in an otherwise largely typical period drama, on the responses of the participants.

The Imitation Game

[20] Paula Byrne, *Belle: The True Story of Dido Belle* (London: William Collins, 2014), p. 8-9.
[21] Byrne, *Belle*, p. 9.

Like *Belle*, *The Imitation Game* is another feature film that claims to have its basis in historical fact. Set between the inter-war period and the early 1950s, although with a substantial amount of the plot taking place during the Second World War, this case study has the most modern setting of the five case study dramas selected. The film purports to tell the story of Alan Turing (played as an adult by Benedict Cumberbatch and as a teenager by Alex Lawther) and the solving of the Enigma Code, although it also explores in some detail the criminal conviction that Turing incurred as a result of his homosexuality being made public in the post-war years. Like *Peaky Binders*, this is another example of a period drama with a male protagonist. But while *Peaky Blinders* is more of an ensemble piece, due in part to its televisual drama form, *The Imitation Game* is dominated by Cumberbatch's central performance. Despite having an impressive supporting cast including Keira Knightley, Charles Dance, Mark Strong and Matthew Goode, most of whom are familiar faces in British period dramas, the film focuses entirely on the experiences of Turing, with the other characters dropping in and out of the storyline according to their relevance to Turing's life.

The film consistently proved to be of interest to my pilot participants, with many commenting on how powerful they found the story to be. This was often due to the film's basis in historical fact, with the excitement and impressiveness of the achievement of breaking the Enigma code providing one source of interest for participants. The fact that this is portrayed as having a major impact on recent history encourages a feeling of direct relevance to the lives of people today in a way that, for example, the abolitionist movement referenced in *Belle's* storyline, may not. Another aspect of *The Imitation Game* that resonated with my pilot participants was the portrayal of institutionalised, indeed legalised, homophobia. The very fact that the film has the most modern setting of the case studies makes this particularly shocking, and many pilot respondents had strong emotional responses to this aspect of the film's storyline.

The exploration of the experiences of a homosexual protagonist was also useful in facilitating the selection of case studies with varied representations. The film also implicitly explores the issue of disability with Cumberbatch's (and Lawther's) performance of Turing and his social difficulties strongly suggesting that the character is on the autistic spectrum. The film frequently references the fact that Turing is somehow different to other people, with the phrase 'sometimes it is the people no-one imagines anything of, who do the things that no-one can imagine' being repeated three times by different characters. This refrain emphasises the film's celebration of difference, although the characterisation of Turing as appearing to have a form of autism is not supported by definitive historical evidence, and the exact nature of Turing's 'difference', beyond his homosexuality, is never explicitly stated. In any case, these character elements, combined with the detailed responses the film elicited in the pilot research, suggested that it would be a fruitful example to include in the main study.

Downton Abbey (series 1, episode 1)

As I noted above, *Downton Abbey* seemed to be an obvious choice for one of the case studies, given its position as probably the most well-known British period drama of recent years. As with *Peaky Blinders*, it also seemed sensible to use the opening episode of the first season. Using the first episode of the opening series, first shown in 2010, does make this case study the earliest broadcast by a few years, with the next earliest example being *Peaky* Blinders, from 2013. The fact that this show continued well into the period in which the other case studies were released does mean that it can be considered as contemporary with the other

case studies, though, and at time of writing a feature film has recently been released. The opening episode is a 'feature length' episode, broadcast over a 90-minute timeslot on television. (Without the advertisement breaks the length is somewhat shorter). The fact that the episode was written with the aim of achieving something of the status of a feature film means that the disadvantages associated with showing the opening episode of *Peaky Blinders* are less evident here.

As with *Peaky Blinders*, *Downton Abbey* is also more of an ensemble piece than the three films. Indeed, the narrative structure is entirely reliant on a large cast of characters, from a range of different social circumstances, whose lives interlink. The opening episode thus introduces the viewer to a diverse set of characters, each of whom is signalled as having their own identifying traits which, the episode implies, will be developed over the coming episodes. The series is set in the fictional country house of Downton Abbey and employs an 'upstairs, downstairs' structure, thus presenting both the aristocratic owners of the house, and their serving staff as having potential dramatic interest. This narrative structure takes its name from a popular 1970s television series that employed the same structure.[22] This acknowledgement of the importance of working-class lives departs from dramas in the tradition of Austen adaptations, where servant characters are rarely little more than extras.

The storyline of the chosen episode, and indeed the whole series, is instigated by the sinking of the Titanic, the use of a well-known event clearly situating the drama within its historical period. The episode explores the dilemmas faced by the Crawley family, whose lack of sons means they may lose the estate to a (currently) unknown distant relative, the previous heirs having died in the 1912 disaster. Whilst set in different historical periods, the emphasis on issues created by primogeniture within the aristocracy means the drama has similarities with *Belle*, and thereby with Jane Austen's novels and their film and television adaptations. As Sarah Cardwell argues, 'Austen adaptations had, by the 1990s, become representative of the genre of classic-novel adaptations as a whole'.[23] Although neither *Belle*, nor *Downton Abbey* is an adaptation of a classic novel, by adopting this particular narrative feature, both texts align themselves with the literariness of many other period dramas. At the same time, the aesthetic emphasis on wealth also reinforces the sense of these as quality dramas.

The 'upstairs' scenes of this opening episode focus on Lord Grantham's (Hugh Bonneville) dilemma over whether to challenge the fact that his estate is entailed away from his daughters. This challenge would aim to install his oldest daughter, Lady Mary Crawley (Michelle Dockery), as the rightful heiress of the estate, although it could risk the estate being divided between heirs and effectively destroyed. 'Downstairs', the narrative is arguably driven by more progressive issues, with dramatic momentum being provided by the arrival of the slightly disabled Bates (Brendan Coyle), as Lord Grantham's new valet. The emphasis on Bates' physical difficulties, which arise from a war-wound, lead to questions about whether he should be dismissed due to an inability to fulfil all his required tasks. Lord Grantham, and his decisions, are therefore key to both main plotlines.

The use of *Downton Abbey* was originally envisaged as a form of 'control' text, given that it can be considered as arguably the most archetypal example of the period drama of recent years, complete with stately home and an array of aristocratic characters. It was therefore my

[22] *Upstairs, Downstairs* (LWT, 1971-5)
[23] Sarah Cardwell, *Adaptation Revisited: Television and the Classic Novel* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 134.

original intention to compare the responses of the participants to this example with the other case studies. In planning the study, I anticipated that this would allow for an examination of whether the different forms of representation in the other case studies affected the participants' responses, in comparison to this more typical example of the genre. However, a closer consideration of the ranges of characters and storylines in the chosen episode demonstrates that my initial approach was over-simplistic. Whilst it is true that *Downton Abbey* is a quintessential period drama in the context of the contemporary industry, an assumption borne out by some of my participants' responses, I was wrong in initially supposing that it didn't feature a range of different character representations. This episode, and the series that contains it, can certainly be associated with a rather conservative and traditional form of the period drama, with the focus on primogeniture and the marriage prospects of female children. However, this particular episode does represent a variety of socially different characters, explicitly emphasising that the treatment of those characters is a product of their position in society.

Perhaps the most obvious area of exploration in this episode is the issue of class inequality, and the different quality of life experienced by the aristocratic and working-class members of the household. The emotional investment encouraged by the screen time given to the servant characters demonstrates that the show identifies these characters' lives as being important and worthy of attention, to the same extent as the lives of their fictional employers. This demonstrates an investment in the values of class equality which goes beyond the popular perception of the show. The focus in the first episode on the disadvantage of being a woman, with the storyline exploring the fact that Lady Mary cannot inherit her father's estate because of her sex, also demonstrates a clear engagement with issues of gender inequality. Many of the female characters in the show are portrayed as intelligent and resourceful, from Dame Maggie Smith's Dowager Countess to Lady Mary herself, and yet they are shown to have little power beyond trying to instigate appropriate marriages.

Downton Abbey also engages explicitly with the often neglected issue of disability. The strong focus on the prospects of the valet Bates, and his evident desperation to maintain his employment despite his physical disability shines a light on the difficulties faced by disabled people when trying to live independently. Like the other issues interrogated in this episode, this is a highly pertinent issue in contemporary society. Finally, the episode also explores the issue of homosexuality, through the revelation that the Duke of Crowborough (Charlie Cox), a visitor to the house in search of a match with Lady Mary, whom he wrongly believes to be the new heiress of Downton, has been having a relationship with the footman, Thomas. The secret nature of the relationship, and the threats of blackmail once it sours, highlight the social attitudes towards homosexuality in the early twentieth century. This relationship also sharpens the focus on class inequality, through the power imbalance between the two men.

Whilst there is clearly a lot more that could be said about all the plot features described above, this overview demonstrates that, far from being a homogenous exploration of the privileged, *Downton Abbey* actually engages with the struggles faced by many disadvantaged members of society. Indeed, this may be a reason for its continued success. The opening episode of *Downton Abbey* uses the confines of the British country house setting to explore the experiences of a range of people from different social circumstances, with ethnic diversity being the only notable demographic characteristic not represented in the series. Whilst this may suggest that *Downton Abbey* is a more progressive drama than it is often given credit for, it is still the case that, despite the huge range of experiences being explored onscreen, as

noted above, the two central storylines of the episode centre on the decisions of Lord Grantham, the current owner of Downton Abbey. As Katherine Byrne comments, 'it is this that is most problematically conservative about *Downton*: its portrayal of a status quo that is successful under the loving, paternalistic eye of the patriarch'.[24] Whilst the episode goes to some lengths to explore the disadvantages faced by many of the characters due to their social positions, the benign portrayal of Lord Grantham acts as a tacit endorsement of his position and power. This then calls into question the more progressive aspects of the episode, with the resolution to many of the difficulties faced by the characters being facilitated by the Lord of Downton in a manner which ignores the extent to which these resolutions are dependent on his continued power and status.

Far from the Madding Crowd

As I have already observed, the period drama has long been associated with literariness, not least because the genre has traditionally been dominated by adaptations from classic literature. However, whilst *Belle* and *The Imitation Game* are based on historical sources of varying kinds, not one of the case studies already described is based on classic fiction. Although this sub-genre may be decreasing in prevalence, with the historical biopic appearing to be taking on a more central role within the genre in recent years, I still deemed it important to reflect this element of the genre by including at least one classic novel adaptation amongst the case studies. I considered several examples, including the Austen adaptation *Love and Friendship* (Whit Stillman, 2016), but in this case the approach taken to the source material over-emphasises the humour and typical Austen plots traits until the film operates more as a comedic parody of an Austen adaptation than a drama. Given the perception of the pilot participants that a film such as *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* was too different to other period dramas to make a useful comparison, I concluded that this film also differed too much from the standard generic traits to be productively compared with the four other texts. I also considered the newest iteration of *Jane Eyre* (Cary Joji Fukunaga, 2011), which I felt to be a good example of the contemporary literary adaptation. However, I finally decided upon a more recent film, the 2015 *Far from the Madding Crowd*, adapted from the Thomas Hardy novel of the same name and directed by Danish director Thomas Vinterberg.

In addition to being a more contemporary example than the 2011 *Jane Eyre*, *Far from the Madding Crowd* also had several other features that made it a good choice for the study. It focuses heavily on the farms and landscapes of Dorset, settings frequently associated with Hardy novels, making it a good example of a British period drama that uses idealised rural landscape as a backdrop to the narrative action. The setting therefore contrasts with the very urban *Peaky Blinders*, or the more aristocratic *Belle* and *Downton Abbey*. The film's storyline also emphasises the issue of gender inequality, and the desire of the female protagonist, Bathsheba Everdene (Carey Mulligan), to live and work independently. Finally, it also engages with the issue of class, with social mobility and the different social statuses of the characters also featuring in the major plotlines. I therefore felt the film offered a useful contrast to the

[24] Katherine Byrne, 'New Developments in Heritage: The Recent Dark Side of *Downton* "Downer" *Abbey*', in *Upstairs and Downstairs: British Costume Drama Television from* The Forsyte Saga *to* Downton Abbey', ed. by James Leggott and Julie Anne Taddeo (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), p. 179.

other case studies, but also maintained a focus on the areas of representation that I wanted the main study to explore.

Looking at all five choices, and how they relate to the data gathered in the general pilot survey, five of the six films and television dramas that were rated most highly by my pilot respondents have become the case studies detailed above. For similar reasons to those explained in relation to *Suffragette*, copyright issues meant that *The Crown* (Netflix, 2016-), which was the second most highly rated drama in the pilot (after *The Imitation Game*), could not be used, but the other most popular films and television dramas were all selected for the main study. It was never the intention simply to choose the most popular titles from the pilot research to be case studies in the main study; as I have already noted, the primary aim was to select examples with varied forms of character representation in them. However, the fact that these examples scored highly with my pilot participants and often featured in qualitative responses did suggest that they had the potential to yield interesting data, a consideration which also contributed to their selection for the main study.

The Questionnaires

Having established the five period dramas that would serve as case studies for my research into teenage responses to such material, I created questionnaires which would gather data on the participants' thoughts about the films and television dramas they watched for the study. In designing the questionnaires, I followed the principles that I used in my pilot surveys, gathering quantitative data and combining this with questions providing participants with the opportunity to give qualitative responses.

As the following chapters will show, in the process of analysing the data, the qualitative data gathered proved to be of greater value, and the study evolved into something closer to a purely qualitative project. This was due in part to the longitudinal nature of the study, which in practice resulted in the vast majority of datasets being incomplete. As is discussed in more depth in the following section, the study received patchy attendance from many participants, and a number of groups left the study before completing all the activities. These issues meant that the quantitative data collected was less indicative of the full cohort of participants recruited to the study, and therefore cannot be considered to present a reliable picture of responses across all participants. This is particularly the case when comparing responses from different surveys, as the number of responses to individual surveys differs quite significantly, although this can still provide some indication about how each drama was responded to by those participants that did watch it. Ultimately, these factors resulted in the analysis focussing more on the qualitative data. However, in describing the process of creating the questionnaires, I shall draw attention to both the quantitative and qualitative approaches to data gathering, as these were both considered significant during the planning stage.

In order to allow me to consider how demographic characteristics might impact on the responses to dramas screened, I needed to collect information, such as the gender and ethnicity of my participants. Rather than gathering this data after each screening, I considered it more user-friendly to allow the participants to provide demographic details about themselves once at the beginning of the study, so it could then be matched with their various survey responses. With this strategy in mind, I therefore created the Initial Survey, which

gathered useful information on each of the participants, and it is this information that is considered in detail in Chapter 3. Following the completion of the Initial Survey, participants were asked to watch the five case study dramas and complete a Post-Screening Survey immediately after each one. These were followed by a final Summative Survey in which the participants were asked to reflect on their experience of watching the five dramas and give their thoughts about the whole process. In summarising the creation of the surveys, I introduce most of the main areas of questioning, as these indicate my intentions when embarking on the data collection. It should be pointed out though, just as the study shifted to a more qualitative approach throughout the process of data-gathering, for various reasons, some lines of enquiry did not prove to be fruitful, and therefore not all the areas discussed below will feature in the analysis chapters which follow this one.

The primary purpose of the Initial Survey was to gather useful demographic information on the participants, including gender identity, ethnicity and age. I also attempted to gain information on their social class, although this is problematic with young people as they have not yet had an opportunity to earn a salary or pursue a career. For these reasons, I sought information on aspects such as their parents' education and occupation and whether the participants had qualified for free school meals whilst at school. I did not seek information on the participants' sexuality, as I felt that it was inappropriate to request this information from young people who may be going through the process of exploring their sexual identity. However, some participants did volunteer this information in responses to specific films.

In addition to collecting information on the backgrounds of the young people, the Initial Survey also collected information on the young people's political identity. As period dramas have been associated with both conservative and progressive ideologies, I considered that this data had the potential to provide an interesting angle for exploration. As another of the goals of my study was to explore young people's relationships with historical representations and media texts, I also gathered data on the participants' consumption of films and television, and of various means of engaging with the past, such as how likely they would be to visit historical sites or museums, or read books set in the past. Linked to this is the fact that the study participants were all engaged in some form of education, and therefore their areas of study could influence their responses to the case studies. In particular, those participants with an academic interest in media or film studies might be more likely to assess the dramas according to features such as cinematography or visual design. On the other hand, participants with an interest in history might be more interested in features such as the representation of the particular periods, or the use of historical details within the storyline. For this reason, I gathered information on which courses the participants were studying in order to explore the impact these had on the patterns of responses. I also aimed to recruit participants through institutions without targeting specific subject areas, with the intention of avoiding such areas of bias.

I was expecting analysis of the demographic data gathered in the Initial Survey to provide some rich conclusions. However, in practice, the levels of participant recruitment and retention, meant that some of the planned lines of enquiry became less fruitful to pursue, and the analysis of the data became more focused on examining individual responses, and less on wider patterns. The data gathered through this survey still provides a useful context for the study data in general, though, and, as Chapter 3 shows, provides an interesting insight into the lives of young people.

In designing the Post-Screening Surveys a key point of consideration was whether the questions in the survey should be adapted to the individual case studies, or whether the same questions should be asked of each film or programme. Seiter points out that a feature of newer audience research is that it 'tend[s] to proceed without a clear cut hypothesis'.[25] This study follows this exploratory tradition, investigating an area of media reception on which there exists little specific data at present, and therefore allowing the analysis to be led by the direction of responses. For this reason, open questions that could be applied to all the case study texts were adopted as the most appropriate way to gather data. These surveys solicited a range of information such as a rating out of five, which moments and characters stood out to the participants, and what they liked or didn't like about what they had been watching. The intention behind this questioning strategy was to encourage the participants to give more of a sense of their own experience of watching the films and television programmes by allowing them the freedom to talk about anything that had struck them about the material. Consistent with Roy Stafford's observation about the increased emphasis placed on notions of pleasure when 'real audiences' become the focus of research, through asking for ratings and for descriptions of what they liked or didn't like about the dramas, the questions deliberately explored the extent to which the participants gained pleasure from watching those dramas.[26] In asking questions about which characters or moments most stood out for them, I also hoped to get a sense of what the text was really about, in the eyes of the participants. This logic is based on the principles of semiotics, and the idea that 'information or meaning is not "contained" in the world or in books, computers or audio-visual media. Meaning is not 'transmitted' to us – we actively create it.'[27] All texts can create many potential meanings depending on who is decoding the information and in what context. In asking which moment, for example, most stood out to the participants, I hoped that the answers given would provide an insight into the most significant meanings my participants took from each drama. Chapter 4 gives an overview of the general responses these surveys elicited from the participants, and Chapter 5 considers in detail the responses to the questions about character.

The use of audience research studies to explore the range of meanings that can be created by engaging with texts by different individuals is not a new strategy. Monk identifies the failure of heritage film criticism to acknowledge the possibility of multiple interpretations of period dramas, arguing that 'the critique's preoccupation with the heritage mise-en-scène solely as a conduit for the working of ideology disregards the wider range of pleasures and meanings it may hold for the films' actual audiences.'[28] In the case of Monk's study, the multiple potential 'pleasures and meanings' were elicited using lists of pleasures and attitudes, through which participants signalled levels of agreement on a Likert scale, in which different degrees of agreement or disagreement can be indicated. The World *Lord of the Rings* Project also sought to explore the different meanings that audiences find in films. This questionnaire asked respondents to identify the 'modality' of the films by identifying the most appropriate descriptor from a list including terms such as 'epic', 'fantasy' and 'allegory'. Each of these modalities contains different associations, meaning that the modality chosen by the participants reveals something of their expectations of the films, as well as their interpretation

[25] Ellen Seiter, 'Qualitative Audience Research', in *The Television Studies Reader,* ed. by Robert C Allen and Annette Hill (Oxford: Routledge, 2004), p, 463.
[26] Roy Stafford, *Understanding Audiences and the Film Industry* (London: BFI, 2007), p. 84.
[27] Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics* (Oxford: Routledge, 2007), p. 11.
[28] Monk, *Heritage Film Audiences*, p. 19.

of the film's underlying meaning.[29] These studies thus employed differing strategies, with Monk's study gauging the level of agreement with a wide range of different attitudes, and the *Lord of the Rings* study asking respondents to identify which approaches to the film best represented their own position from a list of potential answers. What these studies share, however, is the fact that in both cases respondents were given a list of options to choose from. Whilst this is a sound approach in a study in which there is already a reasonable amount of critical opinion surrounding the readings that a film or genre may produce, I felt that the situation for my own study was a little different.

The purpose of this study was to explore the meanings created by audiences during their viewing of a particular genre, period drama in this case. However, it went further, also focussing on a very specific age group. A key principle behind the study was the bringing together of a genre and an audience group not usually associated with each other in order to explore assumptions made about both. For these reasons it was less appropriate to speculate about the approaches that the participants might take towards the films, or the meanings they would take from the case studies. I therefore considered it more suitable for the Post-Screening Surveys to contain open, qualitative questions that would be less likely to influence the responses of the participants. By asking more generalised questions I was able to avoid directing participants towards areas that I found personally interesting, and could find out whether these had been noticed by the participants at all, or whether they had been struck by anything in the case studies that I had not considered important. One example of this is *Belle*, which I chose largely because it is a relatively rare example of a period drama that engages explicitly with issues of ethnicity. However, in the pilot study several respondents also commented on the portrayal of gender inequality in this film. As later chapters show, this continues in the main study, with the chosen case studies attracting very different responses from different participants, including some quite surprising comments about certain details by individual participants.

In addition to finding out what meanings the case studies held for the participants, I was also interested to find out about the ways in which those texts might be related to the participants' own experiences, or to their understanding of history. Participants were therefore asked to rate the relevance of each case study to their own lives. Whilst collecting quantitative data of this kind may be considered by some researchers as something of a 'blunt tool' in its reductiveness, collecting reflections on the relevance of the text to their own experiences in this way allowed comparison with the other dramas in the study. I was then able to compare the quantitative data across all five examples in order to gather a sense of the perceived relative relevance of the case studies to the participants' experiences of contemporary life. This was then combined with a qualitative question asking for more detailed reflection on relevance, or lack of it. This approach builds on qualitative questions in the pilot study, in which the responses indicated that the respondents found many different ways of relating the events depicted in period dramas to their own experiences. The responses of the main study participants to these questions are discussed in Chapter 4.

The potential for period drama to play an educative role by enhancing understanding of the past also featured in my pilot data, so this was something else on which I sought data in the Post-Screening Surveys. Ultimately, the qualitative data gathered on these topics in the main

[29] See Martin Barker, 'The Functions of Fantasy: A Comparison of Audiences for *The Lord of the Rings* in Twelve Countries', in *Watching The Lord of the Rings: Tolkien's World Audiences*, ed. by Martin Barker and Ernest Mathijs (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), pp. 149-80.

study turned out to be less detailed than that gathered in the pilot study. Given that the recruitment methods in the pilot and main study were different, with pilot participants being more self-selecting, this is not surprising, but it was obviously disappointing that the richness of some of the pilot data was not replicated in the main study.

Whilst the five Post-Screening Surveys were designed to solicit an in-depth understanding of how the participants responded to the material screened, a key area of interest was the ways in which the participants' responses were impacted by the content of each case study drama. This meant that the study had an important comparative element, an element brought to the fore in the final Summative Survey, which requested that the participants consider the five dramas in relation to each other. Participants were asked to give their views about all five of the films or television episodes they had watched, evaluating them and identifying which had been their favourite and least favourite. I also gave the participants more space to reflect on whether the case studies had caused them to think about anything in their own lives, or the world they inhabit, and asked whether they had, or were likely to, take any actions as a result of watching any of the case studies. The purpose of asking these questions was to find out whether the consumption of these dramas had had any lasting impact on the participants. In doing this I was hoping to take advantage of the longitudinal nature of the study and the fact that some time (a few weeks in some cases, several months in others) would have elapsed since the participants watched the first case studies. The effectiveness of this was slightly compromised by the fact that each institution carried out the study over a different period of time and, in all cases, more time would necessarily have elapsed between the watching of the earlier screenings than later ones. Indeed, for practical reasons this final online survey was often completed on the same day that the participants watched the last case study, *Far from the Madding Crowd*. This obviously meant it was not possible to assess the potential for impact of the later case study texts to the same extent as the earlier screenings, but the practicalities of running the study meant that this compromise was unavoidable. I compensated for this by asking the participants whether they thought they might take any future actions as a result of watching any of the five dramas, but any data collected from this question is obviously going to be less compelling than answers that give concrete examples of actions that have actually happened.

Recruitment

Many studies of this nature seek to recruit participants in distinct groups, such as the approach taken by Monk in her recruitment of National Trust members and *Time Out* readers. With class being a particularly British preoccupation, many of the studies carried out in Britain seek to identify groups drawn from locations or forms of employment that will identify them as either middle- or working-class. Examples of this approach can be found in Morley's *Nationwide* studies, the research of Skeggs and Wood into responses to reality television, and Helen Manchester and Emma Pett's research into young people's understanding of the arts in Bristol.[30] This approach is clearly very useful in providing insights into the impact that class identity, or factors such as cultural experiences, have on how texts are interpreted. As one of the key areas of interest in my research was to capture something of the diversity of young

[30] See Morley, *Television Audiences and Cultural Studies*, pp. 73-130, Skeggs and Wood, *Reacting to Reality Television*, and Helen Manchester and Emma Pett, 'Teenage Kicks: Exploring Cultural Value from a Youth Perspective', *Cultural Trends*, 24 (3) (2015), pp. 223-31.

people, I did not seek to recruit participants based on pre-determined characteristics such as perceived class. Instead, I attempted to spread a wide net that would allow young people from a range of locations and backgrounds, to participate in the research.

The specific design of this study meant that recruiting participants through educational institutions was the most promising way of identifying participants. As well as providing concentrated groups of my target age range of 16-19 year olds, the fact that films and television programmes are frequently used in teaching meant that the institutions would also have the necessary equipment required to run the screenings for my study. Many also have classrooms containing banks of computers which could then be used to complete the surveys immediately after the screenings. As the constraints of the ethics process meant that working with participants aged 16 and over was the most practical way forward, sixth form colleges were initially targeted, as these are populated almost exclusively by students within the target age range. These institutions also have the advantage of timetabling practices which tend to leave students with some free time within college hours, and some also have an afternoon set aside for enrichment activities, providing a potential window for the study activities to be carried out. Of course, one disadvantage of recruiting through sixth form colleges was that this approach automatically discounted many young people, as not all teenagers progress to this form of education. However, my own experience working in education had taught me that the students of these institutions would still represent a very broad range of backgrounds. Given the various barriers faced in the delivery of this study, and the manifest advantages in using the facilities of educational institutions, I judged it to be the most practical way to proceed.

As a former teacher, and sixth form specialist, I had some knowledge of sixth form colleges in the London area. Whilst this was in some ways an advantage, I was also keen to avoid bias in the selection of institutions by simply selecting colleges with which I was personally familiar. Instead, I used the website of the Sixth Form Colleges Association to identify a list of around 90 colleges in England. I then contacted each of these colleges by letter, inviting them to allow some of their students to take part in my research. In a further attempt to avoid bias, I addressed my letters to the principals of the colleges, in the hope that they would be disseminated amongst staff more widely than they would be if I were to address my correspondence to specific departments such as Media Studies or History. I followed these letters up with telephone calls. The practical issues of this approach are not to be underestimated. By targeting all 90 colleges I was able to spread a wide net and avoid the unconscious bias that might arise if I were to select a sample from the list, meaning that I was more likely to recruit participants from a broader range of backgrounds. However, it did mean that the process of following up my correspondence was hugely time-consuming. After making initial approaches and following these up, I had a list of eleven colleges that had expressed interest in taking part in the study. This process was undertaken at the end of the academic year 2016/17, with the intention of beginning the research in the autumn term of the academic year 2017/18. I was aware that the busy nature of sixth form colleges as a workplace meant that there was likely to be some drop out, but at this point I was satisfied that even a significant level of drop out would still result in a reasonable number of participants.

Following the 2017 summer break I contacted the colleges that had agreed to take part in the study to arrange the first screenings. This proved more difficult than anticipated, and I only managed to start the study with four of the eleven colleges that had initially expressed interest in taking part. By the end of the first term I had completed the study with one centre and gone part of the way through the process with a small number of others, but the number of

participants was a lot lower than I had hoped. This was particularly disappointing given the amount of interest garnered by my initial recruitment attempts, which suggested that many educational establishments were enthusiastic about the idea of contributing to research. Whilst the aim of the study was never to recruit enough participants to create a statistically representative sample of the whole teenage population of England, I was very aware that the small numbers I had at this point in the study would make drawing any conclusions about notable patterns very difficult. I therefore decided to go through my list of 90 colleges again and approach any from whom I had not received a definitive answer. This was the majority of the list.

Whilst I had intended not to approach specific departments within the colleges in order to avoid any bias that might result from this, in my early attempts at recruitment I found I was more likely to receive positive responses from teachers within media or history departments. The next strategy that I used was therefore to target colleges whose websites listed film clubs or history clubs as part of their enrichment offer. As these clubs would already have time set aside for them, it would seem likely that they would be able to incorporate taking part in the study into their activities. This did not prove to be a successful strategy, with no such clubs choosing to participate. However, in my conversations with staff members at the colleges I did find that the project often elicited enthusiastic responses, and I managed to recruit one more college, which began its participation before the Christmas holiday.

One issue with recruiting my participants through educational institutions, and with relying on the cooperation of the college for the study to take place, was that the academic year is peppered with interruptions in the form of holidays, exam leave and work experience, making it difficult to maintain momentum. This was a problem for this study, as following the Christmas holiday, I found that those centres that had been holding regular screenings were unable to continue with the same regularity. This was due to factors such as mock exams, and, I suspect, a general loss of momentum in the study. This therefore meant I received no new data from the colleges that had been participating in the study for the whole of January and February 2018.

Following the Christmas break, and bearing in mind the still low number of participants taking part, as well as the uncertainty over whether those that had begun participation would continue, I decided to make a final attempt at recruiting some more participants. Given that my most successful approaches had been through members of history and media studies departments, I decided that I would contact all the history and media departments in the colleges on my list. The time spent making these phone calls and sending emails to these colleges was not insignificant and I spent a large amount of time in the early months of 2018 working on this. The final recruitment drive did yield a reasonable amount of interest, and I was able to find some more colleges that were interested in participating. I also decided that it was appropriate at this point to utilise some of my personal contacts and I therefore approached a few schools near where I live. This also yielded some positive responses, meaning that I was able to boost the number of participants during the spring and summer term of 2018.

As the above has highlighted, recruitment for this study was complex, and presented a number of significant challenges, some of which resulted from the fact that I was using educational institutions to essentially ‘host’ the study. To avoid these obstacles, I could have explored the option of holding screenings of my case studies at a local venue and inviting my target age group to come along and participate in the study this way. However, this would most likely

have been both more expensive and equally challenging in its practicalities, with the young people being required to give up their own time to come to a venue they may never previously have visited. By using the facilities at the colleges and schools that I was working with, and by holding the screenings in or around college hours, I was more likely to be able to attract participants who were already onsite and less likely to have other demands on their time. However, the disadvantage of this approach was that it relied on my liaising with college staff members who had the responsibility of finding a group of participants and arranging for the screenings to take place, as well as ensuring that the technology worked and the screenings went smoothly. Whilst I was very encouraged by how many of the teachers and other staff members that I spoke to were enthusiastic about the prospect of contributing to my research and appeared to have a genuine interest in the project, these people are also hugely busy and have many other demands on their time. As the study was, quite appropriately and understandably, not a priority for them, this meant progressing with arrangements for the screenings was very difficult at times.

Despite targeting sixth form colleges because they often timetable free periods and enrichment afternoons into their students' timetables, I found that it was still a significant challenge to identify suitable times for the research activities to happen. Whilst a small number of teachers felt that the educational benefit to the students of taking part in the study meant that they were able to use lesson times for the screenings, many teachers were not able to spare the curriculum time. Some colleges were able to use enrichment periods, which worked well where it was possible, although the number of colleges who have this in their timetable appears to be reducing. Whilst many of the schools or colleges who were keen to participate were able to find ways of running the screenings, such as splitting the longer films over two lunchtimes or free periods, many others were unable to make it work, despite an admirable level of persistence from some individuals. The difficulty of finding a staff member to take ownership of the process of coordinating the study in some centres was also an issue, despite my determination that the study would be as easy as possible for staff in the schools and colleges to run. Because of this, I was regretfully told by some colleges that they just didn't have the time to spare due to budget cuts making their timetables more pressurised.

The final, and possibly most crucial, difficulty was attracting the students themselves to volunteer for the study. Whilst some were effectively volunteered by their teachers due to the activities taking place in their lessons, many were being asked to give up their free time to take part, a factor which is inevitably going to discourage participation. Whilst I did have some very reliable and willing participants who maintained their commitment and enthusiasm for taking part over a period of many months, some teachers did report finding it difficult to persuade their students to take part. As it obviously is not ethical to unduly pressure people into contributing to research, I simply had to work with the numbers of students that the teachers were able to interest in taking part. Again, it was encouraging to see the number of teachers who saw the educational benefit for their students in engaging with research, and who saw my invitation as a good opportunity for their students, but enthusiasm from the teachers did not always translate into large numbers of participants.

All of these difficulties were exacerbated by the fact that the study was longitudinal in nature, requiring at least five sessions to complete. These tended to take place over several weeks, but in some cases were spread over the entire academic year. As noted above, the difficulties in maintaining momentum in the study, combined with the very understandable issue of exam pressure towards the end of the year, meant that the number of people taking part in the

study tended to drop off towards the end of the academic year. I had hoped to avoid this problem by recruiting at the end of the 2016/17 academic year, so that the research activities could take place during the earlier months of the 2017/18 year, when exam pressure would be less of an issue. The fact that I was continuing to recruit until February 2018, combined with the fact that it often took a significant amount of time for the colleges to identify a group of students and suitable time to hold the screenings, meant that time pressure towards the end of the year became more of an issue than I had initially anticipated.

In total, ten colleges and schools took some part in the study, although only five completed all five screenings. The institutions recruited were located in various locations across England, including four in London, and others in the northwest, southwest, east and midlands regions of the country. Because of the high number of institutions that did not complete the study, the number of survey responses collected across the seven online surveys is rather variable. Whilst I collected over 60 survey responses for the earlier questionnaires, including the Initial Survey and the survey on *Peaky Binders*, the numbers collected on later case studies are significantly lower, going down to about 20 for the later surveys. From the outset I was aware that the study taking place over an extended period of time meant that it was likely some participants would start but not finish the process, but the extent to which this occurred was disappointing, with less than a third of the original number completing the full study. This obviously means that assessing the participants' responses across all five case studies was more difficult, although the individual questionnaires still yielded a good amount of useful data. In this situation, my original research aim of tracking the responses across all five case studies in order to explore the impact of the different forms of representation became more difficult. As Chapter 4 shows, the data does still allow for this with the groups that were able to complete, but data from other participants can only be used to explore their responses to the individual case studies.

The Screenings

In order to make participation as easy as possible for the colleges involved, the study was designed to be as flexible as possible in terms of how the screenings took place. Participating schools and colleges were therefore given a choice as to whether I attended to help run the screenings, or whether the DVDs were posted to them so they could run the activities themselves. These different approaches had advantages and disadvantages for me. It was much more practical for me to post the materials out and allow the institutions to run the screenings themselves. Since the screenings took place all over England, attending them involved a large time commitment in terms of travelling to each location five times. However, screenings that I attended did yield extra data, in addition to the survey responses. For those at which I was present, I found that it was very enlightening to observe the ways in which the participants behaved during the screenings, and to hear what they said to each other. The behaviour of the groups varied greatly, with some displaying very subdued or passive behaviour during the screenings, while others used a great deal of body language or spoke to each other frequently about what was happening. In these situations, I generally attempted to remain as passive as possible in order to not give too much information about my own thoughts on the various dramas they were watching. However, at times the students did ask questions of me, and in some cases I judged that the activity would be more productive if I engaged with them on the subjects that appeared to interest them. I did not record the participants' speech or behaviour during the screenings using any audio-visual equipment, but

I did make a note of my observations, or anything I heard them say. Whilst more time-consuming, the experience did give me the opportunity to explore the responses of some participants in more depth. It also provided me with the opportunity to consider factors such as the ways in which group members were able to influence other members of the group, leading to distinctly different responses from different groups, as I will discuss in more detail in later chapters.

The fact that I was able to develop some form of relationship with some of my participants is something of a double-edged sword. Whilst it allowed me to gain more insight into their responses to the dramas watched and their group dynamics, as well as assisting me in learning more about them as individuals, it is possible that my presence influenced the behaviour of the groups. This could take many forms; for example, they might have given more positive responses because they wanted to suggest to me that taking part in the study was something they were enjoying. Alternatively, they might have underlined their feelings about taking part by exaggerating their negative responses. These and other possibilities cannot be eliminated entirely, so do need to be borne in mind when the data is being explored in the following chapters.

In addition to the issue of whether I was present or not for the screenings, the different circumstances in which the screenings were held will also need to be considered when analysing the data. The impact of the students taking part in the study during lesson times, and therefore engaging with it as an educational experience, in contrast to those students who took part during free or enrichment periods, during lunch times or after school hours, is also likely to have had an impact on the ways in which they responded to the texts. Some students were encouraged to bring drinks or snacks to the screenings, whereas others had to adhere to the rules of the institution and not eat any refreshments in the classrooms. All these small elements are likely to have impacted on how the participants felt while they were watching the case studies, particularly as the use of classrooms to screen the case studies is already significantly different to the circumstances in which the participants would usually be watching films or television. Again, these factors were unavoidable within my study design, but will need to be borne in mind when considering the responses of the different groups.

The Focus Groups

The various difficulties encountered in recruiting and retaining participants meant that the number of survey responses received was rather disappointing, particularly for the later surveys. In order to maximise the amount of data collected from participants who did complete the study I therefore carried out focus group interviews with groups who completed all five screenings. This allowed the participants' responses to the five films and television dramas to be explored in more detail, and gave them an opportunity to explain their thoughts at greater length. These were carried out as an optional exercise, and the participants were not pressured into taking part, but I found that many were happy to have the opportunity to discuss their views in more depth.

During the focus groups I generally followed the same areas of questioning that I had pursued in the surveys, and therefore used them as an opportunity to further develop my understanding of the participants' responses on the areas of representation, historical accuracy and national identity, rather than begin new lines of enquiry. However, I was also

able to use these opportunities to pick up on behaviours that I had observed during the screenings, encouraging the participants to explain their responses in more depth, or explore the different ways they responded to the different screenings. I also gave the students the space to say anything that they felt was particularly significant about what they had been watching, meaning that the focus group discussions had the potential to go in directions that I had not personally anticipated. As I was keen that the questioning in both the surveys and the focus groups were not dominated too much by my own areas of interest, notwithstanding that as the principle researcher on the project some bias is unavoidable, I was happy to allow these discussions to take their course. Following Liebes' and Katz's observation of group behaviours, noted above, the use of focus groups also provided me with an interesting opportunity to explore in more depth the extent to which the individuals were influenced by their peers, an issue to which I shall return in later chapters.

Conclusion

In many ways the focus of the study remained the same at the end of the project design and data collection as it did when the study was first developed. Central to the research was the exploration of the ways in which young people respond to period dramas, and interrogation of the assumption that this genre does not appeal to this age group. One of the issues I set out to explore is the extent to which a greater diversity in the characters represented alters young people's enjoyment of this genre. In the tradition of many of the audience research studies discussed in the previous chapter, Chapter 5 will also consider the importance of the background of the participants in influencing their responses, although without the directly comparative framework that some studies employ. The range of participants recruited, and the selection of films and television dramas that I used as case studies allows all these areas to be explored. The smaller numbers of participants, coupled with the high rate of drop out, means that the focus in the final analysis is more on the responses of the individuals to the examples shown to them, with less of an emphasis on the process of tracking the responses across all five period dramas. As a consequence, the data yielded by this study is generally comprised of detailed responses from individuals, though which I have been able to capture rich information about their feelings towards the five dramas screened in the study. In these responses, the young participants are heard speaking in detail about the elements of the screenings that they did and didn't enjoy, and the meanings they took from each drama.

In the following chapters I consider first what I discovered about the lives and experiences of my young participants, before going on to explore the reactions to all five of the dramas selected for the study in the surveys and focus group interviews. This leads to a more focused discussion of the ways in which the young people engaged with and related to specific characters featured in the dramas, and the extent to which this might be influenced by their own lifestyles and demographic characteristics. Finally, the thesis returns to the issue that I noted as becoming prevalent in the pilot research, that of how audiences understand the idea of historical accuracy and how they assess the authenticity of historical representations. As I noted at the opening of this chapter, it is inevitable that in presenting these findings a certain amount of bias arising from the interests of myself, as the primary researcher, will occur. However, as these chapters will show, the young people taking part in the study were a diverse group of people, expressing often surprisingly different views. Whilst the study does not claim to be a representative sample of English teenagers, the data provided in the following chapters goes some way to demonstrating the varied tastes and interests amongst young people.

Similarly, the responses to period drama they express are not only highly diverse, but also indicative of a broad awareness of contemporary concerns, thereby emphasising these young people's interest in important social issues.

Chapter 3

'Kids Today…': Teenagers in England in 2017-18

One of the primary motivations of the study detailed in this thesis was to learn more about young people through the exploration of their responses to period drama. In order to contextualise these responses, I asked the 16-19 year old participants to provide more general information about their media consumption and the extent of their interest in and engagement with history, as well as more standard demographic information. Building on approaches trialled in the pilot study I also gathered quantitative data about their views of the period drama genre and its representation of women and minority groups. This information was collected in the Initial Survey, which most participants completed before the screening of the case studies, and it is this information that forms the basis of this chapter. As well as providing data that allows for more detailed analysis of the responses to the case studies, the Initial Survey also provides a snapshot of young people in England today.

Through the data gathered we see a picture of young people as they move from childhood to adulthood. I noted in Chapter 1 that adolescence is often characterised by its 'insistent in-between-ness',[1] a feature often seen as aberrant or leading to moral vulnerability. Whilst there is little evidence in the data gathered here of this transitional phase leading to declining standards of behaviour, the sense that the participants are moving from childhood to adulthood comes through clearly in a number of ways. Most particularly, a sense of transition is evident in the young people's descriptions of their media consumption and in their reports of who influences their hobbies and interests. We also see evidence of an interest in politics amongst young people, a phenomenon that received much coverage in the media around the time the research was taking place, when debates about the views of young people in relation to the Brexit referendum and the rise of Jeremy Corbyn on the left of the UK Labour party were both highly topical. In this chapter I shall look in detail at these issues and explore the picture the information paints of young people today. First though, I shall introduce the participants and their general demographic characteristics.

The Participants

In total, I received survey responses from 94 different young people. As the study was longitudinal in nature, requiring participants to complete seven different online questionnaires over the course of several weeks or months, there are inevitably many gaps in the data, with only a handful of participants submitting responses to all seven questionnaires. The Initial Survey, the first of the seven questionnaires, was completed by 84 young people in total, with a further 10 joining the study at later stages. In this chapter I will refer to the demographic data gathered on the 84 respondents to the Initial Survey, and not to the 10 participants who did not complete the Initial Survey, and therefore did not provide this information. For this reason, the data discussed in this chapter cannot be considered as completely representative of the full range of participants in this study. For the sake of brevity, however, I will refer to the

[1] Catherine Driscoll, *Teen Film: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Berg, 2011), p. 89.

Initial Survey data as if it referred to the study participants as a whole, despite the fact that this gap in the data does mean that some statistics might be slightly different if data on the whole 94 had been collected.

As discussed in the previous chapter, all participants were recruited through colleges and schools in England, with a total of 10 different institutions taking part in the study, from various locations around England. In order to ensure the anonymity of the participants, I have changed the names of all schools and colleges, identifying the institution by the broad area in which it is located and by whether it was a school or a college. These names will be used when discussing contributions from individual participants. All participants were inevitably still in education, pursuing academic courses of study. This is a result of the choice to recruit through educational institutions, allowing me to make use of their resources and timetabling structures to facilitate the recruiting of groups of participants, as well as the screening of the study materials. Obviously, many 16-19 year olds in England are not pursuing academic courses at this point in their lives, and may be completing work-based training, or other vocational schemes. Whilst it would have been very interesting to broaden the recruitment to reach these young people as well, the practicalities of the study would have made this difficult. Consequently, all study participants were in Further Education at the time of participation. The vast majority (84.5%) were studying A Levels, with a further 10.7% studying BTEC Level 3 courses, and the rest studying a mixture of the two.

Given that participants were recruited through different departments, some will have been more accustomed to considering film and television texts in depth, and to discussing them with other participants. They may also have been accustomed to analysing representational features of texts, and, depending on their other courses of study, may have been used to analysing these features in relation to British history and society more widely. Given the longitudinal nature of the study, it is also likely that the participants may have discussed their participation with film and media teachers, history teachers, or possibly teachers of other subjects. These conversations might be considered to have informed the focus group discussions that took place at the end of the study. There is unlikely to be any influence on the survey responses, as these were almost always completed immediately after the screenings, and therefore before the opportunity for any significant discussion with teachers. Whilst it is important to acknowledge the possibility that teachers may have influenced some focus group discussions, my experience of carrying out the study suggests that such influence is likely to be minimal. Two of the focus group interviews took place immediately after the final screening, and there was no discernible difference between the discussion the of the final screening, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, compared to the comments made about the previous screenings. The teachers also rarely watched the screenings with the participants, and therefore had either no knowledge of the dramas, or had watched them less recently than the participants. Therefore, whilst it is important to be mindful of the possibility of teacher influence, I do not consider there to be significant grounds to conclude that the focus group data is anything other than primarily based on the responses of the participants themselves.

Below, I list all the institutions that took part in the study, with a brief description of the groups of teenagers that took part. Given that many groups did not complete the full study, I also note briefly how far each group progressed through the study, and, where appropriate, the details of their focus group interviews.

Cambridgeshire College

This small group of participants was recruited through the history department of a sixth form college in Cambridgeshire, a county in the south-east of England. Three respondents, two female and one male, took part in the Initial Survey. All three identified as White – British, with a range of socio-economic backgrounds indicated. One reported having qualified for free school meals, while the occupations of their parents ranged from managing director to porter. Two of the three participants reported that GCSEs or other level 2 qualifications were the highest level of education held by their parents or guardian, with the third reporting that at least one of their parents held a Bachelor's degree.

One of the participants left the study after the first screening, leaving the remaining two to continue. They completed most of the study activities, with one completing the full study, and the other watching all but the final screening.

Camden School

This set of participants was recruited through the media department of a school in the north London borough of Camden. They were predominantly male, with only one of the 11 Initial Survey responses received being from a female participant. The group was ethnically very diverse. They also appear to represent a range of different economic backgrounds, with three of the respondents stating that they qualified for free school meals. They indicated that their parents had received varying levels of formal education, ranging from no qualifications to postgraduate qualifications. Their parents' occupations also ranged from practical occupations such as 'roofing' to more professional roles such as teacher and social worker, with others only specifying that their highest earning parent worked in 'business'.

Whilst attendance from this group was quite sporadic, they did complete the study.

This group also took part in a focus group interview at the end of the study. As they were recruited through the media department, it is likely that their classroom experience may have impacted on their levels of comfort and ability in discussing film and television texts. However, the participants were not all drawn from the same class, which would have led to the dynamic differing from that of their standard classroom experiences. Whilst it is also inevitable that they may have discussed their experiences of the study and the screenings with their teacher, the teacher was not present for the screenings, so it is unlikely that this would have influenced the substance of the focus group discussions to a significant degree.

Greater Manchester College

These participants were recruited through the history department of a sixth form college in Greater Manchester in the north-west of England, geographically relatively close to Lancashire College, described below. The group submitted nine Initial Survey responses, six from female participants and three from males. This group predominantly identified as White – British, with no-one in the group indicating that they qualified for free school meals. The group also reported a range of occupations for their parents, with jobs reported ranging from professions such as teacher, professor and barrister to more practical jobs such as electrician. The range of educational qualifications held by the parents of participants was similarly broad.

This group did not manage to progress beyond the first screening of the study.

Haringey School

This group was recruited through the English and media department of a school in the north London borough of Haringey, although the teacher recruiting for the study used a poster campaign to recruit beyond her own subject. The group were all female, and reported a range of different ethnic backgrounds. None of the participants reported that they had qualified from free school meals. The occupations held by their parents ranged from practical jobs such as delivery driver, to more specialised professions such as an actors' agent. Two of the four Initial Survey respondents reported that their parents held university qualifications.

This group completed the study, while one further member joined late, and did not complete the Initial Survey. Two members of this group also took part in a focus group interview at the end of the study. One of these was studying Film Studies for A level; the other did not complete the Initial Survey, so it is unclear whether they were used to discussing films in a classroom setting. The teacher who recruited the participants did watch the first screening, and half of the second, and so may have discussed some of the material with participants outside of the study, but given the small number of participants, it is unlikely that this would have taken the form of direct tutoring on what they might say about the material.

Lancashire College

This set of participants were recruited through the media department of a sixth form college in Lancashire, a county in the north-west of England. This group submitted six responses to the Initial Survey, although a small number of participants also joined this group as the study progressed. The group all identified as White – British, and were predominantly male, with only one participant identifying as female. None of the group reported that they had qualified for free school meals. The range of educational qualifications held by their parents or guardians ranged from no formal qualifications to Master's degrees, with jobs reported also varying but tending to fall within the ABC1 range of professions (teacher and civil servant where both specified by participants in this group) which require higher levels of education and generally pay larger salaries.

Attendance with this group was variable, with some participants attending all the screenings and others taking part more sporadically. However, the group did complete the full study and took part in a focus group interview at the end. Unlike some of the other groups, these participants were all drawn from the same class, and so would have been used to discussing film and television in an academic environment. This is likely to have impacted on the ease with which the group discussed the screenings. However, as their teacher did not watch the material with them, the contributions in the focus group are still likely to have been participant-led, rather than responding to direction from their subject teacher.

Lewisham College

These participants were recruited through a sixth form college in the south London borough of Lewisham. Whilst this group completed the Initial Survey, they ceased participation before watching any of the screenings, and therefore did not contribute to the main area of interest in the study, namely the views of the young people about the five period dramas. There were 13 survey responses submitted by this group, who were mainly female, with a small number of male participants and one who identified as non-binary. The group was predominantly black, with most participants identifying as from Black – African ethnicities. A relatively large proportion of the participants qualified for free school meals, with five identifying themselves

as being within this demographic group. The majority of participants in this group did not have parents who had been to university. A relatively large number of participants indicated that they did not know their parent or guardian's job title; amongst those that did caring occupations such as nursing or carer were frequently referenced.

Norfolk College

This group was recruited through a sixth form college in Norfolk, a largely rural county in the east of England. There were 9 Initial Survey responses from this group, which was split fairly evenly between male and female participants, all of whom identified their ethnicities as White – British. This group were all studying for BTEC qualifications in media and came from homes with little experience of university level education, with the highest qualifications held by their parents being A levels or other level 3 qualifications. Only two of the nine participants reported qualifying for free school meals, but the occupations of their parents were typically more practical, such as postman, bus driver and electrician.

This group completed the full study, and was the first group to do so, having undertaken all the study activities before Christmas 2017. The group also took part in the first focus group interview of the study. As this group was recruited as a full class, and participated during lesson time, their experiences of studying together may have impacted on their ability to discuss film and television texts as a group. The teacher was present during the discussion, but did not participate. The teacher was not present for the screenings, and so was unlikely to have impacted significantly on the substance of the contributions made by the participants during the focus group discussion.

Somerset College

This set of participants was recruited through the history department of a sixth form college in Somerset, another rural county, this time in the south-west of England. The Initial Survey received 13 responses from this group, two reported as male, one did not provide information on their gender, and the rest all identified as female. All but one of this group stated that their ethnic background was white, although two of these also noted that this was of non-British origins. None of the group stated that they had qualified for free school meals. The majority of the group indicated that their parents or guardians had received university education, with the occupations of their parents ranging from more professional roles such as biochemist and civil servant to more practical jobs such as HGV driver and tree surgeon.

This group experienced a high rate of drop-out, with only a small number of the group progressing beyond the first screening. They completed the majority of the study, but did not watch the last screening.

Waltham Forest College

These participants were recruited through the media department of a sixth form college in the borough of Waltham Forest in north-east London. The Initial Survey received 12 responses from this group, although a small number of extra participants from this college joined the study later. Nine of the respondents identified as female, the rest as male. This was an ethnically highly diverse group, with the most common ethnic identity reported being Black – Caribbean. The respondents from this college also indicated a range of economic backgrounds, with some reporting that their parents held PhDs and worked in highly skilled professions, whereas others came from families where the parents did not hold university qualifications

and tended to work in less highly paid jobs. Three of this group reported that they qualified for free school meals.

This group watched the first three screenings, but were unable to complete the full study.

Warwickshire College

This group was recruited through the history department of a sixth form college in Warwickshire, a county in the Midlands region of England. There were only four responses to the initial survey, with all identifying as female, three as White – British, and the fourth identifying as Black – African. None of this group had parents or guardians who had been to university, and the jobs listed as their occupations tended to be more practical, such as telesales, although some had a skilled element, including one described as 'vehicle engine technician'.

This group also made it part-way through the study, with no responses submitted beyond the third screening.

While there were disappointingly few minority ethnic participants in the pilot study, in the case of the main study the diversity of respondents was much improved, with 44% of respondents indicating that they came from mixed or non-white ethnic backgrounds. This is likely to be due to the different recruitment methods being used, with convenience and snowballing being used for the pilot, and the main study recruiting through my strategy of approaching educational institutions in a large number of different areas. The proportion of minority ethnic participants is significantly higher than the average for England as a whole, with the most recent 2011 census recording that 14.6% of the population identified

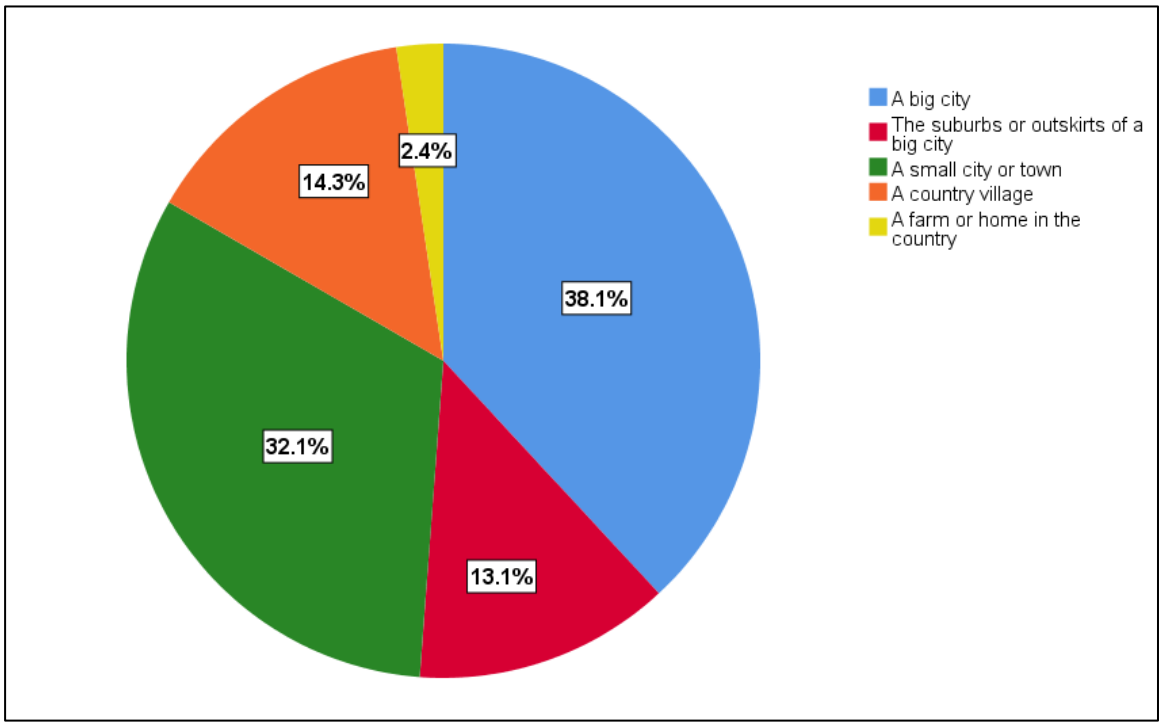

Chart 3.1 Descriptions of where the participants live (n=84)

themselves as having mixed or non-white ethnicity.[2] The high number of participants from non-white or mixed ethnicities is due largely to the number of schools and colleges in London that agreed to take part in the study, with most participants of mixed or non-white ethnicities attending educational institutions within the London area.

As we can see from Chart 3.1, there is also diversity in the characteristics of the participants' home locations. A large number report living in very urban areas, either in a big city or the suburbs of a big city, but 16.7% indicate that their home is in a more rural location. The economic background of the participants is also shown to be diverse, with 16.7% of participants reporting that they were eligible for free school meals when at school, indicating that they come from less economically secure households. This is also higher than the national average of 14%, as reported by the Department of Education in January 2017.[3] Although I was disappointed not to attract more participants to the study, as this data shows, those who were recruited represent a range of different backgrounds. This is coupled with the fact that the ten institutions from which the participants were recruited also represent a wide range of geographical areas across England. Therefore, whilst the data gathered cannot be considered to be representative of the population of 16-19 year olds as a whole, it can be considered to be indicative of the responses of young people from a range of different geographical, socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds.

Media Consumption

As teenagers, the participants were moving from childhood into adulthood, and this state of transition comes across in the reports of their tastes in films and television. When asked to name their favourite films or television shows, or give examples of films and television shows that have been particularly impactful for them, the participants named a range of different films and genres, as captured in Chart 3.2. Using the films and genres named in answer to this question, I coded the information in order to give a sense of which types of films were most popular amongst these young people. While some participants specified genres for themselves, often I had to determine how to classify the films named. Ascribing films to genres is undoubtedly a rather crude exercise, with many films having characteristics of several different genres. Nonetheless, the results do provide interesting information about the relationship of young people to film. Perhaps unsurprisingly the most popular genre was drama, with 34 participants naming films that can be classified as dramas. In this category participants named a range of contemporary and classic films, with few titles named by more than one participant. As Chart 3.2 shows, comedies, and superhero films are also very popular, the latter being due to the prevalence of the many films produced by Marvel Studios amongst the films named. The participants also show enthusiasm for genres such as action and horror, with graphically violent films such as the *Kingsman* films (*Kingsman: The Secret Service* and *Kingsman: The Golden Circle*, both directed by Matthew Vaughn, 2014 and 2017 respectively)

[2] ONS, 2011 Census Data (Office for National Statistics, 2011), http://www.nomisweb.co.uk/census/2011/KS201EW/view/2092957699?cols=measures [accessed 18 December 2018].
[3] Department of Education, 'Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics: January 2017', 29 June 2017, https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/schools-pupils-and-their-characteristics-january-2017 [accessed 18 December 2019].

and the films of Quentin Tarantino also being mentioned by several participants (both coded here under 'Adult Action and Gangster Films' because of their graphic qualities).[4]

However, perhaps one of the most notable features of this data is the number of participants (18) who also named among their favourite films those that could be considered as family films. The most popular titles in this category were the *Harry Potter* films, with four people naming these.[5] Amongst the others were a variety of animated films, particularly those made by Disney, such as *Moana* (Ron Clements and John Musker, 2016) and *Tangled* (Nathan Greno and Byron Howard, 2011). The presence of these films highlights the extent to which the participants are still influenced by their childhood experiences, even as they begin to consume more adult material. This is highlighted by some of the comments made by participants when asked to explain the selection of their favourite films, such as one who named both *Cars* (John Lasseter, 2006) and *Cars 3* (Brian Fee, 2017) as his favourite films: 'Cars has been my childhood favourite since 2006. Cars 3 brought back the nostalgia.' (MSP71, Camden School, M, Asian – Indian). This quotation emphasises the extent to which childhood favourites can still hold significance for people in their late teens. However, the fact that this participant explicitly identifies a sense of nostalgia for this childhood experience when watching *Cars 3*, one of the sequels to the original film, demonstrates his movement into a new phase of life, even as the pleasures of his childhood continue to appeal to him.

The continuing appeal of childhood favourites was also demonstrated in an exchange during one of the focus groups carried out as part of the project. This extract is taken from

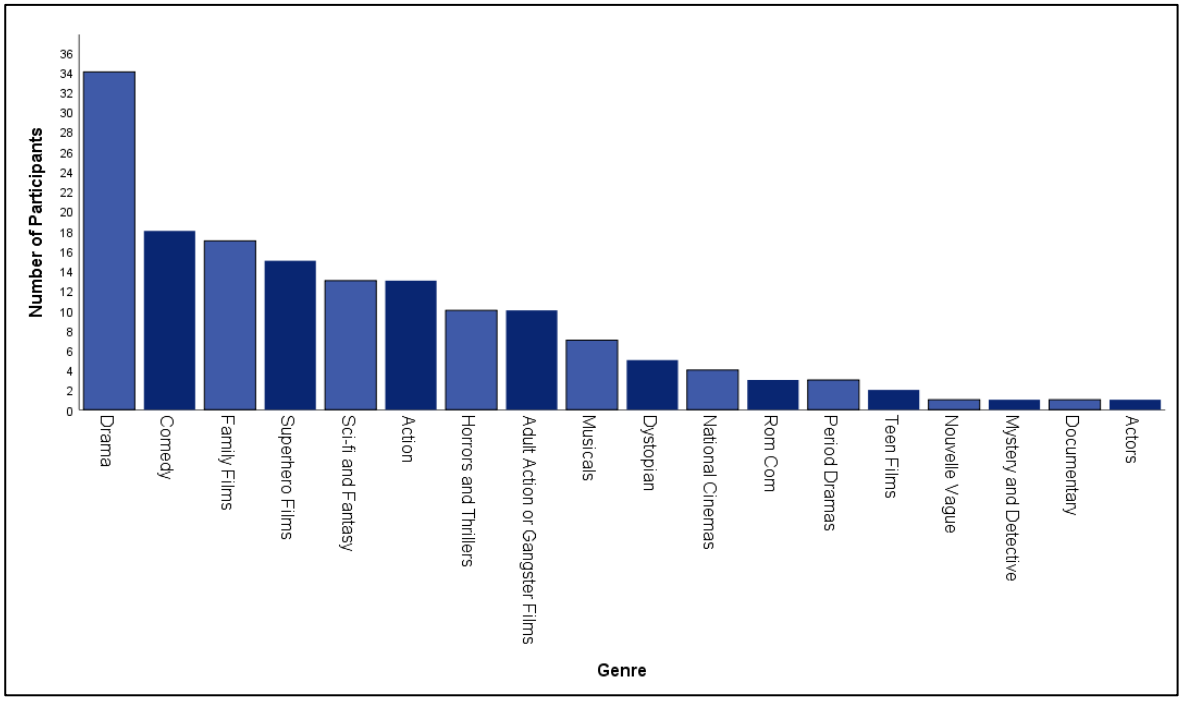

Chart 3.2 Genres of films named as favourite films by participants

[4] Participants named a variety of Tarantino Films, including *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and *Django Unchained* (2013).

[5] The *Harry Potter* film cycle consists of 8 films, released between 2001 and 2011, although at time of writing the *Fantastic Beasts* franchise, which extends the 'wizarding world' of the *Harry Potter* films is also being established. No individual films were named by participants in relation to the *Harry Potter* films, implying that these films are valued for their collective influence on popular culture, rather than for the appeal of individual films.

a discussion with participants from Camden School, after they had watched all the case studies:

> MSP72: We should have watched *Narnia*…
>
> MSP68: *Narnia* would have been really good…
>
> MSP69: *Narnia*, I love *Narnia*… It's one of my all-time favourites…
>
> (general enthusiasm for *Narnia*)
>
> SG: I don't know if *Narnia* is strictly a period drama?
>
> MSP72: World War II, it's set in World War II when they move to…
>
> SG: Oh that is a very good point…
>
> (all talking at the same time about *Narnia*)
>
> MSP68: It's all real… it's based off a true story!
>
> MSP72: It's just a metaphor for them hiding in the wardrobe…
>
> MSP68: It's a metaphor for them hiding in the countryside…
>
> MSP66: It represents the stresses of the time…
>
> MSP68: Also, the evil witch you know, she represents Nazi Germany…
>
> MSP72?: Nazi… yeah, she actually does…
>
> MSP66: Also because she's quite authoritarian…[6]

This extract, in which several members of the group talk excitedly about the *Narnia* films again demonstrates the extent to which films aimed at child and family audiences continue to elicit heartfelt enthusiasm from young people as they move into adulthood.[7] A short time before this exchange, the students had discussed some of their favourite TV series:

> MSP72: Yeah, *Peaky Blinders* was boring the first time… I mean the second time…
>
> MSP68: Yeah I only like watching *Prison Break* twice…
>
> MSP72: Yeah, *Prison Break*… you have to like get an understanding…
>
> MSP68: *Prison Break* is the best show ever…
>
> MSP72: Actually *Game of Thrones* is quite good too…

[6] All participants are male and from Camden School, ethnicities as follows: MSP72 (Mixed – White and Black African), MSP68 (White – British), MSP69 (Any other background), MSP66 (White – British). The group were recruited through a Media Studies department, but were not all drawn from the same class.
[7] There was a series of adaptations of the Narnia books televised by the BBC from 1988-1990, but the participants here are presumably referring to the more recent film adaption: *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (Andrew Adamson, 2005).

MSP68: *Game of Thrones* is too long to watch again![8]

The fact that the group can move from discussing very adult themed material such as *Game of Thrones* or *Prison Break* (Channel 5 2006-7, Sky One 2007-2017), to having an animated discussion about *Narnia*, demonstrates the ways in which these participants straddle the space between childhood and adulthood. Also significant is the relative length of the extracts, with the extent to which several of the participants leap at the opportunity to discuss the *Narnia* films demonstrating the affection they have for this story. Clearly, there is an element of the participants wanting to demonstrate their knowledge of the film and its symbolism here; the discussions of the metaphorical nature of the story suggests some form of prior study of the text. However, their expressions of love for the film ('I love *Narnia*… it's one of my all-time favourites') and, indeed, their ability to apply the story to my research after my own initial hesitation, demonstrates an investment in the story that emphasises the extent to which this children's film still holds great significance in their lives.

In Chapter 1 I discussed the ways in which the transitional phase of adolescence was often perceived to be a source of threat, with young people seen as requiring guidance to prevent them from making morally dubious choices. There may be some evidence of this in future chapters, with Chapter 5 demonstrating that some participants judged characters in the dramas against what might be considered to be fairly high standards of behaviour. This might suggest that some participants had rather inflexible approaches to principles of right and wrong, which could be indicative of a level of immaturity. However, in this survey, I would suggest that what most clearly emerges from the descriptions of the participants' favourite films is something closer to the opposite of the threatening associations that adolescence often attracts. Whilst many participants clearly enjoy consuming a variety of films created with a purely adult audience in mind, the innocence of childhood is clearly still close to the surface in the identities of many of these young people.

In addition to naming their favourite films, the participants also gave examples of their favourite television shows, along with separate qualitative explanations for each on why the films and shows they had named appealed to them. They were also asked to explain any wider impact that the examples they had given had had on them. These answers provide an interesting insight into both the ways in which young people use film and television in their everyday lives, and the attitudes of the participants to both film and television texts, an overview of which are provided in Table 3.1. Unsurprisingly, the participants appear to consume television significantly more than film, with 50% of the 84 respondents stating that they watch television every day. In contrast, 36.9% stated that they watch films once or twice a week, although another 29.8% watched films several times a week. From this information we can see that the participants are frequent film and television consumers, a factor which may have been enhanced by the fact that some groups were recruited through media departments. However, this data also shows that the watching of films is a less frequent event in the daily routines of the respondents and this difference in consumption rates, and therefore the different levels of attention and investment given to film and television, are likely to be one reason behind the differences in attitudes. In addition to this, whilst one participant did note that they particularly enjoyed documentary films, the range of television shows enjoyed by participants extended far beyond the fictional formats that tend to be more dominant in film,

[8] Both participants are male and from the Camden School, ethnicities: MSP72 (Mixed – White and Black African), MSP68 (White – British). The group were recruited through a Media Studies department, but were not all drawn from the same class.

with types of programming such as reality television and documentaries also being named by participants. This will, of course, also have impacted on the reasons given for enjoying the shows identified.

In discussing the ways in which television provokes an emotional response in its viewers, Kristyn Gorton argues that 'television, unlike film, must construct itself for faithful *and* casual viewers. Unlike film, television needs to be more available to a wider audience and therefore the emotional dimension may not always be as thought-provoking or moving as film.'[9] There is some evidence of this distinction here, with a higher number of participants commenting on the ways that film makes them feel, as a part of its appeal. For example:

> I like the emotional impact they can have on me (happy/ sad) (MSP18, Norfolk College, F, White – British)

> Normally if there is an emotional scene in a film I would probably get emotional myself, more so in romantic films than others. (MSP79, Greater Manchester College, F, White – British)

> They mean everything. They allow me to live a new life for a couple of hours. They make me feel emotions that I don't experience in everyday life and I become a different person. Films mean everything to me. (MSP83, Haringey School, F, Mixed – any other background)

The more immersive nature of film viewing is evident here, with the extended nature of film narratives, coupled with their less frequent place in the routines of the participants resulting in a tendency for film to be valued for its ability to impact on the emotions of the participants. The ability to relate to the characters in films was also commented on more than in the comments on television, with several participants noting that the appealing or relatable nature of the characters in the films they had named as favourites was a significant factor in their choice:

> I like the amount of action in them and the young characters are relatable to some extent too. (MSP19, Norfolk College, F, White – British, named *The Hunger Games* series and the *Kingsman* films as favourite films)

> Representation of myself and the friendships I have is really important (ghostbusters 2016) as it adds to the emotional value of the film as it gives me more of a connection with it. (MSP35, Somerset College, F, White – any other background)

> I like there storylines and there specific characters. For example Black Panther and how it changed the views of black people (MSP70, Camden School, M, Any other background, named 'Marvel Movies and Fast and Furious' as favourite films)

Chapter 5 explores in more detail the processes through which audiences engage with characters, and the complexities that this process can involve. However, it is worth noting here that these comments demonstrate that some participants value emotional engagement and

[9] Kristyn Gorton, *Media Audiences: Television, Meaning and Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 118.

characters that represent elements of their own identities. Many of the films named by the participants have non-realistic settings and build their characters through action-oriented narratives. Despite this, the participants still appear to be able to find a lot to relate to in these films, and value representations that contain character elements that they recognise in themselves, as explicitly identified by MSP35 and suggested by MSP19. The final quotation, from MSP70, suggests the value he places on the ability of films and their characters to influence wider society, as well as to entertain.

The data in Table 3.1 also suggests that the participants tend to focus more on the quality of films than of television programmes, with two participants commenting on the fact that their favourite films are 'critically acclaimed' (MSP12, Waltham Forest College, F, Mixed – White and Asian) or 'iconic' (MSP30, Lancashire College, M, White – British). The participants were also more likely to comment on the aesthetic quality, or the skills of the creative contributors to the films they named, compared to their comments about television programmes:

> I love the musical arrangements, the narratives, the cinematography and editing styles (MSP75, Greater Manchester College, M, White – British)
>
> visually impressive and creates excitement (MSP65, Camden School, M, White – British)

Reason for Enjoying	Film (number of participants)	Television (number of participants)
Aesthetic features or quality of production (including acting, writing etc.)	15	10
Appealing or relatable characters	7	2
Childhood favourite	5	2
Creates community / facilitates connection with others	1	1
Critically acclaimed	2	
Elicits an emotional response	17	7
Entertaining	42	51
Escapism	4	4
Genre features (specific to genre named)	10	8
Life lessons (taught participants something about themselves or encouraged personal development)	12	8
Locations represented	1	
Nature of TV narratives	n/a	8
Plot features	2	
Provokes thoughts or enquiry about the wider world or history	16	17
Pushes boundaries	4	5
Relationship to other media	2	
Stars (appeal of named actors or celebrity in general)	1	1

Table 3.1 Comparative table showing the explanations given by participants for why they like their favourite films and televisions shows, and the impact these have had on them

> I love films like 2001, RFA [*Requiem for a Dream*] and Thelma because I appreciate and am mesmerised by the film making. Whereas with films like The piano and Silence and the lambs I love the acting. I like films such as. Atonement and Sicario because of the acting. In general though, I like all of these films as they are brilliantly made, have great acting and a good story, for me these
>
> 3 things make movie great. (MSP84, Haringey School, F, Mixed – White and Black Caribbean)

As these comments show, the participants were able to harness popular notions of quality in support of their choices of favourite films by alluding to the skill of various creative personnel working on the films. Whilst MSP75 and MSP65 allude more briefly to features such as the cinematography and editing, MSP84 has provided an extended discussion of what, for her, 'make movie[s] great', namely the quality of the acting, narrative and skill of the filmmakers. This answer demonstrates a clearly thought out attitude towards the assessment of film value, framed within a discourse of quality and artistic skill. Aside from her brief comment that films need 'a good story', this very long answer makes little reference to the purpose of films as entertainment.

Another notable feature of the comments made by the participants about their favourite films was their readiness to find in film narratives sources of inspiration for personal growth. Many participants attributed positive life lessons to the watching of their favourite films, for example:

> They make me want to pursue a great career & believe in myself & work hard for the things I really want. (MSP11, Waltham Forest College, F, any other background)
>
> they have taught me I don't have to be rude to be funny. (MSP21, Norfolk College, M, White – British)
>
> they made me cry, laugh and made me accept that life is not infinite. (MSP29, Lancashire College, M, White – British)
>
> it helps me meet people through a shared love and also makes me realise I should treasure the people I love (MSP52, Lewisham College, F, Black – African, film named – *The Best of Me*)

This diverse list of responses demonstrates the extent to which film holds the potential to inspire changes in attitude or behaviour. Consistent with the arguments relating to the media effects debate discussed in Chapter 1, these responses show that young people are certainly open to influence by the media, but that this influence is more nuanced than much popular discourse on the relationship between young people and the media suggest. The comments quoted above indicate ways in which film has proved helpful to these individuals in allowing them to develop their thoughts around their personal qualities, their hopes for the future, or the nature of life itself. The personal motivation that MSP11 reports she has gained through the watching of films demonstrates the ways in which the watching of films can inspire young people to consider and even change the course of their lives. MSP21 and MSP52 both suggest that their attitudes have been altered by the watching of films, whether it be in their approach to humour, or how they feel about those closest to them. Perhaps the most profound example

here, however, is MSP29's report that the watching of films has allowed him to come to terms with the difficult fact that 'life is not infinite'. This particular example suggests the power of narratives to allow unpalatable facts to be processed by individuals in a way that allows them to absorb the truth of them without experiencing the trauma of the events represented for themselves.

As discussed in Chapter 1, it is often considered important to note the impact that film can have on young people; they are at a point in their lives when their personalities are still being formed, whilst also having to take important decisions about their futures. This is evident in all the examples quoted above, in which we can see the participants being influenced by films to approach elements of their lives in different ways, whether it be choosing less hurtful ways to make others laugh or coming to terms with mortality. However, if we compare this with the data collected from participants of various ages in the BFI's *Opening Our Eyes* study, it becomes clear that these impacts are not exclusive to younger participants. Whilst it is not possible to make a direct comparison between my data and this study, given the different modes of data collection and different approaches to the coding of data, the BFI study reports that 41% of respondents identified film as 'Inspirational', with 54% seeing it as 'Thought-Provoking'.[10] Going even further, participants in the BFI's study also felt that film had the potential to influence 'attitudes, and… long-term behaviour'.[11] This data therefore suggests that, far from influencing the young exclusively, audiences of all ages can be influenced by the watching of films to both think and behave differently.

The BFI study also found that both film and television were considered to have significant entertainment value, with 87% and 84% respectively of participants associating these art forms with the adjective 'entertaining'.[12] It is therefore unsurprising that my participants were also likely to describe the entertainment value of their favourite films and television shows as an important aspect of their appeal. As Table 3.1 demonstrates, this was more often the case for television, with 51 participants (60.7% of the 84 respondents) commenting on the entertaining nature of their favourite television shows. These comments often focussed on aspects such as an interesting storyline, or the ability to hold attention or make them laugh. The distinction that Gorton makes between the more intense experience of watching film and the potentially more casual approach to watching television, sometimes characterised as the 'cinematic gaze' and the 'televisual glance', is also apparent in comments made by the participants.[13] Whilst some participants commented that they tended to enjoy the same features in both film and television, others took a notably different approach when describing what they like about their favourite television shows:

> Form of escapism. Quick and easy. I don't seem to invest in them as much as I do films because they don't require as much concentration. But they are a way of passing time rather than filling it. (MSP83, Haringey School, F, Any other background)

[10] Northern Alliance and Ipsos MediaCT , *Opening Our Eyes: How Film Contributes to the Culture of the UK* (London: BFI, July 2011), p. 35 http://www.bfi.org.uk/sites/bfi.org.uk/files/downloads/bfi-opening-our-eyes-2011-07_0.pdf [accessed 18 December 2019

[11] Northern Alliance and Ipsos MediaCT, *Opening Our Eyes*, p. 8.

[12] Northern Alliance and Ipsos MediaCT, *Opening Our Eyes*, p.35.

[13] See Gorton, *Media Audiences*, p. 5, drawing on John Ellis, *Visible Fictions* (New York: Routledge, 1983).

> I usually only watch TV shows as background to whatever I'm doing, but I like to laugh with TV shows. (MSP62, Warwickshire College, F, White – British)

These comments support the view of television as a cultural form with less significance than film. Changing film distribution practices mean that films are increasingly likely to be viewed in circumstances other than the cinema, with the rise of streaming services such as Netflix. In turn, television drama now attracts bigger stars and budgets, meaning that the differences between the experiences of watching film and television are far less clear cut than they have been historically. Indeed, this was one of the reasons for including case studies of both television and film in this study of period drama. However, the comments from the participants in my survey make clear that the longstanding distinction between film and television still holds, with television characterised as something diverting but not immersive. The comment by MSP83 is especially enlightening when compared to her assertion (quoted in full above) that 'film means everything to me'.

However, the conception of television as less immersive or significant is only part of the story. Whilst the participants were more likely to be stimulated to make personal reflections whilst watching films, the number of participants commenting that they were encouraged to reflect on the lives and experiences of people from different backgrounds, cultures or periods in history, was marginally higher than the same category for film, with comments such as:

> 13 reasons why received an emotional response from me and I thought it was very though provoking and a true reflection in some cases, of society today. (MSP77, Greater Manchester College, F, White – British)

> Helped me to understand different cultures from a young age. Also they were very forward thinking for the time. (MSP26, Lancashire College, M, White – British, TV series named – *Star Trek*)

> the historical dramas I enjoy as I'm interested in the time period and subject matter (MSP74, Greater Manchester College, F, White – any other background, historical dramas named – *Call the Midwife* and *Peaky Blinders*)

Whilst television clearly does serve a broad range of purposes in the lives of the participants, these comments indicate that television plays an important role in encouraging reflections on phenomena in the wider world and on the experiences of others. It is also noteworthy that MSP26 comments that *Star Trek*, his favourite television show, was 'forward thinking for the time'. He was not alone in making comments along this line, and whilst the artistic qualities of film were more likely to be valued by the participants, it is interesting that television, specifically television drama in the examples given here, appears to be considered as likely as film, or even more so, to be able to push boundaries. The capacity of television to come up with original or unique approaches to the medium was commented on by five participants, with four commenting on this in relation to their favourite films. This highlights the fact that, although film seems more likely to be considered as artistically valuable, television is recognised by at least some participants as a site of innovation.

Consumption of History

As a central feature of this study was the exploration of the ways in which the participants respond to representations of British history on film and television, I used the Initial Survey to gauge the extent to which they were already accustomed to consuming representations of the past. Participants were therefore asked a series of questions about the frequency with which they were likely to engage with various forms of activity, all of which involve elements of historical representation. The results of these questions are shown in Chart 3.3. Following on from this, participants were also asked to indicate who they were likely to be doing these activities with. The purpose of this line of questioning was to gain some indication of who the most influential figures were in the lives of the participants, whether they were more likely to be engaging with historical narratives with their family members, friends, or as part of an educational course of study. The information gathered from these questions is displayed in Chart 3.4.

As Chart 3.3 shows, watching films and television programmes already appears to be the most popular way for my participants to engage with history, with 46.4% of the 84 Initial Survey respondents stating that they 'often' watch films or TV shows set in the past. Following this, reading either fiction or non-fiction books about historical periods are also relatively popular ways of engaging with history, with 19% of participants stating that they 'often' take part in each of these activities. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these reading activities are most likely to be carried out in isolation, with the majority of respondents stating that they would be undertaking these activities 'on my own'. However, the influence of the education system is still evident here, with 22.6% of participants stating that they were most likely to be reading non-fiction books about history with their school or college. Parental influence is most evident in the viewing of period films and television and the visiting of historical buildings or museums. In relation to the former category, the proportion of young people who state they are most

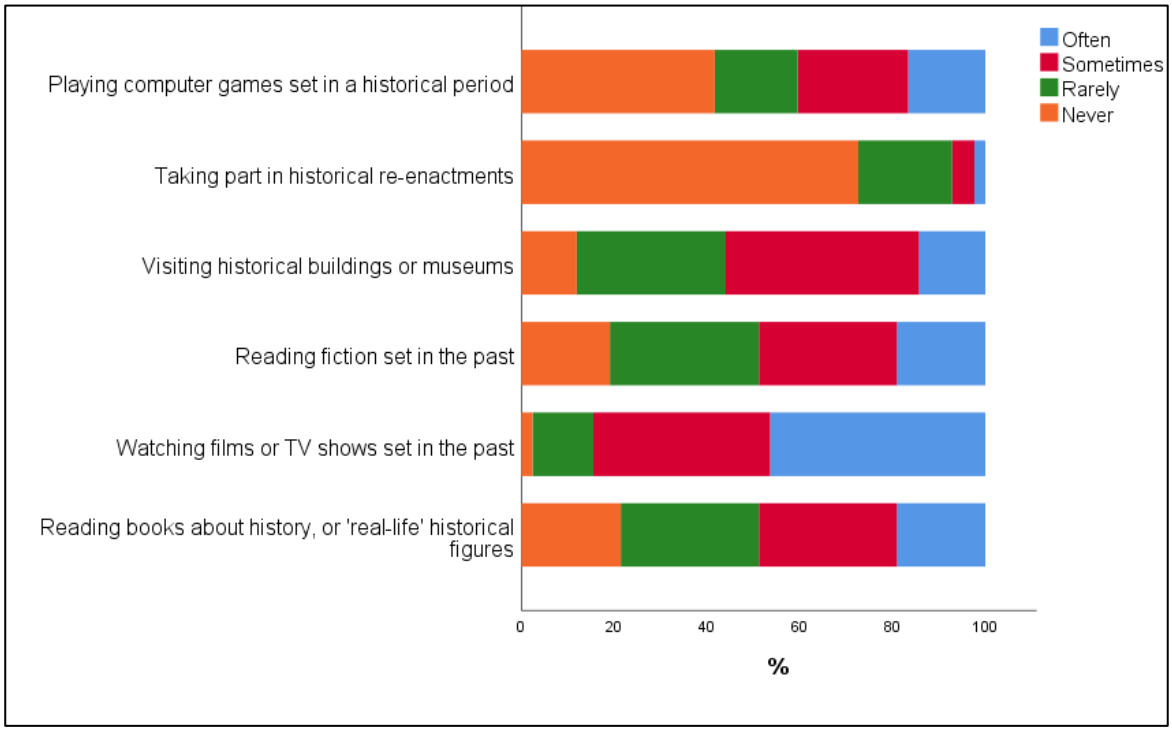

Chart 3.3 How often the participants engage with forms of historical representation (n=84)

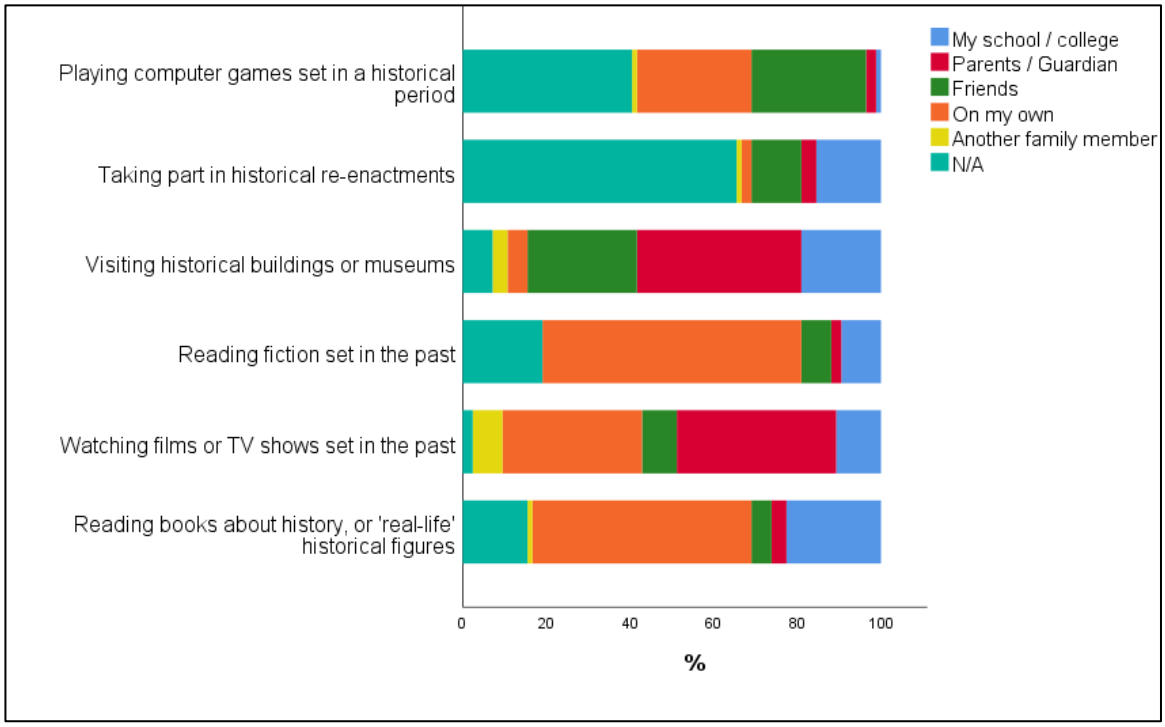

Chart 3.4 Who are the participants likely to be with when engaging with different forms of historical representation (n=84)

likely to be watching historical films or television with parents or guardians (38.1 %) indicates that the traditional practice of family viewing continues to be reasonably widespread, despite the proliferation of screens across homes and the increasing portability of audiovisual entertainment. This is described explicitly by participant MSP19: 'I like to watch Victoria with my parents so having a common interest gives us a way to connect and spend time with each other' (Norfolk College, F, White – British). However, the fact that a further 33.3% of participants stated that they were most likely to be watching historical films or television shows on their own also demonstrates that this tendency is not solely the product of parental influence. It appears that many of the participants enjoy consuming historical representations on film and television enough to choose to do this independently.

In relation to the visiting of historical sites or museums, the school trip is in evidence, with 19% noting that they are most likely to make these visits with their educational institution. However, the influence of parental figures is even stronger, with 39.3% of participants saying that they are most likely to be visiting historical sites with their parents or guardians. This suggests that the family still holds a lot of influence over the hobbies and interests of these young people, even as they move into adulthood. However, a further 26.2% of participants did state that they were most likely to be visiting historical buildings or museums with friends, indicating that the consumption of history is a pastime that some young people also pursue with their peers. Indeed, it is worth noting that this data suggests that many young people engage with representations of history in a number of ways, often outside of a formal education setting. In later chapters we shall see this engagement in evidence in some participants' use of the period dramas screened in the study to instigate further investigation into historical details that captured their interest.

Political Engagement

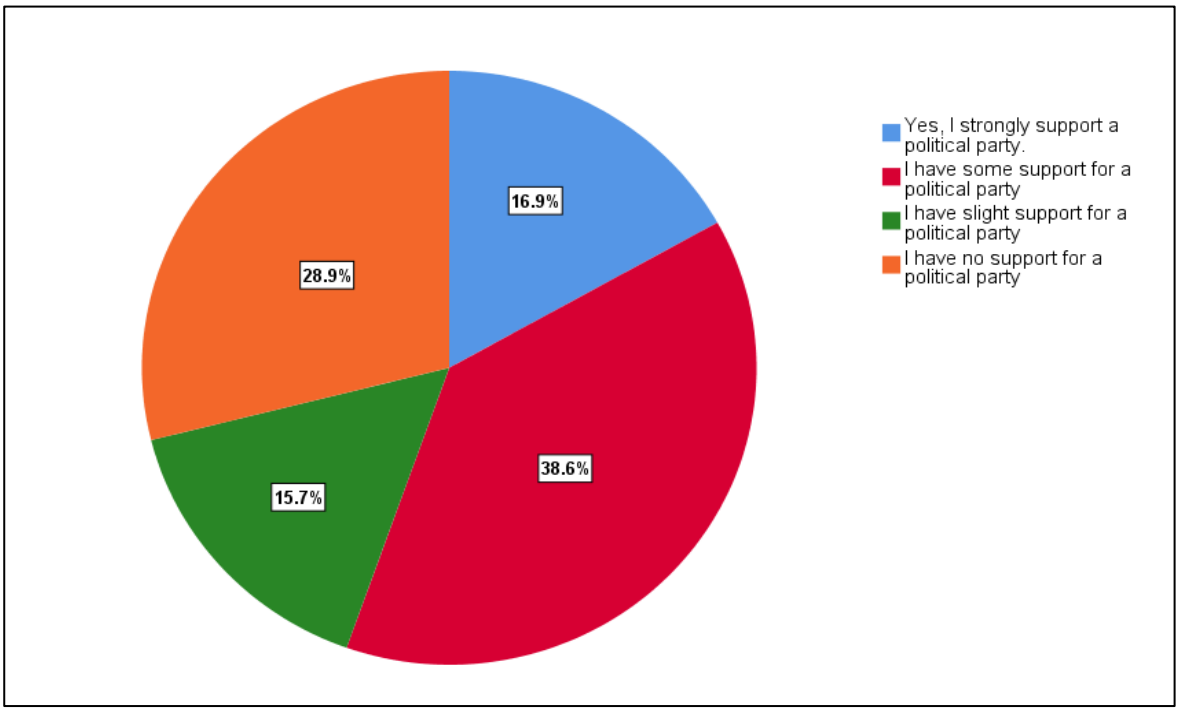

Chart 3.5 Participants' levels of support for UK political parties (n=84)

As the period drama has traditionally been a site of contested political criticism, having been labelled both conservative and progressive by various critics, I also judged it potentially useful to gather background information on the political leanings of participants. In terms of the levels of political engagement displayed by the participants, the picture is somewhat mixed. Whilst the largest proportion (38.6%) of respondents identified themselves as having 'some support for a political party', the second largest group (28.9%) appear much less engaged,

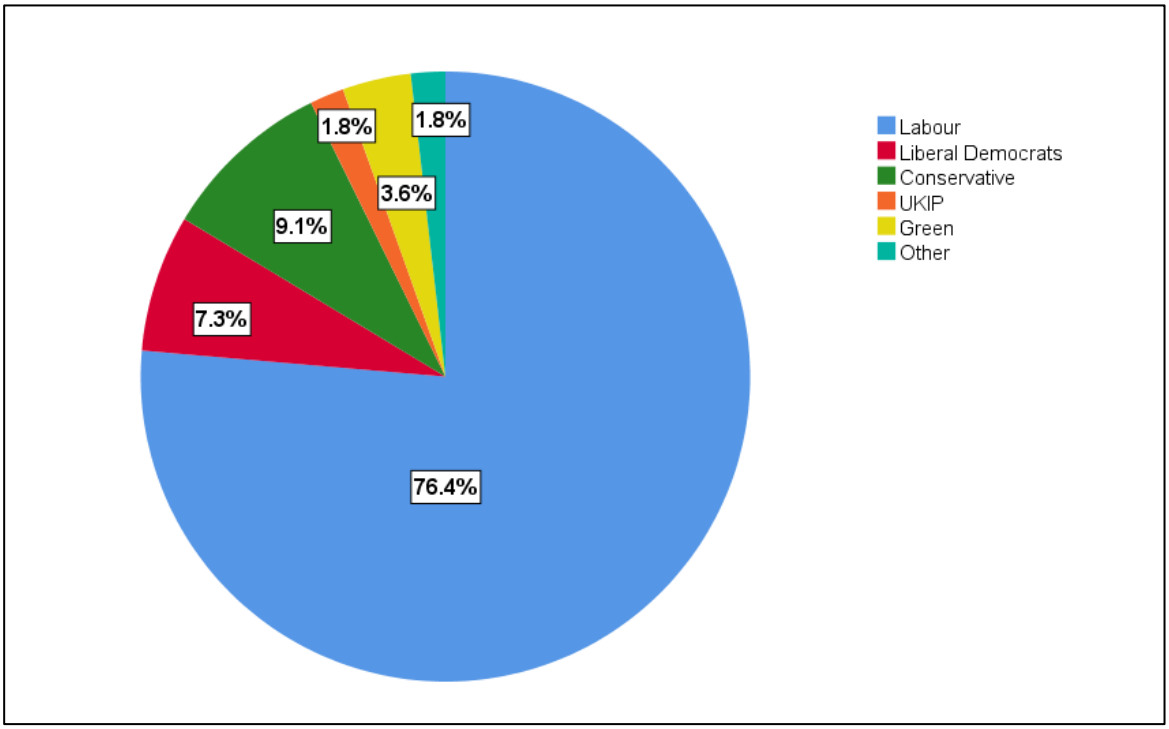

Chart 3.6 UK political parties supported by participants (n=55)

stating that they have 'no support for a political party'. The remaining respondents split reasonably evenly, between those who 'strongly support a political party' and those whose support is only 'slight'. Given that many of the participants would have been below the legal voting age when completing the questionnaire, it is perhaps unsurprising that levels of political engagement with British political parties is not overwhelming. However, this study took place in the aftermath of the 'snap' UK general election of 2017, during which much was made of the ways in which young people had been galvanised to engage with politics. Despite this, the data suggests that amongst my participants there is still a sizeable minority who remain unengaged with the British political system.

Key to the engagement of the youth vote in the 2017 general election was the Labour Party's leader, Jeremy Corbyn, who represented a move away from the more centrist approach of the UK Labour Party in the previous decades. This is certainly evident in the data collected, with those 59 participants who reported supporting a political party overwhelmingly naming Labour as the party they supported, as Chart 3.6 highlights. The fact that 76.4% of the young people surveyed in the Initial Survey indicate support for Labour suggests that the group generally leans towards the political left, with Jeremy Corbyn's Labour representing a clear prioritisation of leftist policies. The Conservative Party, who were in power at the time the study took place (albeit in a minority government) were supported by only 9.1% of the participants, although this did represent the second highest proportion for this question.

Attitudes Towards Period Drama

As one of the key areas of exploration in the main study was the impact of the representation of characters representing different demographic groups, I asked the 84 respondents in the Initial Survey to comment on their perceptions of various aspects of representation related to the period drama genre. This activity repeated an approach taken in the pilot study, which yielded both quantitative data and qualitative comments about the respondents' views on the diversity of representation in this genre. In both cases, this section also featured questions about historical accuracy and national identity, as can be seen in the statements quoted in Table 3.2. Whilst a reasonably large proportion of the answers from the main study participants indicate non-committal answers such as 'Don't know' or 'Neither agree nor disagree', many did express opinions about the forms of representation featured in the period drama genre.

The general trend indicates that the teenage respondents do feel that women and minority groups are underrepresented in the period drama genre. This agreement is most emphatic on the subject of the representation of LGBT characters, with 52.4% of the respondents either agreeing or strongly agreeing that this group is underrepresented in the period drama genre. This pattern was largely due to the high proportion of female respondents supporting this statement, with 69.3% of females indicating agreement, compared to only 27.3% of male respondents. Perhaps unsurprisingly the very small number of respondents who identified as non-binary also strongly agreed with this assertion. The strength of agreement with this statement contrasts greatly with the answers relating to working class characters, in which only 26.2% of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that this demographic group was underrepresented in period dramas. Perhaps surprisingly, this proportion was higher (31.7%) amongst those respondents who reported that they did not qualify for free school meals whilst at school, and therefore belong to more economically secure social groups. Amongst those

who did report that they qualified for free school meals, only 14.3% of the respondents indicated agreement for this statement.

Whilst it is impossible to know from this quantitative data the reasons behind the agreement or disagreement with the statements, these trends suggest that the teenagers in my study have particularly strong views when it comes to questions of potential homophobia or the representation of LGBT people. The lack of enthusiasm for the statement on working class representation suggests that issues around class and social mobility may have less resonance for these young people than other aspects of representation. Whilst little can be gleaned from this statistic alone, this does raise questions around young people's perception of the importance of class identities in Britain today. Given the extent to which class divisions have been a defining feature of British identity for many years (incidentally, an aspect of society central to the narrative of many period dramas) this suggests the potential for further exploration of young people's attitudes towards class in contemporary British society.

When it comes to questions about the representation of gender and ethnicity, as Table 3.2 demonstrates, the participants were also likely to agree that ethnic minorities were underrepresented in period dramas and that there were not enough positive representations

Statement	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)	Don't know (%)
There are not enough British period dramas featuring positive female characters.	11.9	33.3	32.1	8.3	4.8	9.5
There are not enough British period dramas featuring ethnic minority characters.	21.4	28.6	33.3	3.6	3.6	9.5
There are not enough British period dramas which feature the lives of working-class people.	6	20.2	40.5	17.9	6	9.5
There are not enough British period dramas which feature LGBT characters.	25	27.4	23.8	8.3	3.6	11.9
There are not enough British period dramas which feature disabled characters.	21.4	28.6	25	9.5	3.6	11.9
It is important that British period dramas portray historical periods accurately.	34.5	39.3	19	1.2	2.4	3.6
Watching British period dramas makes me feel more British.	6	17.9	46.4	17.9	8.3	3.6

Table 3.2 Participants' attitudes towards period drama

of women in British period dramas. The female participants were less likely to hold a positive view of the portrayal of women in period dramas, a trend also evident in the pilot research, with 51% of female Initial Survey respondents agreeing that there are not enough British period dramas featuring positive female characters, compared to 36.7% of males who agreed. Looking at the issue of the representation of ethnic minority characters, 50% of the overall cohort agreed that ethnic minority characters were underrepresented. Whilst the Initial Survey had a high number of respondents from minority ethnic backgrounds, this proportion was reasonably consistent across white and non-white participants, with 48.9% of those participants identifying as white, indicating agreement with this statement.

When this line of questioning was piloted, I found that many participants used the space provided to explain the thinking behind their answers, meaning that this section of the pilot survey also yielded a useful amount of qualitative data. However, despite using the same format in the main study, I found that very few participants chose to expand upon their answers. Whilst it is possible that this is a characteristic of the specific age group being studied, there may also be methodological explanations for this. Jerslev, Kobbernagal and Schrøder have explored the impact of different sampling strategies by comparing the convenience sampling strategy used in the Danish section of The World *Hobbit* Project to a stricter quota sampling strategy, which recruited participants by ensuring a sample that represented the cinemagoing population in Denmark. Through this they found that the convenience sample, who were by nature more emotionally invested in the subject of the study, were more inclined to provide more detailed qualitative responses, compared to the quota sample, who did not self-select on the basis of their interest in the study subject.[14] In the pilot survey, those respondents who chose to participate did so in the full knowledge of its focus on period drama, and so were therefore more likely to have an interest in this subject. The participants for my main study were recruited in a variety of ways, with some self-selecting to participate in the study by responding to requests for volunteers made by their teachers, whereas others were volunteered to participate by their teachers, with the activities taking place during their lessons. It is unclear why so few of these participants chose to take the opportunity to expand on their answers, but it may be related to the fact that they have less of a personal investment in the period drama genre, compared to the participants in the pilot survey.

The fact that my research activities all took place within an educational institution may also have impacted on the participants' attitudes towards the surveys. As they are accustomed to completing written work within this environment, it is possible that they may have perceived the surveys as another form of work and been unwilling to undertake more than the minimum amount necessary, therefore choosing to skip the optional qualitative questions. Whilst they were more inclined to provide detail about their favourite films and television shows, and what they like about them, as the section on media consumption above demonstrates, it is possible that a lack of engagement with the subject of period drama led to a disinclination towards answering in more detail than was required. In practice, only a handful of participants chose to expand on their answers in this section, which was disappointing given the interesting insights this question provided in pilot stages of the research.

The participants who did choose to comment further on areas of representation in period drama tended to follow a reasonably homogenous line of argument. As I have noted in

[14] Anne Jerslev, Christian Kobbernagal, Kim Christian Schrøder, 'The Importance of Sampling: Building Complementary Insights About Reception Experiences of *The Hobbit* Film Trilogy with Different Survey Sampling Strategies', *Participations*, 13 (1) (2016), p. 351.

previous chapters, the issue of historical accuracy became increasingly prominent as the study went on, resulting in my decision to dedicate the final chapter to questions of accuracy and authenticity. This Initial Survey indicated that, similar to data collected from pilot participants, the issue of diversity was problematised by questions of historical accuracy. The majority of comments made in response to the set of questions on diversity, historical accuracy and national identity, tended again to raise the perceived tension between a genuine desire to see more diverse representation, and a concern for an accurate representation of history:

> Minority characters shouldn't be added just to tick boxes, they should enhance the historical element of the show (to help it be more accurate). (MSP42, Somerset College, F, White – British)

> When it comes to ethnic minorities and powerful women characters I would rather it be historically accurate than to include them to tick a box (MSP80, Greater Manchester College, M, White – British)

> In regards to ethnic minority, I believe there are not enough people of ethnic minoritys on Tv in general so I liked agree. However [if] a TV show is historically accurate (which I understand they are all not) and there would of been no ethnic minorities I don't disagree with not cast any ethnic minorities as it is unrealistic. in the same way that I don't expect women to be casted as soldiers In a WW2 piece as women were not allowed to fight. (MSP84, Haringey School, F, Mixed – White and Black Caribbean)

Whilst only a small number of participants responded to this question, the fear of politically correct box ticking is still in evidence here, with both MSP42 and MSP80 explicitly commenting on this. This suggests that the suspicion that I noted in the previous chapter amongst my pilot participants, of the media's willingness to forego historical accuracy (an implicitly more worthy concept) for political correctness, with its associations of the nanny state and attempting to fix what isn't broken, also exists amongst this younger group of respondents. The argument made by MSP84 about the inappropriateness of casting ethnic minority actors where this would not reflect history accurately is clearly in conflict with her expressed desire to see more ethnic minority characters on television. The fact that she has written this lengthy comment, expressing these conflicting desires demonstrates the implicit belief that it is not possible to have both an ethnically diverse and a historically accurate period drama.

The concerns expressed by these participants can also be linked to the objections raised by some ethnic minority actors that the only roles for them in period dramas are characters who occupy rather negative or subservient roles.[15] This could be seen as making the characters unattractive to play, but might also have a broader impact, with the casting of well-known actors in negatively portrayed roles possibly also having a damaging effect on people from a similar ethnic background who may see the actors as role models. However, it is worth noting here that some academics and actors have worked hard to disprove the popular idea that minority groups, particularly ethnic minorities, cannot be portrayed in a positive way in a period setting. The actors Paterson Joseph and David Oyelowo have both argued for the

[15] See, for example, BBC News, 'Historical Dramas 'Limit UK Black Actors'', 19 March 2017, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-39319503 [accessed 18 December 2019].

presence of black Britons to be acknowledged in historical representations.[16] This is in addition to the work of historians such as David Olusoga, who has researched the Black presence in Britain throughout history.[17] Based on the responses to both the pilot and Initial Survey, however, these ideas are yet to gain much traction in wider society.

Participants both in this survey and in the pilot study appear to assume that an attempt to diversify the representation of period dramas automatically threatens the integrity of the drama due to an assumption that it will be less historically accurate. With specific regards to the issue of ethnic diversity, this supports Stephen Bourne's suggestion that 'there is ample ammunition for regarding "whiteness" as a specific generic trait of British period films, even if it is one that their audiences unthinkingly take for granted.'[18] Bourne makes clear that the excising of Black histories from British films, both historical and otherwise, cannot be divorced from more general issues regarding the diversity of British society. However, his arguments do suggest that the failure of British films to capture the presence of people from diverse ethnic backgrounds throughout the nation's history contributes to more contemporary racial tensions by failing to promote this diversity as an established feature of British society. This results in something of a 'vicious cycle', in which the whiteness that Bourne notes as being a generic feature of the British period film is reproduced repeatedly through more recent examples of the genre, thus reinforcing the notion that this is an 'accurate' representation of history. Through the establishment of this image of British history as exclusively white, somewhat ironically, any drama that attempts to rectify this inaccuracy automatically runs the risk of being considered inaccurate. Perhaps worse, they may also be accused of pandering to the politically correct box-ticking exercises that both my pilot and main study participants appear suspicious of.

Whilst many participants do appear to 'unthinkingly' take for granted the whiteness of the period drama, a small number of the participants did take the opportunity to comment on the potential of the period drama to actively promote more diverse representations of women and minority groups:

> In regards to LGBT, women and ethnic minorities it depends on the periods social climate and how well it represents the periods overall attitude towards them, as long as it remains true and not misleading. (MSP24, Cambridgeshire College, M, White – British)

> Since women, doc [poc?], and disabled people weren't just randomly invented in the last 20 years, it is only logical that they be represented in the media we produce to reflect these 'period' times. (MSP63, Camden School, F, White – any other background)

[16] See Paterson Joseph, 'Why Wuthering Heights Gives Me Hope', *The Guardian*, 11 November 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/nov/11/wuthering-heights-black-actors [accessed 18 December 2019] and Andrew Pulver, 'David Oyelowo: 'People of Colour Have Been Expunged From British History', *The Guardian*, 6 October 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/oct/06/david-oyelowo-a-united-kingdom-people-of-colour-film [accessed 18 December 2019]

[17] David Olusoga, *Black and British: A Forgotten History* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2016).

[18] Stephen Bourne, 'Secrets and Lies: Black Histories and Black Historical Films', in *British Historical Cinema: The History, Heritage and Costume Film*, ed. by Claire Monk and Amy Sargeant (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 49.

Here we can see MSP63 taking a very matter-of-fact approach to the issue of representation, arguing for the logical nature of diversity. This participant has implicitly recognised the 'taken for grantedness' of the forms of representation perceived as typically employed by period dramas, and appears to see no barrier, in the form of notions of accuracy, to increasing the levels of representation of women and minority groups in period dramas. Whilst she did 'strongly agree' that historical periods should be represented accurately, she also indicated agreement, sometimes strong, with increased representation of minority groups and more positive representation of women. (The only exception for this participant was the representation of working-class characters, whom she didn't appear to consider as underrepresented.) MSP24's comment is more tentative in his suggestion that it is potentially possible to represent women more positively, and to provide more representation of some minority groups within period dramas. His emphasis that the dramas must remain 'true and not misleading' highlights the continued dominance of the notion that it is both possible and desirable to achieve a truthful depiction of historical periods, even whilst acknowledging the possibility that this might allow for an increased representation of minority groups.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided an introduction to the participants of this study, presenting an impression of them as they began the study. It has explored their diversity, with regards to their backgrounds, as well as their attitudes towards film and television and history. They emerge as a group who are beginning to develop as mature individuals with strong and well-developed views, and who use media texts to assist with this process. However, they also continue to pursue pastimes with family members, particularly parental figures, and to value the films that were meaningful to them as children. This suggests they are occupying a transitional stage in their lives, no longer children but not yet fully adult. The transitional nature of adolescence has resulted in a perception that this group needs to be controlled and educated on how to conform to society's norms, desires based on the fear of the 'other' that this life stage inspires. However, there is little evidence for this need here, with the participants demonstrating thoughtfulness and interest in a range of issues, and often expressing intelligent and considered points of view.

Through the evidence of transition we see the young people showing interest in learning about the wider world, expressing opinions about the roles of media texts and, perhaps most significantly, using the experiences they have to reflect on their identities and behaviour, in some cases attempting to effect positive changes. Film and television texts are shown to hold great importance in the lives of these young people, with the frequency of their consumption of these demonstrating them to be a regular feature of their day to day lives. Significantly in the context of this study, they are also shown to already hold an important role in mediating between these young people and their knowledge of history, being the most likely way for them to engage with historical narratives. Given that the study was inspired by my personal frustration about negative generalisations made about young people, including the tendency to see their engagement with media texts as likely to lead to negative results, it is significant that the data here runs counter to these assumptions. The participants here demonstrate enthusiastic engagement with a wide range of texts, and often produce thoughtful responses to them which impact positively on their understanding of themselves and their place in the world.

Some assumptions about young people do seem to be borne out by the data, however. The participants show mixed levels of political engagement, but those that do indicate an interest in UK politics incline strongly to the left, favouring Jeremy Corbyn's Labour opposition over the incumbent Conservative party. This association of younger citizens with support for Labour, particularly as it moves more strongly to the left, aligns with the popular perception of voting patterns. The more liberal political positioning of the participants is consistent with their support for greater diversity in the representation of minority groups in period dramas, and more positive female characterisation. However, it is notable that a smaller proportion supported the increased representation of working-class lives in period dramas. This calls into question this group's investment in matters of class, historically the defining issue of the Labour Party, with more contemporary concerns such as LGBT and ethnic minority representation appearing to attract more interest from these teenage participants.

It is against this backdrop that we can now move on to explore the thoughts of these teenagers about examples of historical representation in film and on television, with the next chapter detailing their responses to the five dramas selected for the study.

Chapter 4

Love and Loathing: The Responses to the Dramas

In the following chapters I look at various aspects of the participants' responses to the five dramas in more depth, namely the reactions to the characterisation and to those examples that adapted pre-existing material. Before I explore these aspects in more detail though, in this chapter I provide an overview of all the responses received by examining each case study in turn, drawing on comments made by the participants in written surveys and focus group discussions, as well as any relevant observations made during the screenings at which I was present. Through their responses we can gauge the feelings of the young people about the period drama genre more generally, as well as their investment in the values and issues at the heart of many of the dramas. Significantly, we also see the power of social influences, and the impact that the group screenings had on the data collected.

One of the most significant features of the responses to the five case studies, *Peaky Blinders*, *Belle*, *The Imitation Game*, *Downton Abbey* and *Far from the Madding Crowd*, was the depth and variety of the responses given by the participants. As a former teacher, it was no surprise to me that these young people were capable of highly intelligent, thoughtful responses, albeit expressed in ways not often found in academic publications. This study both represents young people and seeks to interrogate popular ideas of the adolescent, and so it is worth emphasising this feature of the responses from the outset. Perhaps even more significant than the intelligence and depth of some of the responses, though, is the diversity of responses captured in this study. I have previously noted that a central consideration of the planning was the intention to track patterns of responses across the five films and television episodes featured. However, as this chapter will show, in practice such tracking was made almost impossible by the huge range of responses the screenings inspired in different participants. Given that this research was inspired partly by my frustration at the blanket generalisations so often made about young people, this diversity was significant for me because it demonstrated the lack of homogeneity across my teenage participants.

However, as the nature of the responses are inextricably linked to the methodological choices made when designing the research project, I begin the chapter by first reflecting on the ways in which those choices impacted on the data collected.

Reflections on the Methodology

In addition to the unanticipated levels of variation in the responses to the screenings between different participants, the initial aim of the study, which was to track participants' responses across the five case studies, was problematised in other ways. The longitudinal nature of the project meant that achieving the aim of all participants watching all five screenings was more difficult than originally expected. Whilst I had expected that there would be inevitable gaps in the data due to participants missing sessions, in practice, the majority of participants who started the study did not complete it.

As a consequence, many more survey responses were received on the first screening, *Peaky Blinders*, than the final one, *Far from the Madding Crowd*. This therefore meant that the

quantitative data was problematised, making it impossible to draw full comparisons of the responses across all five case studies, as the data would inevitably be skewed by the fact that the information on *Far from the Madding Crowd* is representative of only a small number of the respondents who submitted survey responses on the earlier films and television episodes. Therefore, while I do use the quantitative data to draw comparisons across the responses to the different screenings, in order to provide a baseline from which to initiate more detailed discussion, this cannot be done in as methodical or reliable a way as if a larger proportion of the participants had submitted responses to all five. Despite the quantitative data being somewhat compromised by the inconsistency of participation, as the following chapters will show, the study did yield a large amount of rich, qualitative data, in which the participants express a large number of different views.

This qualitative data, as with much information of this nature, is obviously subject to interpretation, and so what is written here is inevitably the result of my own personal viewpoint. However, through the responses provided the young participants allow us an insight into their views on the dramas selected for the study, and film and television texts more generally. Perhaps even more significantly, we also get insights into their own decision-making processes and the values that govern them.

In addition to the complication of the original research aims to track responses across the five screenings, it also became apparent early in the study that the experience of group screenings was greatly influencing the responses of individual participants. In Chapter 2 I discuss my awareness of the impact of peer influence, and my intention to reduce the effects of this by collecting data through individual surveys that were completed as soon as the screenings had finished. Despite these efforts, the patterns of responses were highly suggestive of the importance of a group mentality in determining how positively or negatively the participants responded to each case study. Charts 4.1 and 4.2 show the case studies that the participants

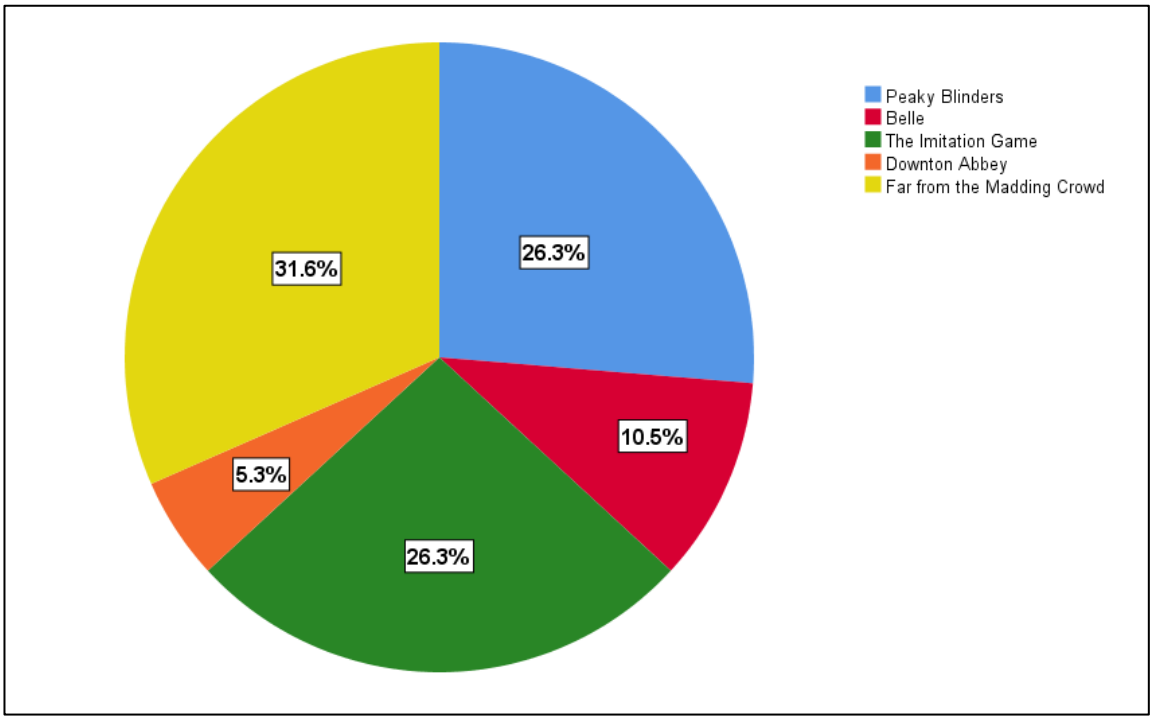

Chart 4.1 Favourite screenings of the Summative Survey respondents (n=19)

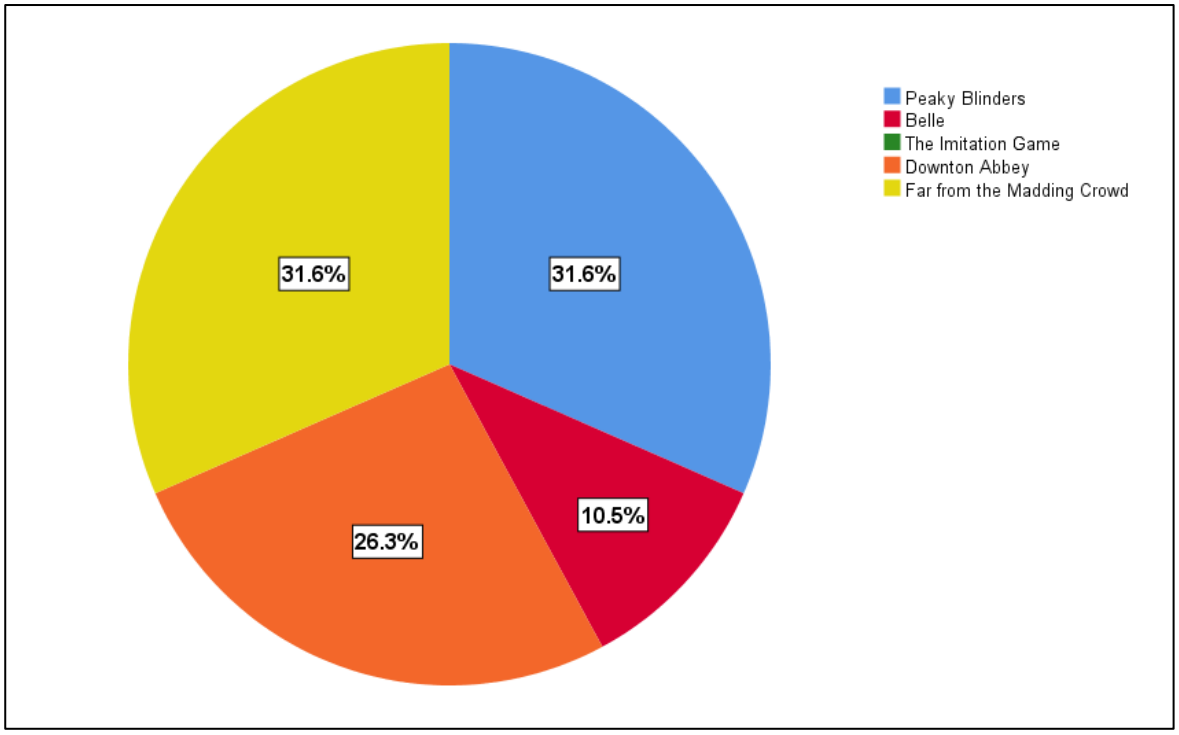

Chart 4.2 Least favourite screenings of the Summative Survey respondents (n=19)

who completed the Summative Survey at the end of the study chose as their favourite and least favourite screenings.[1] These charts demonstrate the great variation in responses to the case studies, with no clear favourites or least favourites. I shall return to this data when I outline the responses to each individual text, but what was notable for me as I carried out the study was that while responses to the case studies tended to vary greatly between participants, they were generally much more consistent between members of the same group, as the data presented in this chapter will show.

Despite the attempts I made to mitigate the impact of peer influence, in practice, the aim of capturing 'uninfluenced', individual responses proved to be ineffective. One reason for this was the impossibility of preventing the participants from discussing the material whilst they were watching it. Another reason was the fact that, in some cases, the screenings took place over two sessions, in order to fit into the available timeslots, meaning that the participants had the opportunity to discuss their impressions of the screening, albeit with only a partial knowledge of the film or television show. Three of the five case studies also had advertisement breaks in the recordings, which gave the participants a brief opportunity to swap notes. The viewing culture within each group was also different, with some watching largely in silence from beginning to end, whilst others would continually discuss the material being screened, either with each other or with me, throughout the screening time. All these examples reflect just some of the ways in which all screen material is received within a social context, to which we bring our own experiences, and our awareness of the ways in which others have responded to the material.

[1] Participants completing this survey were drawn from Norfolk College, Cambridgeshire College, Lancashire College, Camden School and Haringey School. Completion within these cohorts was variable though, with the majority of the Norfolk, Lancashire and Haringey participants completing it, but only a small number of Cambridgeshire and Camden participants contributing to this data.

However, discussion wasn't the only means by which group opinions were arrived at. I observed the 'consensualising process' that Graeme Turner anticipated would result from David Morley's *Nationwide* methodology appearing to take place even without the use of verbal discussion.[2] Although each group that I observed behaved slightly differently, it was often possible to identify the levels of enjoyment in the room based on very simple signals such as the levels of attention being given to the events on the screen, body language such as shifting position in their seat and non-linguistic verbal signals such as audible sighs. Citing Teresa Brennan, Beverley Skeggs and Helen Wood note the 'contagious' nature of affect, and comment on the difficulty of capturing the precise quality and causes of responses using traditional research methodologies.[3] As an observer, this contagious character of responses, and the rather elusive ways in which they spread, was certainly in evidence. I experienced screenings that felt hugely drawn out due to the palpable boredom within the room, whilst other screenings felt like immersive experiences during which time quickly passed, due to the sustained engagement of the participants. In both cases, the responses almost seemed to have been agreed upon through unspoken signals. For those screenings in which all the young people in the room had demonstrated clear engagement with the case study, results were generally positive, even where some participants had been able to identify some potentially negative features of the text. In contrast, those screenings in which there was an atmosphere of boredom in the room tended to produce largely negative responses, despite participants in other groups finding the same material much more enjoyable, as Charts 4.1 and 4.2 show. These experiences highlighted to me the extent to which the group experience played a role in determining what the young people would say about the case studies. Even when there was no time for extended discussion to result in a verbal confirmation of the collective opinion, participants still appeared to be able to sense the feelings of their peers and produced relatively uniform responses.

Peaky Blinders

As noted in Chapter 2, the first screening the participants experienced was the television show *Peaky Blinders*, of which they watched the opening episode of series 1. I received 67 responses to the survey carried out at the end of this screening, the highest number of all the case study surveys.[4] Although this number is much higher than the number of participants who completed the Summative Survey, the data reflected in Charts 4.1 and 4.2 is largely consistent with the qualitative information gathered on this drama, with both indicating that this was a rather divisive text. Looking at the Summative Survey data, although 26.3 % considered *Peaky Blinders* to be their favourite film or television episode of the five watched, a further 31.6% named it as the one they had least enjoyed. All participants who watched the case studies were asked to rate each screening out of five in the Post-Screening Surveys, and *Peaky Blinders* achieved an average score of 3.5, reflecting the rather split nature of the participants' opinions on it. That this is one of the two case studies that were television shows, with stories unfolding

[2] Graeme Turner, *British Cultural Studies* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990), quoted in David Morley, *Television Audiences and Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 17.

[3] Beverley Skeggs and Helen Wood, *Reacting to Reality Television: Performance, Audience and Value* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), p. 125, citing Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

[4] Participants from all groups contributed to this survey, with the exception of the Lewisham College group.

over several episodes (and indeed series) is not insignificant here. Most participants were aware of the show, with only 20.9% not having heard of it. Many of them had already seen it, with 34.3% having seen some episodes before they watched it as part of the study. However, the fact that they watched only the first episode of the drama meant that the participants did not get to experience a complete narrative, and this appeared to impact on some of the responses. This episode establishes a large number of characters, and although it does have moments of dramatic interest, many participants appeared to struggle with the narrative content. This was apparent in the responses to the question on what the participants didn't like about the drama:

> Got a bit non-understandable (MSP2, Waltham Forest College, M, Black – Caribbean)
>
> I thought the overall episode was very slow paced and therefore a little boring. The amount of things that were added to that one episode was a little much in my opinion and made it hard to understand what was happening. (MSP18, Norfolk College, F, White – British)
>
> Bit confusing in terms of story line as a first time watcher (MSP85, Haringey School, F, Black – Caribbean)

This was also a subject of discussion in the Norfolk College focus group:

> MSP17: I dunno, even *Downton Abbey* I could watch a little bit better than *Peaky Binders*, I just found it so boring….
>
> MSP19: I didn't understand it.
>
> MSP17: Yeah, I didn't even care…
>
> MSP19: One minute they're on a boat, the next they're in a pub, then they're on a boat again, then they're in the pub. Look – what are you doing like?[5]

MSP17's remark that he 'even' preferred *Downton Abbey* suggests that *Peaky Blinders* is here failing to come up to the standards of a fairly low bar. His comment that he 'didn't even care' succinctly highlights the problem that many of the participants appeared to have with this episode. There was a lack of investment in the action, which meant that he, and many others, failed to find any motivation to engage with the screening. This is consistent with Martin Barker's discussion of 'strategies of viewing', in which he describes observing that those audiences members who have the most investment in a text are more likely to produce the most detailed and complex responses: 'They noticed more, cared more about what they noticed, and modulated their accounts of their emotional responses in the most complicated ways'.[6] Here we can see the opposite end of that spectrum, in which the lack of investment has resulted in a lack of attention, with the participant failing to follow the storyline or engage with the characters. This is also evident in MSP19's comment that she 'didn't understand it',

[5] Both participants from Norfolk College, MSP17 (M, White – British), MSP19 (F, White – British). Participants were recruited as a whole class, and were all studying Media Studies BTEC.
[6] Martin Barker, 'Crossing Out the Audience', in *Audiences: Defining and Researching Screen Entertainment Reception*, ed. by Ian Christie (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), p. 195.

and her subsequent description of what felt to her like a montage of scenes with little narrative coherence. Her rather exasperated exclamation, 'what are you doing like?', perfectly captures the frustration that many participants seemed to feel when watching this case study. As noted in the previous chapter, this group were recruited as a class, with the discussion taking place during lesson time. The easy rhythm of the exchange here highlights the comfort the group had in talking to each other. However, as noted, there is little evidence of teacher influence in these honest exchanges about their dissatisfaction with *Peaky Blinders*.

The comment by MSP17 that he 'just found it so boring' echoes that of his classmate, MSP18, whose survey response quoted above also uses this word. In fact, this sentiment was echoed by many other participants in response to the question on what they didn't like about the episode:

> Beginning was boring, If i was watching it at home I would've taken it off after 5-10 minutes (MSP67, Camden School, M, Black – African)
>
> The episode dragged on and on and on (MSP4, Waltham Forest College, F, Black – any other background)
>
> It was just boring (MSP1, Waltham Forest College, F, Asian – Indian)

Whilst the response from MSP67 suggests that the episode may have redeemed itself as it progressed, both MSP4 and MSP1 express rather vehement feelings of boredom. These responses somewhat surprised me, as I had purposely selected *Peaky Blinders* to be the first case study screened because of my belief that the untypical subject matter and *mise en scène* were likely to be engaging for the participants. With its focus on gangster characters, a working class setting, and the use of anachronistic, upbeat music, I had predicted that the episode was likely to prove enjoyable to the participants and had hoped that it would encourage continued participation in the study. As these responses demonstrate, however, this prediction proved to be wrong in many cases.

Although some of the participants found watching *Peaky Blinders* to be a painfully boring experience, others responded to it much more positively. In response to a question about what they liked about the screening, 17 participants commented that they had found the episode interesting or entertaining. Comments include,

> I liked the storyline and i found the acting to be really good, overall i found it to be very enjoyable and enticing (MSP25, Lancashire College, F, White – British)
>
> the depth portrayed by characters was quite refreshing to see as well as the introduction of the storyline. the way it all wove into actual historical events and fiction for entertainment value was well done in my opinion (MSP31, Somerset College, F, White – British)
>
> I just enjoyed the overall story (MSP14, Norfolk College, M, White British)

In contrast to the participants who found *Peaky Blinders* to be completely unengaging, these participants, and many others, were able to engage with the complexity of the storytelling, and found the experience of watching it enjoyable. In contrast to many of his classmates, MSP14 does appear to have been engaged by this drama. Significantly, when asked about his prior

knowledge, this participant indicates that although he had not seen it before he had 'heard about it from [his] sister'. Whilst it is obviously impossible to know the nature of what his sister had told him about the drama, the more positive feedback on the episode raises the possibility that this participant may have a pre-existing reason for thinking that he might enjoy it, based on what his sister had said about it, and therefore approached the viewing with a greater level of investment than some of his peers. In contrast, his classmates generally reported more impersonal prior knowledge of the text, such as 'I had seen glimpses when it was being advertised' (MSP19, Norfolk College, F, White – British), resulting in the lower levels of personal investment in the text discussed above. These indicators of the different levels of investment brought to the screening by this group further emphasises the ways in which our social experiences and prior knowledge can greatly influence the way we respond to texts.

Perhaps most significantly, in the light of the subject of the study, the largest number of comments made by participants on the subject of what they liked about the episode referred to the period setting of the drama, and the inclusion of historical details. This is alluded to by MSP31 in her comment above about the way the drama wove together actual historical events and fictional aspects of the story; in total, 24 of the 67 respondents commented on the setting of the drama, and the representation of a particular historical period.

> I enjoyed how accurately it captured England of the time. the crooked police, the setting etc. Cillian Murphy's performance was brilliant. the way PTSD was portrayed was also fantastic. (MSP29, Lancashire College, M, White - British)

> i liked the setting as it was very descriptive of the slums at the time. I also enjoyed [the] characters as they showed depth and reflected issues of the people at the time. (MSP77, Greater Manchester College, F, White – British)

> I liked how it showed what was happening at England. I liked the setting and the costumes as it made it look realistic (MSP11, Waltham Forest College, F, Any other background)

Perhaps the most notable feature of these comments is the discourse of accuracy that can be identified in all these examples. This is typical of the responses to this text, which seemed to accept the drama as an 'accurate' or 'realistic' depiction of working-class life in the early part of the twentieth-century. Whilst the previous chapter observed that the study participants appeared to be less interested in the representation of class diversity, compared to female representation and that of minority groups, a keen awareness of class relations is apparent throughout their responses to many of the screenings. I have explained that a key reason for choosing *Peaky Blinders* as a case study was its focus on working class characters. Only one respondent explicitly stated that they had enjoyed this feature of the drama: 'I enjoyed seeing the working class people shown through the drama' (MSP74, Greater Manchester College, F, White – any other background). However, implicit in many of the endorsements of the show's 'realism' is the fact that it represents the lives and living conditions of social groups that are less frequently depicted in period dramas, such as the reference to the 'slums' in MSP77's comment.

The selection of *Peaky Blinders* as an example of the period drama genre was the subject of some discussion, as in this extract from the Lancashire College focus group:

> SG: …. Er, MSP26, from what you were saying, I… I sensed a slightly disparaging tone towards period dramas, would you say it's not a genre that you particularly like?
>
> MSP26: I'm not a fan… Um, I can… for things like *Peaky Blinders*, which I've watched a few more episodes of, I'm kind of enjoying it… I, I don't enjoy it because it's a period drama, I enjoy it because it's gritty, it's dark, it's clever, the writers are intelligent and the film… It's… generally it's quite compelling. I don't enjoy it because it's a period drama, I enjoy elements of the film…[7]

MSP26 is here suggesting that his enjoyment of *Peaky Blinders* is unrelated to its period setting, and he here employs some of the critical skills that he is likely to have come across during his studies in his justification of his enjoyment of the drama. However, as the above quotations show, for many participants the situating of the drama within a specific historical period was a source of pleasure for them. The reference made to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder by MSP29 is also typical of many participants, who found the depiction of the trauma suffered by returning World War I soldiers to be a particularly interesting feature of the drama. Similarly, some participants from the Camden School found the references to the early activities of the IRA to be an interesting detail as this edited extract from their focus group discussion shows:

> MSP68: Yeah I think the terrorist crisis in Ireland at that time was quite interesting… so I did a bit of research around that…
>
> ….
>
> MSP68: It made me read about the IRA…
>
> SG: Oh, *Peaky Blinders*?
>
> MSP72: You guys really are interested, you fakers… I was really bored…
>
> ….
>
> SG: Did you talk to anyone about what you watched?
>
> ….
>
> MSP66: (to MSP68) We talked about the IRA when we got to yours after…[8]

Despite the rather incredulous reaction of MSP72 here, it's clear that the historical details in *Peaky Blinders* had interested MSP66 and MSP68 enough for them to continue to dwell on these features after the screening. Indeed, in the case of MSP68, it had even inspired him to learn more about the historical context. This data suggests that, whilst *Peaky Blinders* is in many ways not a typical example of the period drama genre, the situating of the action within a particular historical period is not only a central feature of narrative and characterisation, but

[7] MSP26 (Lancashire College, M, White – British)

[8] All participants from Camden School and male, ethnicities as follows: MSP68 (White-British), MSP72 (Mixed – White and Black African), MSP66 (White – British). The group were recruited through a Media Studies department, but were not all drawn from the same class.

also a key contributor to the pleasure of watching the drama for many of these teenage viewers.

Finally, whilst I began by noting that many of the participants did not find the viewing of the *Peaky Blinders* episode to be a pleasurable experience, other participants tended to consider it the most likely of the five case studies to appeal to their age group, as exemplified by this extract from the Haringey School focus group:

> SG: Erm… I mean, if you had to choose one example which would appeal more to your age group, out of the five, again MSP95 I know you haven't seen all of them, but, like, erm, which one would you go to for somebody… like your friends, people that you know… what would you think would be the one that would appeal the most?
>
> MSP84: I would go *Peaky Blinders* because that's the one I've recommended to a lot of people, and I know a lot of teenagers watch it…
>
> MSP95: A lot of people, yeah…
>
> MSP84: And I think…
>
> MSP95: I hear about it all the time…
>
> MSP84: Yeah, people are really into it…
>
> SG: Yeah?
>
> MSP84: I think, out of all the things we watched, for sure, that's the one that teenagers watch the most… erm…
>
> MSP95: Mmm…
>
> MSP84: I think people… well I certainly like the kind of grimy gangstery vibe, but then also, English gangsters, which is a bit different from quite a lot of the… you know, you've got all of the Scorsese movies and stuff, and then I think a big part of it is a lot of teenage girls find a lot of the men in it very very attractive…
>
> (laughter)
>
> SG: OK.
>
> MSP95: Yeah, all I hear about is people talking about people from *Peaky Blinders*, if I'm telling the truth… and it's so weird….!
>
> MSP84: Yeah, people are like (puts on a voice) 'Cillian Murphy… oh my God… he's amazing!'
>
> MSP95: Yeah, him…
>
> SG: Oh, interesting!
>
> MSP95: Yeah, I hear that all the time, and I don't know what happened…

> MSP84: People are like really really into him… but then people also really love the storylines and I… people who know who aren't even really into film and TV go really in depth like (puts on another voice) 'I love this.. I love this part… I love the way the story's going… oh it's a bit weak here…'. People are very very into it. I like it too, but I'm a bit behind…[9]

Or this extract from Camden School:

> SG: If you had to say which was the most suited to your age group, which would it be?
>
> MSP68: *Peaky Blinders*…
>
> MSP64?: *Peaky Blinders*…
>
> MSP72: *Peaky Blinders*…
>
> MSP71 and MSP69: *Peaky Blinders*…
>
> MSP68: Wait, I don't think it's most suited to our age group…but we like it…
>
> MSP66?: It's just interesting…[10]

Both dialogue extracts represent an emphatic agreement that *Peaky Blinders* was the case study most suitable for viewing by a teenage audience. The participants of the Camden School group were unanimous in their decision that *Peaky Blinders* was most suitable for their age group (although MSP68 appears to be questioning the premise of the question and implies that it has appeal for varied age groups). The young women of the Haringey group are also emphatic in their certainty of *Peaky Blinders*' appeal to teenagers. The length of the discussion above demonstrates both their enthusiasm for this opinion and the numerous reasons why they think the drama appeals to this age group (the 'very very attractive' men, the 'storylines', the 'grimy gangstery vibe'). Whilst MSP95 in this extract hasn't seen *Peaky Blinders*, her enthusiastic responses to MSP84 and her clear recognition of the show's reported appeal demonstrates an accepted position in which this case study has clear teenage-appeal. The fact that this contrasts so greatly with many of the more negative responses referenced above emphasises the extent to which teenagers cannot be considered to be a uniform group. Whilst both the positive and negative responses appear to show the influence of peers within their own particular social group, the diversity of the responses demonstrates the wide range of tastes found within this age group in general.

[9] Participants from Haringey School, MSP84 (F, Mixed – White and Black Caribbean), MSP95 (No Initial Survey data received). The participants were recruited through an English and Media Studies teacher, but recruitment did expand beyond these subjects.

[10] All participants are male and from Camden School, ethnicities as follows: MSP68 (White-British), MSP64 (Mixed – White and Black Caribbean), MSP72 (Mixed – White and Black African), MSP71 (Asian – Indian), MSP69 (Any other background), MSP66 (White – British). The group were recruited through a Media Studies department, but were not all drawn from the same class.

Belle

As Charts 4.1 and 4.2 show above, *Belle* generally inspired less strength of feeling amongst the Summative Survey respondents than *Peaky Blinders*, with less participants identifying it as either their favourite or least favourite film or television show in the study. The survey about *Belle* received 41 responses, with participants giving it an average rating of 3.7 out of 5, marginally higher than the rating given to the *Peaky Blinders* episode.[11] However, whilst the overall responses to the Summative Survey suggest that the responses to this film were generally less strong overall, at both ends of the spectrum individuals reacted with great strength of feeling to this drama. Indeed, in possibly the most extreme reaction to any of the screenings in the study, the entire group of students at the Camden School walked out halfway through the film!

In contrast to *Peaky Blinders*, the majority of respondents to the Post-Screening Survey on this film hadn't heard of it before, with 70.7% reporting that they were not aware of it at all before the screening. This was particularly significant in the cases of the north London participants, of which there were three groups (Waltham Forest, Camden and Haringey) as the action of the film centres around the residents of Kenwood House, still a well-known visitor attraction on Hampstead Heath. Kenwood House is easily accessible from Camden and Haringey, and the area would be familiar to local residents. It is therefore particularly notable that most of these participants were unaware of the film, or the historical figure whose story it purports to tell.

Whilst I noted that a lack of investment in the story of *Peaky Blinders* may have been a significant factor in the lack of enjoyment some participants experienced during the first screening, in the case of *Belle*, a lack of prior awareness did not hinder investment in the film. For many, this screening appears to have been a pleasant surprise, with those who had never heard of the film often reporting that they had found watching it to be a pleasurable experience. This is reflected in the answers to the survey questions on what they liked about the film, with many of these appearing to reflect a strong emotional engagement with the film:

> Belle portrayed the character well, good acting added a nice realistic effect and it added to the sadness of it all, i liked all the characters and the setting was so realistic and i love everything about it (MSP9, Waltham Forest College, F, White – any other background)

> The battles against society being portrayed in a powerfully emotive way, making the characters seem more like people and creating a connection between the viewer. This allows the viewer to really understand the hardships and woes. (MSP24, Cambridgeshire College, M, White - British

> I liked the storyline and some of the characters and just the entire film in general was just so interesting. (MSP1, Waltham Forest College, F, Asian – Indian)

These emotionally engaged responses differ somewhat from the more cerebral reactions to *Peaky Blinders*. The melodramatic nature of *Belle*, with its dual narratives representing both Dido Belle's romantic attachments and her efforts to undermine the slave trade through the

[11] Participants from all groups, with the exception of Greater Manchester College and Lewisham College, contributed to this survey.

progress of the Zong court case, has evidently been highly successful in capturing the attention of the audience. Clearly, the most notable feature of *Belle* is its incorporation of Black history into what Stephen Bourne identifies as a typically white genre (see previous chapter). This was certainly not lost on the participants, many of whom seemed to appreciate this diversification of representation:

> That although Belle was adopted at such a young age by a white family, she didn't let that interfere with her roots and when she got to a certain age she decided to fight back. (MSP88, Waltham Forest College, no Initial Survey data provided)

> I liked the romance between Mr.Davinier and Dido Belle as it showed that love has no boundaries: ie ethnicity and that love isn't wrong between two different ethnicities. I also really enjoyed the way that the painting of Dido and her cousin showed the change and positive representation of black women and equality between two ethnicities unlike the other paintings that were seen in that narrative that represented black people as weaker and inferior. (MSP90, Waltham Forest College, no Initial Survey data provided)

> I liked the fact that the main character was a women of colour, I also liked the story in general. (MSP84, Haringey School, F, Mixed – White and Black Caribbean)

> I like the character of dido (her fiery spirit and refusal to accept the hand she was dealt precisely, and her defiance as she searched for representation) and the costumes and scenery of the period felt realistic…. (MSP35, Somerset College, F, White – any other background)

All of these responses demonstrate an appreciation of the positive representation of black identity, with MSP84 implicitly noting how unusual it is for a drama, perhaps particularly a period drama, to feature an ethnic minority woman as its protagonist. MSP90 particularly enjoyed the ways in which the film explicitly draws attention to the equal nature of Dido's relationships with her family and lover. The progressive nature of the film's narrative is explicitly recognised by this participant, as they comment on the use of portrait painting in the film to express 'the change and positive representation of black women'. The comment by MSP88 perhaps most clearly reflects contemporary discourses on the nature of black identity, with this participant describing Dido as being 'adopted at such a young age by a white family' but managing to hold onto 'her roots' despite this. The language used here clearly reflects modern debates around children from ethnic minorities losing touch with the cultures of their birth through adoption or care by white families. The character of Dido is seen to symbolise the importance of children being allowed to express their cultural heritage through her refusal in the film to deny her mother's black identity and her own engagement with the legal battle to undermine the slave trade. MSP88 characterises this as Dido 'fight[ing] back', suggesting that they see her strength of character as inspiring in some way, a feature also commented on by MSP35, who likes Dido's 'fiery spirit' and 'her defiance as she searched for representation'. All of these participants appear to be aware of current debates around the importance of the visibility and positive representation of ethnic minorities within the media, and respond

positively to the ways in which *Belle* addresses these debates, exploring contemporary issues within its period setting.

In addition to the significant representational features of *Belle*, many participants also reported enjoying the characterisation (12 comments) and the actors and quality of acting (11 comments), with Gugu Mbatha-Raw, who plays the title character, unsurprisingly being singled out as particularly good by several participants. As with the responses to *Peaky Blinders*, however, the area with the greatest number of comments was the use of historical details. In some cases these reflected a more general appreciation of the period setting, such as the comments by MSP35, that 'the costumes and the scenery of the period felt realistic' and MSP9 who uses the word 'realistic' twice in her enthusiastic endorsement of the film. This was a common feature of the positive feedback, as these further quotations demonstrate:

> The characters were very believable and it was a very true to life of what I would presume life was like then. (MSP20, Norfolk College, F, White – British)

> I loved the setting of the film as well the characters and the roles they played that represented that time period, for example, the importance of having a high status within society as well as racism. (MSP6, Waltham Forest College, F, Black – Caribbean)

> I like the way they made the setting true to its time. The characters did this from the way they dressed, their choice of speech and the way they obey the more superior characters. (MSP2, Waltham Forest College, M, Black Caribbean)

The suggestion by MSP20 that the film reflects what she 'presume[s] life was like then', also endorsing the film as 'true to life', possibly indicates the power of period dramas to determine how we imagine the past to be. *Belle* adheres to many of the narrative and aesthetic conventions found in literary adaptations of Jane Austen's novels and similar works, and it may be the case that the accuracy perceived here is due to the familiarity of these participants with other period dramas of this type. Once again, the representation of social class is connected to perceived realism, with MSP6 and MSP2 both explicitly equating the clear demarcation of characters from different social strata with an accurate depiction of the historical period. Just as 'whiteness' was described by Bourne as a generic feature of the period drama, these participants appear to accept strict class division as an integral feature of the period drama, and, by extension, of British history in general.

I shall discuss the fact that *Belle* purports to be based on historical fact in Chapter 6, and therefore will not explore this feature of the responses in detail here. However, it is worth noting that, for several participants, this seemed to make a significant contribution to the appeal of the film:

> I really enjoyed the film the storyline was very interesting especially since it was based off of a true story which was extremely intriguing…. (MSP95, Haringey School, no Initial Survey data provided)

> the story was gripping and the acting was top notch. Also the based on ture [true?] events made me interested in the film. (MSP29, Lancashire College, M, White – British)

For some participants this aspect of the film was interesting enough for them to seek out more information about the subject matter after the screening, as evidenced in this extract from the Lancashire College focus group:

> MSP25: I really liked *Belle*…
>
> MSP26: Yeah, *Belle* was good….
>
> MSP25: It had a really lovely storyline to it, cos it was based on a true story, and I actually went home and researched some more about that, cos I just thought it was really interesting.
>
> ….
>
> MSP25: I went home and actually starting googling up on the *Belle* story….I was really interested in the picture, and the fact that it's real…[12]

These comments demonstrate the impact that this film had on MSP25, not only at the time of watching, but in a more lasting way through her interest in the subject matter and her wish to learn more about it. Just as the screening of *Peaky Blinders* instigated an interest in the history of the IRA for some young men at the Camden School, MSP25's description of the process of 'googling up' on the subject of the portrait of Dido Belle emphasises not only how accessible information is to young people in the age of the internet, but also their willingness to harness this to discover more about topics that pique their interest. Emphasising the influence that film can have on our understanding of the wider world, this participant has not only had an enjoyable experience of watching the film, but her understanding of British history appears to have been impacted by her desire to learn more about the 'true story' behind the film's narrative.

In addition to asking the participants what they liked and did not like about the case study dramas, I also asked them to identify any specific moments from those dramas that stood out to them. With *Belle* these serve to indicate the storylines that most interested the participants. As noted, the film is constructed around dual narratives concerning Dido's romantic relationships and her involvement in the 'Zong' court case being ruled on by Lord Mansfield, her great-uncle and guardian. Although much narrative time is dedicated to Dido's relationships, with her engagement to Oliver Ashford (James Norton) and her developing romance with John Davinier (Sam Reid) both receiving a good deal of focus, the majority of participants appear to have engaged more with the storyline involving the legal ruling on the case of the Zong slave ship. Whilst only four participants specified moments from the plot involving Dido's romance with Davinier as their most memorable moment, six of them specified the moment when Lord Mansfield delivers his verdict and condemns the slave trade. In addition to these six many others identified scenes in which the difficulties faced by Dido because of her ethnicity particularly stood out for them. These include the scene in which Dido's father brings her to be raised within his family, which stood out because 'back then it

[12] Both participants from Lancashire College, MSP25 (F, White – British), MSP26 (M, White – British). This group were recruited through a Media Studies teacher, and were all drawn from the same class.

was unheard of to see a wealthy man take a young black child into his care' (MSP25, Lancashire College, M, White – British) and because of the initial struggles faced by Dido's family when confronted with the prospect of caring for her:

> I found it very interesting how although Belle is blood relative they still struggled to accept the fact that they were her only help. The fact that they are family meant nothing as the colour of her skin seemed of more importance (MSP83, Haringey School, F, Mixed – any other background)

Another moment that appeared to resonate with the participants was the scene in which Dido faces a moment of personal crisis and attempts to rub the black from her skin:

> the scene where Belle tries to wipe the black off of her, is a very powerful scene as it shows her realisation of her life and the problems of being black (MSP29, Lancashire College, M, White – British)

> The moment when Dido is in front of the mirror rubbing at her skin because of the way she must live her life due to the colour of her skin. It was a very striking scene which draws links between racism back then and the effects of racism now. (MSP92, Lancashire College, no Initial Survey data provided)

These responses demonstrate that despite the deep emotional investment that some participants had in this film, the feature that appears to have resonated most deeply is the exploration of racism and the black experience, rather than the love story, which follows a plot structure that is more familiar in this genre.

Although I have so far observed that many participants found the experience of watching *Belle* to be both emotionally rewarding and intellectually stimulating, this was certainly not the case for all participants. As described in Chapter 2, the film adopts many of the traditional features of a period drama, featuring a lavish *mise en scène* that reflects the privileges of Dido's aristocratic family, a narrative that follows the romantic upheavals of its heroine and action that unfolds at a slow pace. As Daniela Berghahn argues, the films employs 'the museum-aesthetic and visual opulence of heritage cinema.'[13] The presentation of the narrative action tends to follow conservative notions of propriety, with no scenes of graphic violence or sex that would challenge the traditional generic expectation of a 'safe' and visually stimulating viewing experience. (Although Asante does confront these expectations to some extent, such as one scene in which Tom Felton's James Ashford describes to his brother the pleasures of sampling 'the rare and exotic… on the cotton fields of the Indies', effectively making the raping of slaves the subject of polite after-dinner conversation.) The more familiar genre characteristics proved difficult for some participants to overlook, with certain participants reporting that they found the experience of watching the film to be boring and unstimulating.

> The music was boring and the storyline wasn't gripping as it didn't have much going on. (MSP42, Somerset College, F, White – British)

[13] Daniela Berghahn, 'Rewriting History from the Margins: Diasporic Memory, Shabby Chic and Archival Footage', in *Screening European Heritage: Creating and Consuming History on Film*, ed. by Paul Cooke and Rob Stone (London: Palgrave, 2016), p. 101.

> I did not like the rather long, slow nature of the film. It was very interesting but i occasionally lost focus. (MSP24, Cambridgeshire College, M, White – British)

> i thought that the film was too long winded and boring (MSP71, Camden School, M, Asian – Indian)

These remarks all demonstrate that the stately pace and lack of sustained dramatic action served to alienate these participants in some way. While these traits are not unique to the period drama genre, they can be considered as characteristic of it. Discussing the concept of genre, Martin Barker and Julian Petley observe that

> Audiences for any kind of medium do not come innocent to particular materials. Whether they are coming to romances, westerns, horror, the news, situation comedies, comics or cartoons, audiences begin by learning the *kinds* of thing to expect. They learn the 'rules of the genre' and, in doing so, learn if they are the kinds of material they will enjoy and want to invest in.[14]

Barker and Petley go on to suggest that 'audiences *can make sense of* a film or television programme *only* if they have learnt the 'rules of the genre'…'.[15] This approach to spectator readings of genre characteristics recalls Rick Altman's 'semantic / syntactic' approach to genre. In this, Altman argues that some genres are identified more by semantic elements, such as the visual appearance or typical characters or locations, whereas other genres are identified more by the syntax, that is the way these are organised, such as the typical relationships or thematic concerns that are set up within the genre.[16] In considering how these factors work together, Altman suggests that

> Spectator response… is heavily conditioned by the choice of semantic elements and atmosphere, because a given semantics, used in a specific cultural situation will recall to an actual interpretive community the particular syntax with which that semantics has traditionally been associated in other texts.[17]

Altman's reference here to 'an actual interpretive community' further stresses the importance of developing an understanding of how genres work, and a familiarity with the characteristics of specific genres, in order to fully comprehend how the texts are creating meaning. The comments from the participants above suggest that these participants may have struggled with the generic conventions deployed by *Belle*, its 'semantic elements and atmosphere', and have therefore been unable to fully engage with it. Whilst MSP24 comments that he did find the subject of the film to be 'very interesting', its use of the slow, rather genteel narrative pace of the period drama means that he 'lost focus' despite his investment in the subject matter.

I noted in Chapter 2 that *Belle*'s narrative has some strikingly Austenian features and this is significant in terms of the genre identity of the film. Sarah Cardwell argues that 'Austen

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[14] Martin Barker and Julian Petley, 'Introduction', in *Ill Effects: The Media / Violence Debate*, ed. by Martin Barker and Julian Petley (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 9.
[15] Barker and Petley, 'Introduction', p. 9 (my italics).
[16] Rick Altman, 'A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre', in *Film Genre Reader III*, ed. by Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), p. 31.
[17] Altman, 'A Semantic/Syntactic Approach', p. 39.

adaptations had by the 1990s become representative of the genre of classic-novel adaptations as a whole', meaning that by harnessing features of the Austen adaptation, *Belle* effectively aligns itself with the entire genre of classic novel adaptations.[18] MSP42's comment that 'the music was boring' is consistent with this reading, with Cardwell elsewhere noting that in addition to the slow-paced, pictorialist aesthetic of the heritage drama, classic-novel adaptations frequently employ 'a certain type of elegant, decorous or wistful orchestral music on their soundtracks'.[19] *Belle*'s score was composed by Rachel Portman, whose music has been used in several other period dramas, including the Austen adaptation *Emma* (Douglas McGrath, 1996), for which she won an Academy Award. The fact that this participant specifically identifies the score, which is highly typical of a period drama, as one of its most objectionable features suggests again that the use of the characteristics of the period drama has been off-putting for some participants.

Cardwell also notes Greg Smith's arguments that the opening moments of a film or television programme establish 'mood cues' which work to identify for us the genre we are about to watch, and therefore prepare us for the experience we will have whilst watching it. In a way that is similar to the effect of the 'rules of the genre' described by Barker and Petley, or the 'semantic elements' identified by Altman, mood cues 'establish in the viewer… [a] predisposition to feel certain emotions' and are 'integral to the text in the sense that [the mood] is created through (stylistic) features inherent in the text itself – the text itself can be said to have a mood.'[20] Kristyn Gorton also cites Smith, when she argues that 'film or television does not *make* viewers feel, rather, we as viewers, are *invited* to feel and must possess some level of understanding in order to make sense of the mood-cues we are offered.'[21] The fact that some participants did not engage with *Belle*, whereas others found watching it to be an emotionally rich experience, suggests that responses may have been determined by the participants familiarity with, and willingness to invest in, the conventions of period dramas. Those who did 'accept' the invitation to feel, clearly found the experience emotionally rewarding, whereas those more resistant to or unfamiliar with this invitation felt frustrated or bored by the slow pace and inoffensive tone of the narrative development.

I noted above that, in probably the most dramatic response to any of the case study screenings, the entire group of participants at Camden School walked out halfway through the screening of *Belle*. This group were typically very talkative, and often talked to me about the screenings as they were underway. Whilst it was not always possible to identify whether participants' objections to genre characteristics were due to a lack of familiarity, with a consequent difficulty in reading these effectively, or whether these characteristics simply did not accord with the participants' personal tastes, some of the questions asked by the Camden School group while watching *Belle* were enlightening with regards to their familiarity with the period drama genre. Some of the group appeared confused early in the film, asking at one

[18] Sarah Cardwell, *Adaptation Revisited: Television and the Classic Novel* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 134.
[19] Cardwell, *Adaptation Revisited*, p. 80.
[20] Cardwell, *Adaptation Revisited*, pp.146-7, citing Greg M Smith, 'Local Emotions, Global Moods and Film Structure', in *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition and Emotion*, ed. by Carl Plantinga and Greg M Smith (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999).
[21] Kristyn Gorton, *Media Audiences: Television, Meaning and Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 80, citing Greg M Smith, *Film Structure and the Emotional System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

point whether a scene had been 'skipped'. I believe that more experienced viewers of the period drama would instinctively be able to read into small gestures, or apparently innocuous moments, the intended narrative or emotional significance behind them, without needing these to be explicitly stated. This group's perception that a sequence had been left unfinished suggested to me a lack of familiarity with the genre conventions which to some extent hampered their ability to engage with the film.

This lack of comprehension at some points in the film should certainly not be taken as an indication of a general inability on the part of the participants to appreciate subtle ways in which meaning is communicated. The scene preceding their confusion at what they experienced as an incomprehensible narrative movement was a scene in which Dido is asked to play the piano in company for the first time, the request being made by Oliver Ashford, a gentleman with a clear romantic interest in her. This group were keenly aware of the importance of this moment for the character and their reactions demonstrated an understanding of the ways in which the scene creates tension. As the viewer is unaware how skilled Dido is at this important feminine accomplishment, the moment leads to a moment of concern for her, as we worry that she is about to humiliate herself in public. This was a concern that the group clearly understood, with one group member asking me whether Dido was able to play the piano, while another guessed that she was going to turn out to be better than her cousin, a prediction that the scene quickly proved to be correct. When the tension in the scene is broken by Dido's highly impressive piano playing, the group accurately commented on the fact that Dido's cousin, Bett, is shown to be jealous of Dido's superior skill.

Whilst watching this scene the Camden group were clearly able to grasp the significance of the moment for Dido, and to understand the response of her cousin. However, following this sequence of events in the film, they appeared confused that the action of this scene had not been developed further. Whilst they showed perception in their understanding of the scene, they didn't draw from it the levels of meaning (Dido has impressed with her level of accomplishments and identified herself as a desirable match for an aristocratic man, in spite of her ethnicity) that a more experienced viewer of the genre would. They were also interested to know whether Dido had 'had sex' with any of the men in the film, or whether she was going to. These responses also indicated to me that this group were not experienced in reading the genre characteristics of period drama. More experienced viewers would understand the significance of the scene described above without needing further development. Similarly, they would also be likely to understand that many examples of this genre tend to approach the subject of love and sexuality in a more suggestive way, without the inclusion of explicit 'sex scenes', and that, in this genre, women of Dido's social class are presented as not engaging in sexual relationships before marriage. This group were able to ask highly pertinent questions, such as asking about the exact relationship between Dido's (white) father and (black) mother, a subject the film takes a somewhat coy approach to, but many of their reactions during the screening suggested that their ability to engage with the film was impacted by a lack of familiarity with the characteristics of the genre and how to read them.

Belle's position as a more typical period drama can therefore be seen to have impacted on this group's enjoyment of the film. Whilst they were clearly highly aware of the significance of the ways in which this biracial character was represented and asked many pertinent questions about her life and her position in upper class Georgian society, their interest could not penetrate the incomprehensibility of the period drama characteristics. This is a subject that I shall return to in relation to this group. However, clearly this was not the case for all

participants. Despite his clear dislike for the period drama genre, quoted in the previous section, MSP26 was happy to agree that '*Belle* was good' and as we have seen, many of the participants reported highly enthusiastic and emotionally engaged reactions to this film. The responses to *Belle* further underlined the unpredictable and diverse nature of the participants demonstrated by the data collected on *Peaky Blinders*. However, we now move on to a case study that inspired a far more unified response.

The Imitation Game

The Imitation Game was selected by a smaller proportion of respondents to the Summative Survey as their favourite film or television programme in the study, as Chart 4.1 shows. Despite this, it can arguably be considered to be the most popular with the cohort as a whole. As Chart 4.2 indicates, this film was the only example that was not chosen as their least favourite by any respondent to the Summative Survey. It also received an average rating of 4.5 out of 5 from the 38 participants who completed the Post-Screening Survey on this film, significantly higher than *Belle*'s 3.7, which was the second highest average rating.[22]

Once again, the historical setting and use of 'true-life' details was the most commented upon aspect of the film, when the participants were asked what they particularly liked about it. These features were alluded to by half of the 38 respondents, including the following examples:

> I liked how it told the story of him and everything to do with that time. For example it was interesting to learn about how sexuality was seen as. (MSP19, Norfolk College, F, White – British)
>
> It was an amazing factual story and it was portrayed beautifully and filled with emotion and it had a great cast (MSP25, Lancashire College, F, White – British)
>
> It's a true story and provides a history lesson as well as entertainment. (MSP59, Warwickshire College, F, White – British)

The comment by MSP59 succinctly expresses the appeal of this type of narrative as both entertaining and able to teach viewers something about history. The overt references within the film to historical figures whom this drama purports to represent, in a way similar to the many other dramas that make similar claims, encourage audiences to value the film more because of its apparent ability to educate as well as entertain. This feeling is also captured in MSP25's description of the film as 'an amazing factual story' and MSP19's impression that it represented 'everything to do with that time'. Her comment that she found the film 'interesting' was also echoed by many others, with 12 responses to this question indicating that they found the film interesting or engaging. As with *Belle*, the appeal of the 'factual' nature of this case study is undoubtedly a significant feature of *The Imitation Game*'s appeal, a point to which I shall return in Chapter 6.

The comment from MSP25, that she found the film to be 'filled with emotion', also echoes the thoughts of many other participants, with several respondents to the survey commenting that they liked the way the film combined the wartime narrative with the exploration of emotional experiences or social issues. The following is an edited extract from a particularly long and enthusiastic response to this film that demonstrates some of these areas:

> with a story like this (one with lots of maths and talking-not a huge amount of action) there was a risk the plot could have fallen flat and become stale during the build up to solving of enigma. However, this was avoided with an emphasis on relationship drama…. I think an angle on relations is always a positive thing to include in war films as

[22] Participants from all groups, with the exception of Greater Manchester College and Lewisham College, contributed to this survey.

> war is a time full of turmoil and love and, with these being heightened due to war, to ignore them in a film during WW2 would be a huge mistake, it would be missing a huge chunk of what makes war, war…. I also like how many different social factors this film covered, attitudes and consequences of war, gender inequality, homosexuality, (arguably)mental disability, fear of communism and distrust between allies, governmental secrecy. (MSP24, Cambridgeshire College, M, White – British)

This highly engaged and thoughtful response touches on many of the film's strengths, according to the survey respondents. MSP24 alludes to the historical setting, but appears to particularly appreciate the ways in which the emotional experiences of the characters are foregrounded within the narrative. The list of issues that he sees the film as addressing demonstrates that the film also appeals to the audience through the highlighting of identifiable social issues. Seven other participants commented explicitly on the representation of LGBT identities, but others agreed with MSP24 that the film also explored many other issues that can be considered as relevant in contemporary society: 'I liked the fact the film explored more modern issues (sexuality/socialising issues/etc) in the wartime setting as it made it more relatable and added more realism than I normally see in historical films.' (MSP35, Somerset College, F, White – any other background).

This question of relevance appears to be important in understanding the participants' responses to this film. For each of the five films and television programmes in the study, the participants were asked to rate how relevant they found them to their own lives. The responses to these questions differed substantially from the approach of my general pilot study respondents. Although the participants of my pilot research, who were drawn from a far broader age range, were generally able to find parallels between the narratives of period dramas and their own lives, my main survey participants tended to report that they could find little of relevance to their own lives in the period dramas they watched in the study. Chart 4.3 indicates the average ratings for relevance that each of the five case studies received, and we can see from this that *The Imitation Game* was considered to be the most relevant of the five.

When considering the question of relevance, many of the participants took a rather literal approach, such as these responses given in relation to *Peaky Blinders*:

> I'm not smuggling guns (MSP7, Waltham Forest, M, Black-Caribbean)

> I'm not working class or from Birmingham so it was hard to relate to (MSP35, Somerset College, F, White – any other background)

Other participants found the temporal difference to be too much of a barrier for them to recognise much of relevance to their lives:

> It's set in the past and society has completly changed since then. (MSP19, Norfolk College, F, White – British)

> I wouldn't say it is relevant to society today because living conditions and working conditions are a lot better now. (MSP79, Greater Manchester College, F, White – British)

Some participants did find more relevance to their lives, as in the following comments:

> Although the living conditions today is better than shown in the drama. I can recognise similarities with the poor being exploited. It gets better but it it hasn't changed (MSP11, Waltham Forest College, F, Any other background)
>
> it is quite relevant in regards to mental health. also, the links to terrorism is in some ways relevant (MSP31, Somerset College, F, White – British)
>
> It shows you how society at the time had its issues with major gang violence and ideological differences (MSP81, Greater Manchester College, M, White – British)

Despite the fact that some participants were able to find themes that related to their own lives, or the society they live in, as the low relevance rating indicates, many participants struggled to see *Peaky Blinders* as having much to say to them about their own experiences.

As Chart 4.3 shows, *Belle* was considered slightly more relevant, receiving the second highest rating, although this was still reasonably low, at 2.6 out of 5.[23] Unsurprisingly, this increased perception of relevance was due to the film's exploration of ethnic difference, as the following examples illustrate:

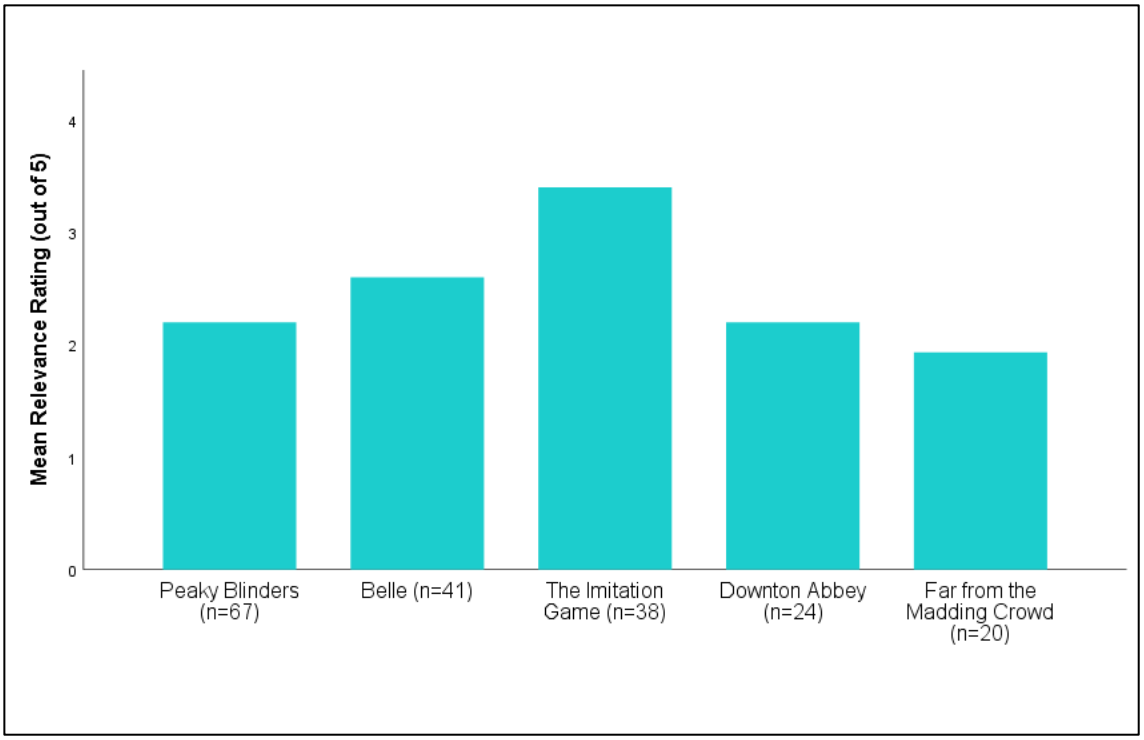

Chart 4.3 Average relevance ratings for each of the screenings, drawn from each of the five Post-Screening Surveys

[23] This chart compares ratings gathered from different surveys, and therefore uses a variable number of participants in each column. The *Peaky Blinders* survey includes participants from all groups, apart from Lewisham College. The surveys on *Belle* and *The Imitation Game* includes all groups apart from Greater Manchester College and Lewisham. The *Downton Abbey* survey includes Cambridgeshire College, Camden School, Haringey School, Lancashire College, Norfolk College and Somerset College. The *Far from the Madding Crowd* survey includes Cambridgeshire College, Camden School, Haringey School, Lancashire College and Norfolk College.

> Racism is still around, personally i haven't been affected by it, but it still annoys me that people hate someone just for their skin colour. (MSP20, Norfolk College, F, White – British)

> Racism still exists, whether we want to believe it or not and as a black woman, i need to fight 10 x harder than the next person to achieve what i want, Belle's character portrayed that at a time where racism was at it's peak. (MSP88, Waltham Forest College, no Initial Survey data provided)

However, even the treatment of a pressing contemporary issue such as racism was not enough to make *Belle* appear more relevant to the participants than *The Imitation Game*. The subject of this film's relevance was a frequent point of discussion in focus groups, as this edited extract from the Norfolk College, demonstrates. The extract follows on from a question asked by me regarding which of the case studies felt relevant to the participants in the group.

> MSP13: Only really *The Imitation Game* for me, and that's because it had an effect on World War II…
>
> ….
>
> SG: So you see that as having a…
>
> MSP13: Well it just affected everyone really, or everyone in the UK at least, if that didn't happen then… it would be a lot different…
>
> SG: OK
>
> MSP17: I'd probably say *The Imitation Game* as well because I learnt the history of World War II in high school, and here, so… yeah….
>
> SG: So it was kind of about events that you had some familiarity with?
>
> MSP17: Yeah, well… kind of…
>
> (laughter)
>
> MSP17: I didn't really know that much about the Enigma code but…
>
> SG: OK, but you could put it into context, in terms of what it was about.
>
> MSP17: Yeah.
>
> MSP20: Also with *The Imitation Game*, it's got like, people like… it's like a true story so you've got MI… people like MI5 and people like that…
>
> SG: Mm-hm
>
> MSP20: Is it MI5 or MI6?
>
> SG: MI…6… I think.

MSP20: Yeah, and erm… like, we've still got them now, so you're kind of like, looking at that with them back then, that's what happened…they like… organised that, so what are they doing now, kinda?

SG: So, the world of *The Imitation Game* is more recognisable to you…

MSP20: Yeah

SG: …because it's more similar to the world that we live in now?

MSP13: Yeah[24]

The more recent nature of events depicted in *The Imitation Game*, along with the participants' perceptions of the importance of Alan Turing's contribution to the victory of the Allied forces, appears to have been a significant feature in their increased sense of relevance to their own lives. This subject was also covered by the Camden School participants:

MSP68: *The Imitation Game*…

MSP71: Yeah, *The Imitation Game*

MSP72: Why is that relevant? Oh, history…

MSP64: It's a major part of us winning the war…

SG: Because of winning the war?

MSP64: It was a major part of us winning the war…

SG: Oh OK… and that feels relevant to you guys?

MSP72: No

MSP68: Well it's quite recent history…[25]

Despite MSP72's scepticism, the other participants in this discussion appear to agree that *The Imitation Game*'s depiction of recent history, and a feeling that the society they live in could have been very different had events taken a different course, makes it feel relevant to their own lives. However, this was not the only reason why participants described it as feeling relevant to them, as seen in this extract from the Lancashire College focus group:

MSP25: It definitely made me compare my life to theirs…

SG: Mm-hm?

MSP25: …and the way things have changed, and it's not actually been that long…

[24] All participants from Norfolk College, MSP13 (M, White – British), MSP17 (M, White – British), MSP20 (F, White – British). The group were recruited as a whole class, studying Media Studies BTEC.
[25] All participants from Camden School and male, ethnicities as follows: MSP68 (White – British), MSP71 (Asian – Indian), MSP72 (Mixed – White and Black African), MSP64 (Mixed – White and Black Caribbean). The group were recruited through a Media Studies department, but were not all drawn from the same class.

SG: Mm-hm

MSP25: …over a short period of time, so much has changed.

SG: Was there anything in particular that made you think that?

MSP25: Probably *The Imitation Game*…

MSP29: Yeah

MSP25: Cos it's the invention of what we have today…

MSP29: Computers

SG: Yeah

MSP26: I mean, admittedly, they were like three times the size of a house, but that's beside the point. And it did three plus three after about an hour, but, not, still… technology.[26]

Here the participants focus on the development of computer technology, as portrayed within the film, relating the work of Alan Turing shown in the film to their own experiences. Elsewhere, a participant in the Haringey School focus group found yet another source of relevance in *The Imitation Game*:

MSP84: I think *The Imitation Game* too, because I'm LGBT so I'm like… that could… if…

MSP95: Mmm

MSP84: I'm sure it's slightly different to men in the past I think, but that could have been…

MSP95: yeah…

MSP84: a fate (laughing) that could have become me… which is really… which is really awful, to think about.

This participant also reported that:

MSP84: …. after *The Imitation Game* the first time I watched it I looked up the laws around homosexuality and when they changed in the UK.[27]

Whilst she was the only participant who reported researching homosexuality laws as a response to watching this film, several other participants also reported that they had researched Alan Turing and the breaking of the Enigma code following a viewing of the film. As with *Belle,* the claims this film makes about representing real events encouraged some participants to seek out more information, further highlighting the extent to which the

[26] All participants from Lancashire College, MSP25 (F, White – British), MSP29 (M, White – British), MSP26 (M, White – British). The group were recruited through a Media Studies teacher, and were drawn from the same class.

[27] Both participants from Haringey School, MSP84 (F, Mixed – White and Black Caribbean), MSP95 (No Initial Survey data provided). The participants were recruited through an English and Media Studies teacher, but recruitment was not confined to these subjects.

participants felt interest in the characters and narrative, in addition to their sense of its relevance to their own experiences.

The other feature of *The Imitation Game* that proved popular with the participants was its star, Benedict Cumberbatch. Whilst five of the survey respondents reported that they liked the actors or quality of the acting in general, and two identified the presence of Keira Knightley as something they particularly liked about the film, nine participants named Cumberbatch in their response to this question. This is consistent with the pilot research, in which my teenage pilot focus group (PFG) participants, who were drawn from a Film Studies university course, described him as 'a young person's star' (PFG8) and 'one of the stars of our generation' (PFG9). The participants in my main study were similarly enthusiastic about Cumberbatch's appeal. The girls in the Haringey School departed from this a little, with MSP84 agreeing that he was 'great in *The Imitation Game*… great in *Sherlock*… but sometimes I do feel that I'm being hit over the head with him…'. There was little sense of overexposure amongst the other participants though, as these extracts from the Lancashire College focus group show:

> MSP26:… It was important and it was clever and it was well done – and it had Benedict Cumberbatch in it, but that's irrelevant…. Any film with Benedict Cumberbatch gets 5 stars…
>
> (some laughter)
>
> MSP26: Um… he's a good actor… he's a very good actor… and that's all I have to say on that…
>
> (some laughter)
>
> ….
>
> MSP29: ...I really enjoyed it just because of, the acting, the performances, everything, the whole idea of telling the story that should have been told years and years ago but was kept under wraps because…
>
> MSP26: It was Benedict Cumberbatch wasn't it?
>
> (some laughter)
>
> MSP29: Yes.
>
> MSP26: Admit it, admit it to yourself it was Benedict Cumberbatch.
>
> MSP29: Yeah, I'm partial to Benedict Cumberbatch…
>
> MSP26: there we go.
>
> SG: Um… I've found that Benedict Cumberbatch seems to be quite a popular, um… actor amongst your age group. Like… is there any reason for that, would you say?
>
> MSP25: Sherlock Holmes
>
> MSP92: *Sherlock*, yeah.
>
> MSP26: That's it, yeah, that's…

MSP29: If you want to know the truth, I've only actually seen one season of *Sherlock*.

(gasp)

MSP25: I think *Doctor Strange* as well, that's probably another one…

MSP92: Yeah.

MSP26: Yeah, he's been in a lot of stuff that a lot of people have watched.

MSP29: Yeah, I mean Benedict Cumberbatch is a fantastic actor.

MSP92: Yeah, he's one of those things… he's in everything…

MSP26: Also, *The Hobbit*…

MSP29: Yes… *The Desolation of Smaug*

MSP25: Yeah[28]

And these extracts from the Camden School focus group:

SG: So you like Benedict Cumberbatch…

MSP71?: Yeah, he's a very good actor…

MSP68: Yeah, I like his role in *Sherlock* too…

?: And he's in the Avengers too..

MSP72: Yeah he always plays good detectives… that kind of smart, genius kind of guy…

MSP68: Yeah, *Doctor Strange*… have you seen *Doctor Strange* Miss?

SG: I have, yes.

MSP68: That's a good film…

MSP71: He's very good at getting into character…[29]

And these from the Norfolk College group:

SG: So what was it about *The Imitation Game* that you liked so much?

MSP13: Benedict…

Several people: Cumberbatch

(some laughter)

[28] All participants from Lancashire College, MSP26 (M, White – British), MSP29 (M, White – British), MSP25 (F, White – British), MSP92 (No Initial Survey data provided). The group were recruited through a Media Studies teacher and were drawn from the same class.

[29] All participants from Camden School and male, ethnicities as follows: MSP71 (Asian – Indian), MSP68 (White – British), MSP72 (Mixed – White and Black African). The group were recruited through a Media Studies department, but were not all drawn from the same class.

MSP13: Him, he's a cool actor.

SG: Yes?

MSP18: He portrayed him… really well.[30]

As these extracts show, whilst the Haringey School participants were less enthusiastic, the consensus was that Cumberbatch is an actor with a huge level of appeal for this age group. It is worth noting that most of the groups are entirely made up of participants who are studying a Media Studies course, and their wide-ranging knowledge of his work may be partly due to this. However, this feature of the groups does not, on its own, explain the prominence of this one actor's work in the discussion. A noticeable feature of the extracts is the amount of laughter that the discussion of Cumberbatch elicits. This often appears to arise from the fact that the group members have been able to anticipate the responses of their peers, such as in the Norfolk group, when several members of the group say 'Cumberbatch' at the same time, or MSP26's slightly coy admission of his enthusiasm for Cumberbatch, followed by his anticipation of MSP29's similar feelings. These exchanges highlight that Benedict Cumberbatch appears to have become more than simply an actor in their eyes. The way in which they can discuss their shared feelings about him means that Cumberbatch has become something of a common currency between them; their discussions of their shared experiences of enjoying his work bind the groups together, elevating him to the role of a cultural cipher, representative of these groups' cohesiveness.

Clearly, the references to Cumberbatch's role in the Marvel films would serve as one explanation for his popularity, but given the huge range of actors within this particular franchise, it does not explain the levels of enthusiasm for this actor that are evident within the quoted extracts. Whilst Cumberbatch's age and previous work would not seem to make him an obvious candidate for such universal approval from teenagers, the statement by PFG8 that he is a 'young person's star' may provide the best explanation for this. It seems that by being 'in a lot of stuff that a lot of people have watched' (MSP26 – quoted above), Cumberbatch has become associated with the culture of young people. This association has something of a self-perpetuating nature to it, with many young people now enjoying his work largely because of his presence in it. I argued above that familiarity with genre characteristics or 'mood-cues' impacted on the responses of participants to *Belle*, but here we can see another form of familiarity informing the responses: familiarity with Cumberbatch's star persona, which these participants all appear to accept as having direct relevance to their own lives and culture.

I have already noted that *The Imitation Game* proved to be the most popular of the five case studies. This was also evidenced through the responses to the survey question about what they did not enjoy about the film. Whilst all the other films and television programmes managed to attract criticism from several participants, the responses to this film are characterised by their struggle to identify anything to dislike. Many participants left this space blank, with another 14 stating they couldn't find anything to criticise ('I'm sorry, I don't have anything. I genuinely just loved it.' (MSP24, Cambridgeshire College, M, White – British). Just four questioned the use of multiple timeframes, which they felt to be either confusing or unnecessary (although it is worth noting that other participants felt that the use of flashbacks within the narrative structure was an enjoyable feature of the film), and one questioned 'Mark

[30] Both participants from Norfolk College, MSP13 (M, White – British), MSP18 (F, White – British). The group were recruited as a class, and were all studying Media Studies BTEC.

strongs poorly tailored suit.' (MSP26, Lancashire College, M, White – British), but the vast majority only found positive things to say about the film.

The near universal approval that this film garnered from my participants was unique within the study, and appears to result from the many ways in which this film holds relevance in the eyes of the participants. Significantly, it has the most recent setting of all the case study dramas, increasing the ease with which participants could relate the events of the film. More than this though, *The Imitation Game*'s engagement with currently topical social issues such as homophobia, gender discrimination, social isolation and disability also encouraged the participants to find relevance to their own lives. These considerations, coupled with the casting of a star with high levels of cultural cache for this age group, also led to the perception that this was a film that could speak to the participants in ways that other case studies could not.

Downton Abbey

As discussed in Chapter 2, *Downton Abbey* was included in the study because I considered it to be the most archetypal period drama of recent years. As Chart 4.4 shows, it was indeed the case study that the participants had the greatest familiarity with.[31] Whilst marginally more had seen *The Imitation Game* before watching it as part of the study, when we combine the proportions who had either seen the film or television programme with those who hadn't seen

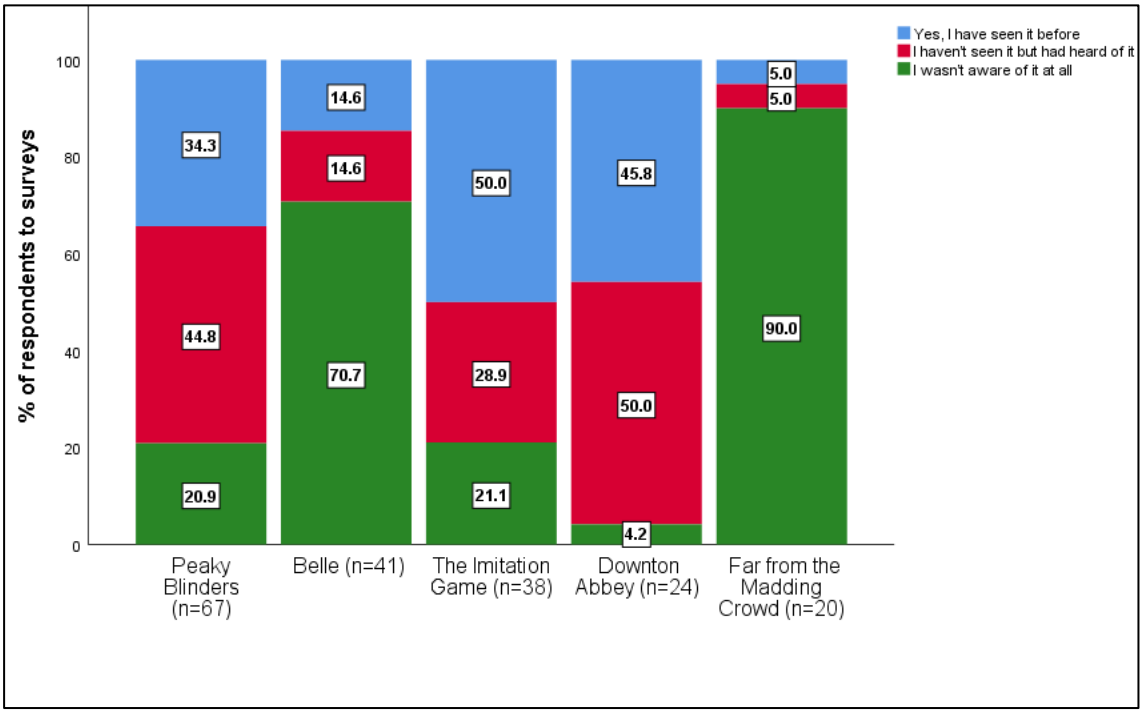

Chart 4.4 Familiarity of respondents to post-screening surveys with each of the five films and television programmes, drawn from responses to each of the five Post-Screening Surveys

[31] This chart compares ratings gathered from different surveys, and therefore uses a variable number of participants in each column. The *Peaky Blinders* survey includes participants from all groups, apart from Lewisham College. The surveys on *Belle* and *The Imitation Game* includes all groups apart from Greater Manchester College and Lewisham. The *Downton Abbey* survey includes Cambridgeshire College, Camden School, Haringey School, Lancashire College, Norfolk College and Somerset College. The *Far from the Madding Crowd* survey includes Cambridgeshire College, Camden School, Haringey School, Lancashire College and Norfolk College.

it but had heard of it, we can see that *Downton Abbey* is familiar to a greater proportion of participants than any of the other examples. It was raised by a small number of respondents to the Initial Survey as being a typically British television programme, and four of the 24 respondents who submitted responses to the survey on *Downton Abbey* reported that they had been introduced to the drama by family members.[32] Many respondents to this survey reported having expectations based on their prior knowledge of the drama. These expectations might be positive ('I knew the general setting. I expected it to be good as I do like period dramas.' (MSP33, Somerset College, F, Asian – any other background)) or negative ('Didn't want to see it. Didn't expect much' (MSP26, Lancashire College, M, White – British)), or simply demonstrate preconceptions about the content and themes ('I only knew it was about a posh old household, nothing else. I expected there to be an emphasis on classes and was not disappointed' (MSP24, Cambridgeshire College, M, White – British)). Overall, most participants watching this episode had some idea of what to expect, based on their prior knowledge of the series.

Downton Abbey received an average rating of 3.3, making it the joint lowest-rated film and television programme in the study. However, as Charts 4.1 and 4.2 suggest, it tended to inspire less strength of feeling than some of the other examples. This is particularly surprising given the fact that the participants tended to come to the screenings with preconceptions that were likely to influence their responses to the drama. Although only a very small proportion of Summative Survey respondents selected it as their favourite film or television show from the study, as Chart 4.2 shows, it tended to inspire less outright hatred than some others as well. As with the film and television dramas discussed above, the historical setting of this drama was one of its most popular elements. Of the 24 respondents to the survey on *Downton Abbey*, nine answered the question about what they liked about the episode by commenting on the setting and historical details featured, as in this response: 'I liked the settings in the programme as they were quite beautiful since the abbey is a huge upper class place.' (MSP95, Haringey School, no Initial Survey data submitted).

Significantly, only one respondent to the question on what they liked about the episode commented that they had found the storyline interesting. This had tended to be a reasonably common reason given for liking the previous three examples, so it is notable that *Downton Abbey* did not inspire this form of response in many participants. Indeed, the most common reason (with nine comments) for not liking the drama was the lack of interesting incidents within the episode. Instead, participants were more likely to comment on their enjoyment of the acting (five comments) or characterisation in the drama (six comments). The former issue particularly appears divisive however, as 4 respondents also commented that they did not enjoy the acting, with one suggesting that 'The slightly over the top acting style can be quite cringey.' (MSP84, Haringey School, F, Mixed – White and Black Caribbean). Discussing *Downton Abbey* in the focus group, this participant expanded on her perception of the style of the drama, as shown in this edited extract:

> MSP84: It seemed a bit like a stereotype I realised. Like it seems like a… all the other [films and television programmes in the study] seemed to be verging away from the stereotypes, sort of…

[32] Participants from Cambridgeshire College, Camden School, Haringey School, Lancashire College, Norfolk College and Somerset College contributed to this survey.

SG: Mm-hm?

MSP84: …of erm….

MSP95: Yeah

MSP84: …kind of the period…

SG: Yes

MSP84: Whereas *Downton* seems to be very firmly, you've got the people who work for them, and you've got the white upper class family who are not particularly interesting and they're just talking about inheritance and they don't care about the people who died…

SG: Mm-hm?

MSP84: On the Titanic. (laughing)

MSP95: So true…

MSP84: And it seems so much like a stereotype of the time…

MSP95: Mm, that's so true.

SG: But it does seem to cover a lot of different issues doesn't it?

MSP84: Yeah…

SG: I mean, within that one episode you've got kind of, class, gender… er… sexuality, disability… er…

….

MSP84: But yeah it does cover those issues but…

SG: But it still feels…

MSP95: But again, that's a lot of things pushed into one…

MSP84: Yeah… and there's no…. focus….

MSP95: You want kind of one… yeah, focus…

MSP84: Focus.

SG: But even despite that broad span of issues, your general impression is still that it's quite stereotypical period drama?

MSP95: Considering like everything in it, I think it is…

MSP84: Yeah…

MSP95: Much more than the other ones, I reckon…

MSP84: It's what I think of when I think of like, upper class people, back in the day.

MSP95: Yes…

(laughter)[33]

I observed in Chapter 2 that I may have underestimated the extent to which *Downton Abbey* departs from period genre archetypes in the broad range of representation in this opening episode. However, as this discussion illustrates, despite the drama's exploration of the experiences of many different social groups, including minority groups, these participants' perceptions of the drama are that it adheres very firmly to the stereotypical features of a period drama, with its focus on 'upper class people, back in the day'. This perception is evident in many of the responses on the relevance of the drama. As Chart 4.3 shows, this television show received a low rating for relevance, and the centrality of class oppositions within the drama appears to be a key contributor to this feeling:

> Edwardian upper upper classes worry about their 100 room house. Wish I had their problem. (MSP26, Lancashire College, M, White – British)

> The programme wasn't very relevant to myself or society today as the entire show is set within the abbey which is a very upper class location. At the time they all had servants working for then which i cannot relate to. Therefore the storylines that developed from this do not relate to me in any way. (MSP95, Haringey School, no Initial Survey data submitted)

Here again the participants show a keen awareness of class representation, belying the apparent lack of interest in class that the data reported in the previous chapter appeared to suggest. For both of these participants the class identities depicted in the episode are defining features for them, and in both cases lead to a sense of alienation from the drama. A small number of participants did recognise relatable features in the drama, either in characteristics of individual characters, or through the recognition of the way that society has progressed in relation to issues explored within the narrative of the episode. However, many respondents also found the rigid class structures around which the story is organised to be too alienating to allow any reflection on personal identification. I noted that this response was also present in the reactions to *Peaky Blinders*, but the pattern is even more pronounced here. As noted above, *Peaky Blinders* did lead participants to reflect on social issues within society today. Whilst these dramas are set only seven years apart, and both explore the lives of working class characters in some detail, the very different setting of *Downton Abbey*, with its aesthetic focus on the upper class lifestyle, appears to have mitigated any likelihood that the range of characters and experiences represented would make the drama widely relatable to this audience.

As with the responses of some participants to *Belle*, the adherence to many period drama conventions appears to have obscured any attempts within the drama to highlight issues of social inequality. Indeed, this pattern of response appears to be in line with Andrew Higson's oft-cited arguments that heritage drama routinely fails to live up to the promise of progressive narrative elements due to the tendency to over-celebrate the materialist beauty associated

[33] Both participants from Haringey School, MSP84 (F, Mixed – White and Black Caribbean), MSP95 (No Initial Survey submitted). Participants were recruited through an English and Media Studies teacher, although recruitment was not confined to these subjects.

with the upper-class lifestyle.[34] Whilst MSP95 does acknowledge the beauty of the spectacle of *Downton Abbey* (in the statement quoted above), she finds little of relevance to her own life in the drama, resulting in a total lack of engagement with the dramatic action. She even joked in the focus group discussion about the likelihood that she would watch any more episodes:

> MSP84: But I mean, some of the characters are semi-loveable and I mean…
>
> SG: Mm-hm? Only semi-loveable?
>
> MSP84: Yep, but I also…. I mean some, yeah, they're alright… a lot them just die…
>
> SG: Don't spoil it!
>
> MSP95: Jeez, I was so gonna watch it as well![35]

Again, the use of humour operates to highlight a shared understanding. Here MSP95's use of sarcasm emphasises the extreme unlikelihood that she would ever choose to watch this programme again. Although she can appreciate the aesthetic features of the drama, these are insufficient to engage her interest.

However, whilst what they perceive as the 'stereotypical' nature of *Downton Abbey* led to a lack of engagement from many participants, it is also clear that the storylines exploring the experiences of minority groups did impact on many participants. When asked to state which moments from the episode had most stood out to them, the vast majority of respondents identified scenes from the (rather brief) storyline involving footman Thomas's homosexual affair with the Duke of Crowborough, or the more prominent storyline exploring Bates, the new valet, and his struggles to find employment due to a physical disability. Whilst only two respondents identified scenes focussing on the experiences of the aristocratic members of the household, and one further participant stated that she 'particularly liked seeing how different classes were portrayed and the social issues that arose.' (MSP33, Somerset College, F, Asian – any other background), these scenes exploring the struggles of minority groups attracted a lot more attention in this question. The scene in which Thomas's love affair is revealed was referred to by five participants several of whom seemed to enjoy the surprise revelation towards the end of the episode: 'The unexpected gay kiss, as it was a twist I didn't expect, and it was a shock to the audience.' (MSP25, Lancashire College, F, White – British). A further 10 respondents commented on scenes from Bates's storyline, with some discussing a scene in which he is deliberately knocked to the ground by a fellow servant, and others commenting on a moment at the very end of the episode in which his sacking is suddenly rescinded by Lord Grantham.

Given the large numbers of characters and storylines introduced in this episode, it is significant that the respondents are so unanimous in their choices of 'stand out moments'. While the drama appears to have failed to make an impact on many participants, with low ratings for

[34] See Andrew Higson, 'Re-presenting the National Past: Nostalgia and Pastiche in the Heritage Film', in *Fires Were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism*, ed. by Lester D. Friedman, 2nd edn (London: Wallflower Press, 2006), pp. 91-109.

[35] Both participants from Haringey School, MSP84 (F, Mixed – White and Black Caribbean), MSP95 (No Initial Survey submitted). Participants were recruited through an English and Media Studies teacher, although recruitment was not confined to these subjects.

enjoyment and relevance, it is noteworthy that the most impactful narrative moments are those with what might be considered a more progressive agenda. Despite some rather ambivalent responses to *Downton Abbey*, this pattern may suggest that, consistent with my initial hypothesis, the participants are more positively inclined towards period drama representations that depart from the stereotypical focus on upper-class experience and provide space for more diverse representation. Indeed, the emergence of the concept of the stereotypical period drama, with its rather uninspiring associations, at this point in the study, suggests that the ways in which the previous three films and episodes, as MSP84 puts it, 'verg[e] away from the stereotypes' are key contributors to the stronger (although far from uniform) responses garnered by these texts.

I noted earlier that the genre conventions adhered to by *Belle* played a significant role in determining how participants responded to this film. Some participants were able to appreciate the novelty in the way in which black British history was woven into the more traditional period drama aesthetics of *Belle*, fully buying into the emotional journey of the characters and showing evidence of both intellectual and emotional engagement with the film that continued long after the screening had finished. However, despite also exploring the experiences of various socially disadvantaged groups, this episode of *Downton Abbey* could not rouse participants to engage more enthusiastically with the story or characters. Whilst it did not inspire the strength of dislike that its archetypal period drama status might appear to invite (or indeed that many other case studies garnered from different groups of participants), neither did this case study yield passionate approval in some participants to the extent that all four other case studies did.

Far from the Madding Crowd

Far from the Madding Crowd was the final screening in the study, and consequently received the smallest number of survey responses, with only 20 submitted.[36] However, as Charts 4.1 and 4.2 show, in contrast to the rather flat responses to *Downton Abbey* it was one of the most divisive screenings, provoking strong reactions from those participants that did watch it. I attended four screenings of this film, and observed that it tended to provoke a more participatory response in all but one of the screenings. This could take different forms. The Norfolk College group responded positively to the film, for instance, with several members of the group reacting to significant plot moments with verbal responses and physical gestures. This group, who had been relatively quiet for the preceding four screenings, showed a consistent level of engagement that I had not observed in any of their other screenings, with frequent low-level discussion centred around the film, and occasional more pronounced reactions when they were taken by surprise by events in the plot. This was reflected in the survey responses to the film, when the participants were asked to comment on what they had liked about it:

> I really liked the suspense and how us a group were all interacting making it more interesting (MSP19, Norfolk College, F, White – British)

[36] Participants from Cambridgeshire College, Camden School, Haringey School, Lancashire College and Norfolk College contributed to this survey.

> The multiple plot twists and the farmer guy (MSP13, Norfolk College, M, White – British)
>
> The development of the characters and how it took the main character so long to realise what she actually wanted. It was really engaging (MSP18, Norfolk College, F, White – British)

As these responses indicate, this group found watching *Far from the Madding Crowd* highly enjoyable. The narrative of the film involves a somewhat convoluted love story, in which the protagonist, Bathsheba Everdene, negotiates the attentions of three different men. The comment by MSP13, who describes the film as having 'multiple plot twists', indicates the extent to which the narrative of the source novel has had to be compressed in order to fit the entire story into a two hour film. I shall return to this subject in Chapter 6, but it is worth noting here that this feature of the storytelling does lend the film a rather contrived quality at times. This did not escape the attentions of this group, as the focus group discussion showed:

> SG: … did the fact that, erm, they were set in a more distant time period mean that you weren't able to relate to that?
>
> MSP13: Yeah, cos everything's a lot different now really.
>
> SG: OK
>
> MSP13: Everything like… dunno… just all is really…
>
> SG: Mm-hm?
>
> MSP19: Even like, with the whole love situation, I wouldn't go out with someone and be like, 'will you marry me', like, ten minutes after I've met them.
>
> (general agreement)
>
> SG: You seemed to be finding that quite funny, in…
>
> MSP13: Yeah…
>
> MSP19: It's just quite weird!
>
> MSP13: It is quite funny, it is really weird…
>
> MSP19: Why would you go up to someone and be like, 'You've got a farm and a piano… I'm gonna marry you'…
>
> (general laughter)
>
> SG: It's a fair point!
>
> MSP19: It's all they seemed to want, was like a farm and a piano like, that's it, they'd be sorted for life…[37]

Whilst *Far from the Madding Crowd* isn't named in this extract, the examples referenced by MSP19 are all clearly drawn from the film. Here the group are attributing the features they

[37] Both participants from Norfolk College, MSP13 (M, White – British), MSP19 (F, White – British). The group were recruited as a class, and were all study Media Studies BTEC.

perceived to be 'funny' and 'weird' to the fact that courtship rituals were different in previous centuries. Whilst this is undoubtedly true, I would also suggest that the slightly ridiculous nature of some of the interactions within the film are a result of the condensing of the narrative of the 400-page source novel. This group have clearly recognised these qualities within the film, but their awareness of them has not impacted on their enjoyment.

In contrast, the Lancashire group also had a very participatory response to the screening of the film, but for completely different reasons. Whilst the Norfolk College group had found it an entertaining viewing experience, this group responded to the film with a passionate hatred. This is best illustrated through one of the many extracts in which the film was discussed in the focus group:

> SG: … Right – I'm just going to grab the bull by the horns… so we've just been watching *Far from the Madding Crowd*…
>
> MSP26: God…
>
> SG: Erm… from my observations, I felt that you were more responsive to this film than you were to the other ones that we've watched…
>
> MSP26: As in we passionately hated it!
>
> SG: OK, yeah… as in… you were verbally responding to it more, gesturing more… would you… could you… would you have any idea as to why that was?
>
> MSP26: Because it was so horrible that we felt like we had to comment!
>
> MSP92: I think that it's more…. Like *Far from the Madding Crowd* is kind of what everybody expects a historical drama to be. So it was all of the conventions coming out, all of the clichés, so I feel like… we were kind of responding because we could predict what was going to happen, in a way.
>
> SG: OK.
>
> MSP26: Didn't really need to watch it then!
>
> (general laughter)
>
> SG: Anyone else want to…
>
> MSP25: The film's storyline went really really quickly, and then really really slowly, and it was just infuriating.
>
> MSP26: Yeah, it moved too quickly as a story, and yet dragged at the same time...
>
> SG: OK.
>
> MSP26: How is that possible?
>
> SG: So it was your infuriation… if that's a word?
>
> MSP26: It was annoying, yeah.

MSP25: Yeah.

MSP26: It felt at times that it was trying to be a rom-com…

SG: Mm-hm?

MSP26: And you had that weird love… square…

(laughter)

MSP26: You can't even call it a triangle cos it was a square…

SG: Uh-huh.

MSP25: Three guys.

MSP26: Three guys and one girl, and none of them wanted to be in that…

SG: Mm-hm

MSP26: None of them were interested…

SG: OK

MSP25: It wasn't… she wasn't… so confused…

MSP26: You started at the start of it like… this woman who didn't want to get married, she just wanted to like, focus on her farm and you were like, 'ok, cool, you go for that', and then at the end you were like 'why…?'

MSP25: Why (laughing)

MSP26: Why do you feel compelled to be married? You've got a farm! You don't need a man to run a farm. Actually, you do, you need several, but you don't need to be married to any of them to run your farm![38]

This extract demonstrates the enthusiastically negative response the film received from this group. This group was recruited from one Media Studies teaching group, and their ease with discussing films together is in evidence here, as is their critical skill, with the criticism taking in features such as the generic features and the narrative construction. The complex love story that engaged the Norfolk group appears to have highly frustrated the Lancashire participants. I look in detail at responses to the character of Bathsheba in Chapter 5, so I will not explore them here, but it is worth noting that the character development that was so enjoyable for MSP18 had the opposite effect on this group, with MSP26 finding her reactions to the various men that she encounters almost offensively anti-feminist. The 'plot twists' enjoyed by the Norfolk group are here characterised as a 'weird love… square', and instead of finding the narrative 'engaging', the Lancashire participants perceived it as 'just infuriating'. Here we can see very different viewing strategies in play. Whilst both groups have recognised similar

[38] All participants from Lancashire College, MSP26 (M, White – British), MSP92 (No Initial Survey submitted), MSP25 (F, White – British). The group were recruited through a Media Studies teacher, and belonged to the same class.

features within the storytelling, the Norfolk group appear to have made an unconscious choice to suspend their disbelief, invest in the film and simply allow themselves to enjoy it. In contrast, the Lancashire group are Stuart Hall's archetypal oppositional readers,[39] more interested in identifying flaws and contradictions within the film than in treating it as a piece of entertainment to be enjoyed. As with MSP84's objections to the stereotypical nature of *Downton Abbey*, *Far from the Madding Crowd* is perceived by this group as a 'convention[al]' 'historical drama', complete with 'all the cliches'. Once again, participants are attributing that which they don't like to the genre conventions of period drama, whilst implicitly approving of that which departs from these conventions. It is noteworthy, however, that these tastes, and the perception of what is stereotypical, varies between participants, and encompasses a range of different case studies.

In the post-screening survey responses to this film, its entertaining nature was the most popular reason for enjoying it, with nine comments on this aspect in answer to a question on what the participants liked about the film. These include the responses quoted above from the Norfolk group. This was the only film or television programme in the study that did not receive the highest number of comments on the setting or historical details in answer to this question. This feature did, however, receive the second highest number of comments (six). Whilst in the other surveys, the comments on setting often incorporated references to the historical period, here, the participants were more likely to reference the farms as an enjoyable feature of the setting, with only one of the six respondents linking this to the historical period. I have observed elsewhere that this adaptation of *Far from the Madding Crowd* is notable for its aesthetically pleasing approach to the Dorset landscapes, so this may be a contributing factor to the comments about the setting.[40] In addition to these features, the acting was also a popular aspect of the film, with five positive comments.

As the focus group extracts quoted above suggest, the feature most commented on in the question about what the participants did not like about the film was the nature of the love story, with five respondents indicating that they did not like the rather contrived nature of the romance plot. Examples include:

> I din't like the fact that there was three people wanting to marry the lead actress of the film. (MSP21, Norfolk College, M, White – British)

> The over arching theme was a bit tame, merely just about promiscuous romances that seemed both rushed and unlikely. (MSP24, Cambridgeshire College, M, White – British)

A further four respondents indicated that they had found the film boring or unengaging, consistent with the feelings described by the Lancashire group above.

As these responses show, this film was one of the most divisive, inspiring strong feelings of both enjoyment and frustration amongst the participants. I explore some features of these responses in more detail in Chapter 5, where I look at how the participants responded to the

[39] Jostein Gripsrud, *Understanding Media Cultures* (London: Hodder Education, 2002), p. 58, discussing Stuart Hall, *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse* (CCCS: Birmingham, 1973).
[40] Shelley Anne Galpin, ''200 Miles Outside London': The Tourist Gaze of *Far from the Madding Crowd*', in *Intercultural Screen Adaptation: British and Global Case Studies*, ed. by Michael Stewart and Robert Munro, (Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming 2020).

character of Bathsheba, and in Chapter 6, where I consider in more detail the impact that this film's position as a literary adaptation may have had on responses.

Conclusion

Through the diverse responses detailed in this chapter, the teenagers who participated in my study emerge as a set of individuals with hugely different responses to the same material. We can often see the participants' opinions being informed by the group situations in which they are situated, with members of the same group often reporting similar responses. However, taken as a whole, the participants demonstrate that any assumptions made about how 16-19 year olds as a group will feel about particular films or television programmes are likely to underestimate the extent to which reactions within this age group can vary. Films such as *Belle* and *Far from the Madding Crowd* are not films that would typically be linked with this age group, due to their adherence to many period drama characteristics, such as slow-paced plotting and a focus on female protagonists and their romantic encounters, but both received many positive reactions. On the other hand, a television series such as *Peaky Blinders*, which might be considered closer to the material more associated with this age group, received surprisingly mixed responses. This data indicates that young people, just like the rest of the population, are highly diverse, and cannot be considered a homogenous group in terms of their taste in film and television.

The varied responses to the material screened in the study provide insights into the ways in which our opinions are formed, fully supporting the assertions of Liebes and Katz, that 'opinions are shaped and anchored' within a group context.[41] This level of variation does mean that my ability to draw conclusions about the likelihood that young people will engage more or less with particular period dramas based on their representational features alone is less strong. But the data does show that many participants are very alive to forms of representation in drama, and often comment on what they perceive to be positive or negative depictions of women, the working classes, or minority groups. Factors such as the context in which they view the material and their familiarity with or openness to genre characteristics or key stars play important roles in determining their overall response to the dramas. However, those that they perceive to be more progressive in their representation, or less stereotypical in relation to the conventions of period drama, are likely to receive positive endorsement from this age group. Whilst the participants appeared to find the issue of class less interesting than other areas of representation when completing the Initial Survey, their responses to these dramas demonstrate their keen awareness of this issue in action. Comments on the case study dramas frequently allude to the representation of social class, as do participants' reflections on their own abilities to relate to the texts, indicating that viewing these period dramas also encouraged participants to consider their own class identities.

The extent to which participants feel invested in the dramas also emerges as a significant factor. This can take many forms, such as finding in the dramas issues such as racism and homophobia that they can personally relate to, or can recognise as related to contemporary social issues. The investment might be more cerebral, such as perceiving the relevance of the solving of the Enigma code in shaping the modern world; or it might be emotional, such as the

[41] Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz, *The Export of Meaning: Cross-Cultural Readings of* Dallas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 156.

responses inspired by the personal struggles of characters such as Alan Turing and Dido Belle. What is notable though is that in many of these dramas the teenage audiences did find aspects with which they could engage, relate to and invest in. With this in mind, the data also suggests that the marketing of period dramas could do more to target younger audiences. Whilst both *Belle* and *Far from the Madding Crowd* received mixed responses from the participants, both also received many enthusiastically positive responses, indicating that this age group is a viable market for these films. However, as Chart 4.4 indicates, a high proportion of participants had no awareness of either of these films, suggesting that there is an audience for these films that is not currently being reached.

Finally, the regularity with which participants referred to historical details and settings as one of the features they most enjoyed about the dramas again suggests that period drama and young audiences are highly compatible. Considering the question of young people's responses to media texts, we do indeed see these young people being influenced by what they watch, but, as discussed in Chapter 1, this does not take the sinister form often projected by those with an instinctive fear of screen media. As the many participants who talked about researching historical details after screenings demonstrate, the experiences of viewing the case study dramas have inspired in some of these young people an interest in historical details, or social issues, that extend well beyond the end of the screening. Whilst this age group may not be the first to spring to mind when considering period drama audiences, many participants enjoyed these dramas because of their period settings, not in spite of them.

Chapter 5

Values, Emotion, Identity: Responses to Character

The participants in my study demonstrated a capacity to give surprisingly diverse responses to the same material. A defining hypothesis in the design of this study was my belief that period dramas featuring more diverse representation of characteristics such as ethnicity and class, might attract more positive reactions from these young people. As Chapters 3 and 4 have shown, the participants were very interested in areas such as the representation of women and minority groups; and, whilst we saw in Chapter 3 that they appeared to be less interested in the issue of class, the evidence of Chapter 4 is that they were still highly attuned to the ways in which this social issue is treated in the dramas featured in the study.

The case studies were selected with the purpose of giving the participants the opportunity to respond to dramas representing a broad range of demographic groups, and in this chapter I explore the responses to characters and characterisation in the various case study dramas. The characteristics considered here are gender, ethnicity and class, and the ways these can be seen to play a role in influencing how the participants react to the characters and to the dramas in general. Almost inseparable from this is the question of audience identification with characters, and the complex processes of emotional engagement that impact on the ways in which viewers respond to film and television texts. We have already seen in the Initial Survey that the participants reported enjoying films that they were able to invest in emotionally, or to which they could personally relate, and these dynamics continue to play a significant role in their reactions to the case studies. However, as has been much commented on, the processes by which audiences identify or emotionally engage with characters in films and television dramas is far from simple. I therefore begin by considering some of the ways in which these processes have been theorised, before going on to explore the responses of my participants to characters within the five films and television programmes included in the study.

Processes of Identification and Engagement

An obvious area of enquiry in this study would seem to be an exploration of the extent to which young people from specific backgrounds react more positively to characters representative of the demographic factors most similar to their own. Thus, it would seem pertinent to explore how participants from minority ethnic backgrounds responded to the biracial character of Dido in *Belle*, or whether male participants were more likely to respond positively to male-led dramas such as *Peaky Blinders* and *The Imitation Game*. In her study of heritage film audiences, Monk observes that her *Time Out* (TO) cohort, generally comprised of the younger and more liberal urban-based participants, tended to prefer period dramas 'that engaged with social issues or identity politics in ways they could frame as relevant to the present, or personally relevant to themselves.'[1] Whilst Monk's participants were all older than my teenage participants, the data gathered in my study allows me to explore the extent to which this tendency can also be recognised in even younger participants. The responses to

[1] Claire Monk, *Heritage Film Audiences: Period Films and Contemporary Audiences in the UK* (Edinburgh: EUP, 2011), p. 134.

different forms of representation and the treatment of identity politics are areas that I will explore in this chapter, but before I do it is worth noting the ways in which some apparently intuitive assumptions have been complicated by theoretical work on audience engagement.

As we saw in Chapter 1, many of the sources of moral panics surrounding the relationship between young people and the media derives from the notion of role-modelling, and an assumption that young people will 'identify' with characters or celebrities they see represented in media texts, and potentially engage in unhealthy or anti-social behaviours as a result of this identification. However, many writers have sought to point out the over-simplistic nature of such assumptions. Roberta Garrett observes that:

> Contemporary feminist approaches must… pick apart the seemingly obvious attraction between certain kinds of texts and viewers… while also acknowledging the pleasurable possibilities of gender cross-identification and audience engagement with texts that do not seem to speak to, reflect or engage with their subjectivity in any direct or obvious way. Feminist work on the lesbian, gay or black gaze or male identification with female victimhood… suggests that one of the chief pleasures of the cinematic experience is the considerable scope it offers for both trying on other identities and affirming our own identity and experience through that of others.[2]

Here Garrett highlights both the 'seemingly obvious attraction' that particular demographics feel towards specific genres and forms, and the need to acknowledge the diverse and far from obvious ways audiences find to identify with characters in films and television shows. Kristyn Gorton builds on this suggested deconstruction of simplistic notions of identification by emphasising that

> It is not simply that a viewer sees a character and *identifies* with them, rather it is a more complex process in which the emotional situation the character is in elicits a response while, at the same time, technical devices such as a close-up shot or music aids and develops this connection.[3]

Elsewhere she notes that Murray Smith has argued that words such as 'absorption' and 'empathy' can function as effectively as the idea of identification in capturing the ways in which audiences become emotionally engaged in the experiences of characters onscreen. This 'cognitive model', she explains, sees spectators 'relat[ing] to the emotions the characters experience rather than identi[fying] with the characters themselves.'[4]

Bev Skeggs and Helen Wood also draw on analyses of media reception that explore the importance of emotional response in their discussions of affect. Through their study into how women engage with and respond to various shows in the reality television genre, Skeggs and Wood also explore the complex process of attempting to predict how audiences will respond

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[2] Roberta Garrett, *Postmodern Chick Flicks: The Return of the Woman's Film* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007), p. 49.
[3] Kristyn Gorton, *Media Audiences: Television, Meaning and Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 151.
[4] Gorton, *Media Audiences*, p. 78, citing Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion and the Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

to the people featured in the shows selected for their study. By exploring the ways in which participants reacted to people participating in the reality shows, Skeggs and Wood identified highly shifting responses, in which participants 'constantly move between positions… from affective states to cognitive states.'[5] Skeggs and Wood argue that the inconsistencies they observe in the ways their participants respond to the texts appear to relate to 'histories of migration, race, gender and class' and they conclude that 'whilst we cannot predict what affects will do, how people will feel… we might be able to predict what social factors come to bear upon viewer's struggles for value and certainty.'[6] This implies that audience identification with the experiences of the figures in television shows is a factor in how they ultimately respond to those shows. Skeggs and Wood employ Michael Taussig's term, 'perspectival spectrality', meaning the use of personal perspective, based on an individual's experiences, to make sense of the texts they encounter. In doing so, they argue for the importance of an awareness of the personal histories of the participants in understanding their interpretations of the representations presented to them.[7] Nonetheless, the ability to emotionally engage with something represented in a television show is also a powerful influence. As Gorton notes, such emotional engagement does not require an identification with all aspects of a person, or a character in a drama. Skeggs and Wood conclude that affective responses are not necessarily stable, and audiences may shift in how they respond.

The complex nature of audience responses to characters was also something highlighted by researchers on The World *Lord of the Rings* Project. Discussing the German branch of the research project, Mikos, Eichner, Prommer and Wedel note that respondents' relationships with characters were significant in determining how they responded to the films. Whilst they note that other factors play a role in creating audience involvement in the film, these researchers state that 'in the case of *LotR* the recipients' relationships to characters… determine how fully audiences are absorbed in and "go along with" the film's events: the stronger the bond with one or more characters, the stronger the involvement in the film.'[8] In the case of *The Lord of the Rings*, the epic scale of the narrative and huge ensemble of characters with significant roles in the storyline made the exploration of audience relationships to the different characters a significant feature of the data analysis. For these films, the range of characters who could be selected as particularly important to individual respondents was very large, with no one character clearly marked as the central protagonist. This then allowed the researchers to explore patterns in the selection of favourite characters. The researchers noticed some tendencies within the data set, with younger respondents preferring some characters that were less popular with their older counterparts, and vice versa. They also noticed some gendered differences, with female respondents tending to select either characters to whom they felt attraction, or whose experiences they identified with (such as the few female characters in the films), whereas the male respondents appeared to select favourite characters based on the values they perceived them as embodying.[9]

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[5] Beverley Skeggs and Helen Wood, *Reacting to Reality Television: Performance, Audience and Value* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), p. 155.
[6] Skeggs and Wood, *Reacting to Reality Television*, pp. 155-6.
[7] Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (London: Routledge, 1993), quoted in Skeggs and Wood, *Reacting to Reality Television*, p. 148.
[8] Lothar Mikos, Susanne Eichner, Elizabeth Prommer and Michael Wedel, 'Involvement in *The Lord of the Rings*: Audience Strategies and Orientations', in *Watching The Lord of the Rings: Tolkien's World Audiences*, ed. by Martin Barker and Ernest Mathijs (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), p. 114.
[9] Mikos, Eichner, Prommer and Wedel, 'Involvement in *The Lord of the Rings*', p. 118.

Unlike *The Lord of the Rings* films, the majority of the films and television episodes featured in my study do have a clear protagonist, and the ways in which the respondents felt about this central character was therefore likely to impact significantly on their responses to the film or episode as a whole. This is particularly true of the films, which, constrained by the need to tell a contained story within a two-hour time frame, all place one clearly delineated character at the centre of the narrative. When asked to select a favourite character from the films, it is therefore unsurprising that the majority of respondents identified the protagonist. I will explore this issue in more detail below, but it is worth noting that there was one significant exception, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, the protagonist of which, Bathsheba Everdene, proved offensive to many participants for a variety of reasons. The question of how respondents identify with characters in the television dramas is slightly more complex. *Downton Abbey*, with its genuine ensemble of characters, comes closest to the model described in the discussion of *The Lord of the Rings*. It was therefore particularly interesting to explore the characters favoured by different participants for this example. As I argue in Chapter 2, whilst *Peaky Blinders* can be seen as more of an ensemble piece than the films featured in the study, the character of Tommy Shelby, played by the successful film actor Cillian Murphy, is identified within the episode as the leading character, and was therefore more likely to be selected by participants as a 'stand-out' character.

Finally, it is worth considering the significance of genre, in this case, period drama, when discussing processes of engagement. In discussing the women's picture and melodrama, Pam Cook notes that

> The distinction between masculine and feminine points of view is not always easy to maintain, particularly in melodrama where there is often a softening of sexual difference, and a merging of masculinity and femininity…. But if, as feminist film theory has argued, classic narrative cinema is marked by the predominance of a masculine perspective to which the feminine is subordinated, then it is important to ask what the consequences are of the apparent reversal of this state of affairs in the women's picture.[10]

Given that the period drama is one of the few genres that often privileges a feminine point of view, akin to the women's picture, Cook's observations are highly significant when considering the ways in which the participants interact with the case study dramas. Her argument that the masculine and the feminine can merge in melodramas may shed light on both the characterisation in the dramas featured in the study, and the participants' feelings towards them. Male characters, such as John Davinier in *Belle* or Gabriel Oak (Matthias Schoenaerts) in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, both of whom attracted positive comments from participants, can be seen to occupy feminised positions within the narrative, playing supporting roles in the personal growth of the female protagonist. Davinier is also a notably emotional character, a feature explicitly stated when Lord Mansfield advises him that he 'must learn to protect [his] emotions if [he] wish[es] to prevent matters both of law, and love, from devastating [him]'. Such advice further feminises the position of this character. In considering the ways in which male and female participants responded to these and other characters, it is therefore important to read their responses in the light of the treatment of male and female characters in the genre more generally.

[10] Pam Cook, *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), p. 78.

In addition to the narrative treatment and gendering of characters within the period drama genre, the ways in which these films and television programmes employ emotional engagement more generally through their storytelling is also a significant feature. Research carried out for the BFI looking at the impact of films in general found that 'three-quarters of… respondents thought that films can be a good way of making people think about difficult or sensitive issues, usually by initially triggering a strong emotional reaction',[11] demonstrating the power of emotional reactions, with the research even finding evidence that film has the capacity to change people's 'attitudes, and… long-term behaviour'.[12] We saw in the previous chapter that some of the most enthusiastic responses to the case study dramas indicated high levels of emotional engagement, such as MSP9's 'love' for *Belle* and MSP24's highly detailed and thoughtful praise for the way *The Imitation Game* focusses on the characters' relationships with each other. Alison Landsberg also notes the complex nature of emotional engagement,[13] and with specific reference to media representations of the past, she uses the concept of 'prosthetic memory' to describe the ways in which these representations encourage the development of a relationship with the past through the creation of an emotional experience:

> Prosthetic memories emerge at the interface between a person and a historical narrative about the past…. In this moment of contact, an experience occurs through which a person sutures him or herself into a larger historical narrative. In this process, the person does not simply learn about the past intellectually, but takes on a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live in the traditional sense.[14]

This building of a personal, emotionally experienced relationship with the past is another feature of the period drama genre that cannot be applied widely to other film and television genres. We can therefore see that, in addition to the less typical approach to gender and constructed point of view, this genre also engages the emotions of the viewer in very specific way. It not only invites audiences to invest in the emotional journey of the characters, but also uses this audience investment to develop insights into past events, attitudes and ways of life. As we have already seen in Chapter 4, the opportunity to learn about the past was a significant aspect of the study participants' enjoyment of the case study dramas. Landsberg's development of the concept of prosthetic memories provides a rich way of understanding the link between these young people's emotional reactions to the case studies themselves, and their interest in the representation of history.

I began this section by noting the difficulties in predicting how audiences will respond to characters based on perceived similarities of background or experience. These difficulties are certainly supported by at least some of the responses of my participants to the five case study dramas. As discussed in the previous chapter, identifying consistent patterns in responses to the films and television shows was more difficult than I had anticipated, with the participants' reactions to the screenings varying greatly from group to group. This question of group

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[11] Northern Alliance and Ipsos MediaCT , *Opening Our Eyes: How Film Contributes to the Culture of the UK* (London: BFI, July 2011), p. 2 http://www.bfi.org.uk/sites/bfi.org.uk/files/downloads/bfi-opening-our-eyes-2011-07_0.pdf [accessed 18 December 2019].
[12] Northern Alliance and Ipsos MediaCT, *Opening Our Eyes*, pp. 8.
[13] See Alison Landsberg, 'Memory, Empathy and the Politics of Identification', *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, 22 (2) (2009), p. 224.
[14] Landsberg, 'Memory, Empathy and the Politics of Identification', p. 222.

dynamics, and the impact of watching the dramas in a social situation, is obviously relevant here too, given the likelihood that some form of social influence will have impacted on at least some of the responses I report here. My focus here, however, is on the ways in which the respondents reacted to the characterisation in the various films and television episodes, and, in line with Mikos et al's observation that investment in character tends to result in increased investment in the text as a whole, the ways this appears to have influenced responses to the dramas more broadly. As the question of representation was a central feature of the study design, I have broadly divided the discussion into sections based on the key representational and demographic factors, gender, ethnicity and class. However, as many of the dramas inevitably explore the experiences of several different social groups simultaneously, such as *Belle*'s dual focus on ethnicity and gender, this should be treated as general guide only. Many of the sections touch on areas other than their main focus, in order to prevent the analysis becoming overly fragmented or repetitive.

Gender

The treatment of gender, and especially the tendency to privilege the experiences of women, has long been seen as a positive feature of the period drama.[15] In designing my study, I deliberately selected a range of examples of the genre, ensuring that I included both female and male-led dramas for the case studies. Here I explore the ways in which the participants responded to this selection, and the extent to which an awareness of gender inequalities can be seen to influence both positive and negative responses to the dramas.

A notable feature of the responses to the dramas was the tendency to appreciate the presence of strong female characters. This was clear in responses to *Peaky Blinders* and *The Imitation Game*, both of which have male protagonists. While a high number of respondents did identify the central character, Tommy Shelby, as their favoured character in *Peaky Blinders*, there were also a number of comments about the various female characters introduced in the episode. The character of Aunt Polly (Helen McCrory), who is presented as something of a matriarch within the Shelby family, was particularly well received. Her character is introduced in the episode when she hits one of the younger Shelby brothers round the head with a gun, and proceeds to berate him for his lack of responsibility. This moment generally received a positive reaction in the screenings I attended, even amongst those groups who found *Peaky Blinders* somewhat underwhelming. It frequently elicited laughter amongst the participants, and this positive response was reflected in many of the survey responses, with several respondents identifying this character when asked which character they liked best:

> The feminist gun lady (MSP7, Waltham Forest College, M, Black - Caribbean)

[15] See for example Monk, *Heritage Film Audiences*, p. 19, Julianne Pidduck's work on gendered spaces in *Contemporary Costume Film: Space, Place and the Past* (London: BFI, 2004), or Claire Monk's 'Sexuality and Heritage', in *Film/Literature/Heritage: A Sight and Sound Reader*, ed. by Ginette Vincendeau (London: BFI, 2001), pp. 6-11.

> Polly Shelby is really interesting, it's nice to see such a strong woman in a time period where in reality, there were few. (MSP22, Cambridgeshire College, F, White - British)

> Polly, as she is an empowering and strong woman, which I appreciate seeing. (MSP62, Warwickshire College, F, White – British)

This character wasn't the only female character in *Peaky Blinders* to attract approving responses though, with the character of Grace (Annabelle Wallis) also being well received.

> I really like the woman who has just started her new job there. She is a complex female character and I think that is cool. (MSP63, Camden School, F, White – any other background)

> The woman who was a spy and worked at a bar. I liked that her character was developed as she seemed innocent at first but then was revealed to be a spy. (MSP40, Somerset College, F, White – British)

These responses show a clear appreciation for interesting and developed female characters, even within male-led dramas. A similar pattern is observable in responses to *The Imitation Game*, in which many respondents identified the character of Joan Clarke (Keira Knightley) as the character they liked the best.

> For me my favourite character was Joan (Keira knightly) just due to the fact that she stands out from the crowd. Her storyline involved more than breaking enigma and introduced discussion about the role of women in society and how they were treated by men. She refuses to back down although Alan does have to persuade her a bit. She is strong minded, accepting and a brave person and does not allow society to disregard her. (MSP83, Haringey School, F, Mixed – any other backgrounds)

> Joan as she was determined and beat the stereotypes of the day (MSP34, Somerset College, F, White – British)

> I liked the female character who helped the main one to realise how to work as a team and make friends with others. She always believed in him when others didn't (MSP19, Norfolk College, F, White – British)

> Joan, because she was a women of intelligence as well as beauty and the only character who treated Alan as a human being not as the unliked, introvert awkward human. (MSP90, Waltham Forest College, no initial survey data provided)

As part of her discussion of her *Time Out* cohort's engagement with identity politics, Monk states that this group of participants

> praised the period films they enjoyed from a feminist perspective. For these respondents, the emphasis on character over action in heritage…films, their nuanced character development and emphasis on character subjectivity – not always confined to a single privileged

> protagonist – was specifically associated with central and complex female characters.[16]

The appreciation of complex female characters is something that we can clearly see in these responses to the women in *Peaky Blinders* and *The Imitation Game.* MSP7's instinctive description of the character of Aunt Polly in *Peaky Blinders* as 'feminist' demonstrates the character's appeal to modern values. The classification of her as a 'strong woman' by both MSP22 and MSP62, together with MSP62's description of her as 'empowering' highlights the appeal of this character's positive, even aspirational, image of womanhood. MSP22's comment that 'in reality there were few' strong women during this time period also characterises Polly as being somewhat ahead of her time. But it also recalls a theme from the previous chapter, the idea that participants bring their own assumptions of what the past was like and use these as reference points by which to judge the dramas.

The responses to the character of Grace also demonstrate positive reactions to what MSP63 describes as 'complex female character[s]', in a similar way to that observed by Monk. MSP40 also appears to enjoy the gradual revelation that this simple barmaid is more than she at first seems to be. We can see a similar engagement with the discourse of the strong woman emerging in the reactions to the character of Joan in *The Imitation Game*, who is described as 'determined', 'beat[ing] the stereotypes of the day' (MSP34), 'strong-minded', 'brave' and 'not allow[ing] society to disregard her' (MSP83). These characterisations of Joan strongly echo the approving descriptions of Polly in *Peaky Blinders*, with a perception that she is also ahead of her time and maintaining her strength of character in the face of a patriarchal society. Joan in *The Imitation Game* also appears to be valued for her more feminine traits, such as the fact that she is 'accepting' (MSP83), 'she always believed in him [Alan Turing] when others didn't' (MSP19) and 'she was the only character who treated Alan as a human being' (MSP90). These dual discourses of strength combined with feminine support and encouragement provide further insight into this character's popularity, as well as recalling Cook's description of genres in which the boundaries between the masculine and the feminine become more blurred.

Grace is introduced in *Peaky Blinders* as an overtly feminine barmaid who is 'too pretty' to be working in a rough pub, and who possesses an angelic singing voice, before being revealed as a spy with an implied desire for vengeance against the IRA who murdered her father. Conversely, Joan is introduced to us initially as highly intelligent with an implicitly unfeminine mathematical prowess. This is highlighted for the viewer in her introductory scene, in which a civil service underling attempts to point her to the secretary's room, and patronisingly questions her ability to complete the set task, before her right to be there is enforced through Alan Turing's intervention. Once Joan's position as, in her words, 'a woman in a man's world', is established, she is also shown to have a warm and accepting character (as with many characters in *The Imitation Game*, she appears wholly unshocked when Alan's homosexuality is revealed to her, despite its illegality at the time the film is set). As the participants quoted above identify, she serves an important social role, assisting Alan in developing his 'people skills'. Therefore, as with Grace, Joan also combines the appeal of femininity with character traits that go beyond the perceived typical female role of the time. Whilst the older character of Polly, in *Peaky Blinders*, is valued for her indefatigable strength and ability to speak her mind to the men in her family, these younger female characters run the risk of being perceived as

[16] Monk, *Heritage Film Audiences*, p. 134.

somewhat tokenistic in their placement within the drama, and their complexity and strength of character are clearly valued here, when combined with their more feminine qualities.

As the above statements indicate, the female characters in these dramas were more likely to be commented on by female participants. MSP7 was the only participant who identified himself as male in the Initial Survey to name a female character in *Peaky Blinders* as the one they most liked. Other male participants tended to indicate one of the many male characters in this drama. Of the participants identifying themselves as female, whilst many (14) mentioned female characters when asked about their favourite characters in *Peaky Blinders*, they were still more likely to identify male characters as appealing to them, with 19 female participants mentioning male characters in this question. A similar pattern is present in responses to *The Imitation Game*, with only one participant (MSP67) identifying as male referencing the character of Joan as the character he particularly liked in the film. All other male participants identified one of the male characters. As with *Peaky Blinders*, the female respondents were much more evenly split, with 11 identifying a female character and 12 indicating that they most liked one of the male characters.

We could interpret this pattern as supporting the popular perception that women are more likely to respond positively to male characters than men are to female ones, and therefore that male-led films and television shows have universal appeal, whereas those that are female-led speak to a predominantly female audience. However, it must be borne in mind that both *Peaky Blinders* and *The Imitation Game* are organised around male protagonists and are set in very patriarchal environments. We could therefore perceive the significance to be less in the fact that the male viewers appear more likely to focus their attentions on the male characters, and more in the apparent willingness of the female participants to seek out and focus their attentions on the small number of female characters, even when the narrative focus is clearly elsewhere. As Mikos et al noted, the female viewers of *The Lord of the Rings* often indicated preference for one of the (relatively minor) female characters, with these researchers discovering that 'modern female identification figures are important in the otherwise male-dominated film.'[17] As with the participants in the German sample of The World *Lord of the Rings* Project, the female participants in my study also appear to have actively focussed their attention on characters who represented values and experiences more relevant and recognisable to themselves.

However, within this study there is one set of data that appears somewhat anomalous. Whilst participants typically appeared to enjoy the portrayal of strong and complex female characters, when it came to *Far from the Madding Crowd*, it was a rather different story. This film focusses on the character of Bathsheba Everdene, who is introduced in the opening minutes of the film, in her own voice-over and in the comments of her aunt, as being 'too independent', 'too wild' and in need of 'someone to tame [her]'. Over the course of the film Bathsheba struggles to establish herself as the owner of a prosperous farm, very much the 'woman in a man's world' described by Joan Clarke in *The Imitation Game*. This is further complicated by her need to negotiate personal relationships with various men, with these posing threats to both her personal and professional autonomy. On paper, Bathsheba appears to be the very epitome of the strong and complex woman. She has the strength and determination to take on the running of her farm herself, brazenly dismissing her bailiff for his inadequate performance and announcing to a room full of her farm workers that she 'intend[s]

[17] Mikos, Eichner, Prommer and Wedel, 'Involvement in *The Lord of the Rings*', p. 118.

to astonish [them] all', before gamely throwing herself into the physical tasks required in the running of her farm. Her complexity is encapsulated by her tendency to make impulsive decisions, her struggles with how to respond to the attentions she is paid by three different suitors, and her failure to immediately appreciate the course of action most likely to lead to her own personal fulfilment. In her contradictory attempts to assert her own independence whilst also allowing herself to be drawn into romantic encounters that might threaten this, Bathsheba comes across as a complex and rather flawed character. Whilst her strength and complexity might appear to be traits that would interest and engage many of the study participants, in practice the responses to *Far from the Madding Crowd* indicate that Bathsheba was a highly problematic character for many.

As observed above, when asked which character they particularly liked, participants were generally most likely to identify the protagonist of the films. However, in the survey responses to *Far from the Madding Crowd*, participants overwhelmingly identified the character of Gabriel Oak, Bathsheba's shepherd and most appealing love interest. None of the participants who identified themselves as male or female in the Initial Survey named Bathsheba as the character they most liked. She was named by one participant, who stated that 'I liked Barthshiba and though she was interesting although was sidelined by the plot.' (MSP92, Lancashire College, no initial survey data provided). Although this participant did not complete the Initial Survey, and therefore did not provide any demographic information, it is worth noting that they did present as female, and therefore can be taken as one indication that some women might enjoy the complexity of Bathsheba's characterisation.

Another participant, MSP84 was unable to submit a survey response for *Far from the Madding Crowd*, but did report an untypically positive response to the character of Bathsheba, as this extract from the focus group discussion shows:

> SG: … I just wanted to ask MSP84 about it a little bit more… erm, because the character of Bathsheba, she can be a bit divisive, erm... some people really don't like her, but you say that you liked her…
>
> MSP84: Yeah…
>
> SG: Can you say anything more about why that was?
>
> MSP84: I do because she kind of reminds me of myself…
>
> SG: (laughing) OK…
>
> MSP84: I mean I'm sure the whole marrying decision thing might maybe annoy some people…
>
> SG: Mm-hm
>
> MSP84: …and they'd be like 'why didn't she just stay strong and independent and by herself?' and all of that…
>
> SG: Mm-hm
>
> MSP84: …but… you know…
>
> MSP95: (laughs)

> MSP84: …the guy that she went with to start off with wasn't particularly great but I think he made her feel something that she had never felt before…
>
> SG: Mm-hm?
>
> MSP84: …so she just got a bit distracted… and then she was in love with the first guy by the end so I'm cool with her going with people, and I still think she was able to be… not in the first relationship as… was awful… but I still think she was able to be independent even though she was with other people… she at least strives to be independent even though she was in that time period with some quite difficult decisions to make…[18]

Here we can see MSP84 demonstrating an appreciation for the complex nature of Bathsheba's characterisation and for the ways in which she struggles to respond to the difficult situations she is placed in. The participant's explicit comment that she liked the character because 'she reminds me of myself' is also somewhat in opposition to the positions suggested by Garrett and Gorton, in which emotional engagement with a character is based on more complex processes of cross-identification or shifting affective responses. MSP84's indication that her enjoyment of the character of Bathsheba is linked to the fact that she recognises traits of the character within herself may also explain her willingness to overlook the more negative aspects of Bathsheba's characterisation. Whilst many participants did object to the character of Bathsheba for exactly the reasons that MSP84 predicts, there may be an element of the 'perspectival spectrality' cited by Skeggs and Wood in her ability to overlook the more questionable actions of the character. By relating aspects of the character to her own experiences, MSP84 engages with the character in a way that is more emotionally insightful and, as we shall see, far less judgemental than many other participants.

I discussed in the previous chapter the extremely negative reaction that the participants in the Lancashire College group had towards the screening of *Far from the Madding Crowd*. This group particularly objected to the development of Bathsheba's character. I quoted above MSP92's observation that Bathsheba was an interesting character, but was 'sidelined by the plot'. As noted in the previous chapter, during the focus group discussion another member of this group, MSP26, complained that

> You started at the start of it like… this woman who didn't want to get married, she just wanted to like, focus on her farm and you were like, 'ok, cool, you go for that', and then at the end you were like 'why…?' (MSP26, Lancashire College, M, White – British)

This participant also commented on this in his survey responses. When asked what he didn't like about the film he stated:

> Boring, didn't compel the audience at all. not fun to watch at all. started out as a semi feminist piece about a woman gaining their independence and ended in a love square that no one wanted to be

[18] Both participants from Haringey School, MSP84 (F, Mixed – White and Black Caribbean) and MSP95 (no Initial Survey data provided). Participants were recruited through an English and Media Studies teacher, but recruitment was not confined to these subjects.

> in and the whole thing should've ended at the start. I did not enjoy the film at all.

MSP26 clearly feels let down by the film's failure to live up to the feminist promise of the film's opening. His explanation that in the opening minutes of the film he was thinking 'ok, cool, you go for that' indicates his approval of Bathsheba's feminist statements of intent in the early stages of the film, while the heated nature of his objection to the way the narrative develops implies a perceived and deeply felt betrayal of this. Discussing different forms of involvement in media texts, Liebes and Katz identify 'hot' and 'cold' responses, which are respectively associated with emotional or affective responses, and more critical or cognitive responses. Whilst they begin from a position in which critical responses to a text are considered as inherently 'cool', Liebes and Katz observe that amongst their international viewers of *Dallas* they also see responses that are both critical but also highly emotionally engaged, resulting in 'hot' critical responses that confront the text 'at the ideological level of the message.'[19] Skeggs and Wood also observe that participants in their study tend to become more angry at subjects that relate more closely to their own personal experiences, noting that 'in emotional schema anger typically follows from a moral violation that infringes upon investments in person-value'.[20] MSP26's response to *Far from the Madding Crowd* is certainly highly emotionally engaged; later in the focus group discussion he describes the film as 'evil', saying he is 'fuming' because of it and that it made his 'blood boil'. These responses suggest that Bathsheba's failure to conform to his ideas of effective feminist behaviour may have presented a form of challenge to his own ideological values, therefore resulting in a response that moves beyond the 'cool' critical response described by Liebes and Katz and takes on a more emotional character.

Within the focus group, MSP26's extreme response to Bathsheba was questioned by MSP92, whom I quoted above as one of the few participants to respond positively to Bathsheba's character:

> MSP25: It did seem to support feminism at the beginning…
>
> MSP92: Yeah…
>
> MSP26: And then massively veered off track… it starts like feminism and then it's like… 'choose a husband!'
>
> MSP92: Yeah but you've got to be careful with that though because… it's still the historical context… for the time she was an extremely strong woman, to get to where she was anyway… I mean it was…
>
> MSP26: It was just such a surprising left-turn.
>
> MSP92: But it was still… at the end of the day, her choice, if you get what I mean…
>
> MSP26: Yeah…

[19] Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz, *The Export of Meaning: Cross-Cultural Readings of* Dallas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 109.
[20] Skeggs and Wood, *Reacting to Reality Television*, p. 181.

> MSP92: There was no like… father figure saying, you have to marry him, or you have to do this. It was always her choice what she did…
>
> MSP26: But she kept repeatedly choosing 'no' and the men kept repeatedly going 'yes'!
>
> MSP92: But no it wasn't that kind of story though… I think it was her choice…
>
> MSP26: It started out not being that kind of story…
>
> MSP92: Well it wasn't really though, cos it started out with her, you know, making her own business, doing her own farm and then eventually, you know… it was always her choice, she didn't always make the right choices, and some of those came back to bite her, but at the end of the day it was always her choice….[21]

Here we get some insight into why MSP92 may have found Bathsheba to be an interesting character. Whilst MSP26 seems determined to ignore her agency within the narrative, MSP92 repeatedly emphasises Bathsheba's abilities to make choices about her own life. As with MSP84, she acknowledges the complexity and flaws in the character by commenting on the unwise decisions she makes, but also suggests that this is partly what makes the character more interesting to her. It is notable that whilst the female participants here appear more inclined to forgive the more negative aspects of Bathsheba's characterisation, due to their apparent engagement with the difficult social situations in which she finds herself, MSP26, a male participant, is far less willing to appreciate the film for these ambiguities and strongly criticises it for what he perceives as its betrayal of the feminist agenda that it implies at the outset.

The Camden School group, who were predominantly male, also objected to the character of Bathsheba, but for a different reason, as shown in these extracts from the focus group discussion with them. In this extract some of the participants are describing the film to their peers who missed the screening:

> MSP68: I kind of enjoyed *Far from the Madding Crowd*, it wasn't boring… we were talking about it… but then again it wasn't particularly interesting…
>
> MSP72: What's Far from… what's it about, what's the story like?
>
> MSP66: Although it's about (a farm?) there was still a storyline… it's better that than nothing…
>
> SG: OK…
>
> MSP72: Was it a farm in World War II?
>
> MSP71: Not World War II

[21] All participants from Lancashire College, MSP25 (F, White – British), MSP92 (no initial survey data provided) and MSP26 (M, White – British). Participants were recruited through a Media Studies teacher and belonged to the same class.

SG: *Far from the Madding Crowd*? No, it was a farm in the Victorian period.

MSP72: Oh, so is a guy who's just isolated?

MSP71: It's about a girl actually…

MSP68: It's like *Belle* actually… same time period…

MSP66: It's about a twist of fate…

MSP72: A girl? Is she a prostitute?

MSP66: It's like *Mamma Mia!* but…

MSP69?: Who's a prostitute?

MSP72: What? In *Mamma Mia!* she doesn't link bare dons, she's just trying to find her dad…

MSP66: …but her mum dates three different guys…

MSP72: In *Mamma Mia!*?

MSP66: Yeah that's the same as this…

MSP68: Stop talking about *Mamma Mia!*!

MSP66: And then the daughter wants to find the dad…[22]

And here the group talk about their perceptions of Bathsheba more explicitly:

SG: … I realise that you're all guys here today, but do you feel like girls may relate to it?

MSP68: Yeah, I feel like girls might relate to the main female character more…

SG: Mm-hm?

MSP68: She was more…

MSP72: Like being promiscuous?

MSP66: Yeah, she was just promiscuous to get some land…

SG: Was she promiscuous?

MSP66: Well she was getting with three different guys at the same time…

SG: Not at the same time! One after the other!

MSP66: Yeah, but it's like… in a matter of days…

[22] All participants from Camden School and male, ethnicities as follows: MSP68 (White – British), MSP72 (Mixed – White and Black African), MSP66 (White – British), MSP71 (Asian – Indian), MSP69 (Any other background). Participants were recruited through a Media Studies department but did not all come from the same class.

SG: (laughs)

MSP66: …whilst talking to the other ones… it's like she's messaged three guys and got one at a time…

MSP68: Yeah, she is a bit of j…

MSP66: She's a bit of a j-bag[23]

It is possibly somewhat disappointing that these young men appear inclined to link Bathsheba to the ideas of prostitution and promiscuity. In the first extract MSP72 assumes that a film about a farm must centre on a man, before MSP71 corrects him. This appears to be of little interest though, with the conversation quickly moving onto questions of Bathsheba's potential sexual activity. The determination of some of the group to link the film to *Mamma Mia!* (Phyllida Lloyd, 2008) (despite MSP68's exasperated plea of 'stop talking about *Mamma Mia!*!') is based on their perception that the dilemma faced by the character of Donna (Meryl Streep) in that film, is paralleled by the behaviour of Bathsheba in *Far from the Madding Crowd*. Thus, Donna had sexual relationships with three men around the time her daughter was conceived and therefore does not know who the father is, and Bathsheba is also drawn to relationships with three different men.

The perception of Bathsheba as 'promiscuous' (which they implicitly suggest is the case with Donna in *Mamma Mia!*), is implied by MSP72's use of the phrase 'link with bare dons' (meaning that she has relationships with several men), which presumably refers to a comment from another group member that wasn't picked up on the tape (this group did tend to routinely speak over each other during the focus group discussion). His use of this phrase anticipates the later discussion of Bathsheba's promiscuity. MSP66's suggestion that Bathsheba is 'promiscuous to get some land' has resonances of the stereotypical characterisation of some women as gold-diggers, using their sexuality for material gain, but ignores the fact that Bathsheba is already a landowner in her own right for the majority of the film. His later comparison to modern behaviours, suggesting that 'it's like she's messaged three guys and got one at a time', implies a perceived parallel with young women in contemporary society who might also be accused of being promiscuous. The description of Bathsheba by both MSP66 and MSP68 as being a 'j-bag' (meaning promiscuous woman) further implies a perceived similarity between Bathsheba and modern women.

In contrast to MSP26's 'hot' critical reactions to the character, the Camden group's approach appears to be more 'cool', with their objection presenting as less impassioned. In Liebes's and Katz's terms it is also more referential, treating Bathsheba more as if she was a real person. Liebes and Katz characterise these cool referential approaches as associated with a ludic approach, and it is possible to see here in the playfulness of this group an attempt to minimise the threat posed by Bathsheba (and women like her). However, Liebes and Katz also note that 'hot' referential approaches tend to focus on the moral positions of texts, which suggests that the response of this group may be more emotionally driven, and therefore more 'hot', than the playful banter might initially suggest.[24] While MSP26 comes across as highly enraged by the film's failure to conform to his idea of what a strong independent woman is like, the young

[23] All participants from Camden School and male, ethnicities as follows: MSP68 (White – British), MSP72 (Mixed – White and Black African), MSP66 (White – British). Participants were recruited through a Media Studies department, but did not all come from the same class.
[24] Liebes and Katz, *The Export of Meaning*, p. 128.

men in this group take a very different approach. Rather than objecting to Bathsheba's failure to live up to the standards she appears to set for herself at the film's opening, they struggle to perceive her as a strong, independent woman at all, and instead read her in the light of their own moral standards as to how a woman should conduct her relationships with men.

This discussion brings to the fore issues around the ethics of interpreting the words of human participants, particularly those of a relatively young age. In this group's tendency to reduce Bathsheba to a negative stereotype of feminine behaviour there is a clearly misogynistic approach to the character, and implicitly to female sexuality in general. Some of the members of this group appear suspicious of female sexuality, implicitly criticising modern women who engage in relationships with different men 'in a matter of days', and transferring these suspicions towards Bathsheba. The female participants MSP84 and MSP92 were able to appreciate Bathsheba as an example of a flawed but rounded female character, which they could either relate to personally or at least appreciate for the complexity she brings to typical female dilemmas of maintaining independence whilst negotiating relationships with men. However, the young men in this group appear less able to engage with the apparently contradictory aspects of her character, and find it easier to reduce her to a straightforwardly promiscuous woman whose relationships with men are driven by cynical motivations. Despite this, it would be unfair to draw any simplistic conclusions as a result of this exchange without considering the situation in which it was produced.

As discussed in Chapter 2, research of this nature inevitably places the researcher in a privileged position, in which they are able to create their own interpretations of the words of their participants. Whilst I consider it both interesting and important to highlight the fact that some participants were led to interpret the character of Bathsheba in a way that could be considered as misogynistic, it is also important to note that this conversation took place in the context of a generally light-hearted discussion in which there was a good deal of banter from various members of the group, on a range of different subjects. My own laughter at MSP66's rebuttal of my attempt to defend Bathsheba from accusations of promiscuity is evidence of the generally jovial tone of the discussion, and the tendency of the participants to employ slang terminology demonstrates their perception that they were speaking in a non-formal environment. Whilst none of this negates the significance of the views they express, it is important not to forget the importance of contextual influences on the responses of these individuals. In line with Skegg's and Wood's comments above on the importance of participants' social histories in influencing the way in which they interpret media texts, I believe this exchange is evidence of wider attitudes within the participants' social group, combined with their youth and therefore likely personal inexperience of the complexities of heterosexual relationships. It would be both unfair and, I believe, inaccurate to see this exchange as evidence of individualised misogyny in these participants. It seems far more likely that the views expressed are a product of traditional perceptions of correct feminine behaviour, which appear to have crystallised into the concept of 'j-bags' within the social habitus occupied by these individuals.

In her discussion of adaptations of Jean Rhys' work, Sarah Artt observes that the tendency to

> [set] aside the notion of likeability in relation to female characters is only just now gaining ground. We might… consider that just as there

> have been plenty of unlikeable male characters that fascinate readers and viewers, there is also scope for this with regard to women…[25]

It seems that the character of Bathsheba may have fallen foul of a continued preference for female characters who are uncomplicatedly likeable. As Artt observes, male characters are not routinely vilified for the poor decisions they make over the course of a narrative, or for behaviour which might be considered morally questionable. However, whilst many participants commented approvingly on the complex and strong women in other films and television programmes featured in the study, the character of Bathsheba appears to have presented significant issues for many participants, resulting in highly divergent readings of her character. Although, as I have discussed in the previous chapter, this film did receive many positive responses, alongside the highly negative ones, the character of Bathsheba was conspicuously unpopular, with almost all participants identifying the more morally straightforward Gabriel Oak as their favourite character. What these responses to Bathsheba's character suggest is that, whilst strong women might appear to be unambiguously popular, strong women cannot be both complex and flawed *and* popular. Grace in *Peaky Blinders*, and Joan Clarke in *The Imitation Game* combine apparent strength and complexity with an adherence to more traditional feminine values such as beauty and warmth. In contrast, Bathsheba is more challenging in her tendency to make rash decisions that appear to directly threaten the independence she claims to desire. Whilst this makes her a more rounded and arguably more interesting female character, it seems that for many participants this was a level of complexity too far.

Ethnicity

Across my case studies, the drama which most clearly raises issues of ethnicity is *Belle*. As I discussed in Chapter 2, this example was selected because of its relatively unusual combining of generic traits of the period drama, including the whiteness identified by Stephen Bourne, with a biracial protagonist.[26] Of the five films and television dramas featured in the study, it is the only one to clearly include characters from an ethnic minority background. For this reason, I will focus on *Belle* in this section, although it is worth acknowledging that the film also deals explicitly with issues of gender and class.

An obvious area of interest in relation to *Belle* is the extent to which the fact that it features a woman from a mixed ethnic background might lead to increased popularity amongst participants from mixed or non-white ethnicities. The report, *Opening Our Eyes* found that ethnicity was a significant factor in informing attitudes towards films set in the past, with ethnic minority respondents being more than twice as likely to agree that there are too many British films set in the past.[27] This suggests that despite the fact that ethnic minority audiences have an above average interest and involvement in films,[28] they feel less invested in narratives set in the past. Monk also touches on this idea, suggesting that the lack of diversity of ethnicity

[25] Sarah Artt, 'Why we do not Adapt Jean Rhys', in *Intercultural Screen Adaptation: British and Global Case Studies*, ed. by Michael Stewart and Robert Munro (Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming 2020).
[26] Stephen Bourne, 'Secrets and Lies: Black Histories and Black Historical Films', in *British Historical Cinema: The History, Heritage and Costume Film*, ed. by Claire Monk and Amy Sargeant (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 49.
[27] Northern Alliance and Ipsos MediaCT, *Opening Our Eyes*, p.44.
[28] Northern Alliance and Ipsos MediaCT, *Opening Our Eyes*, p. 3.

in representations of the British past would logically lead to a conclusion that heritage films are unlikely to appeal widely to an ethnic minority audience. However, Monk does mitigate this through anecdotal evidence, observing that heritage texts do have the power to appeal to the experiences of ethnic minority viewers even when they don't engage directly with issues of race.[29] Given the perception that period dramas might seem to be particularly irrelevant to ethnic minority viewers in Britain, this relatively rare example of a period drama that engages with the black British experience provides the opportunity to explore the extent to which this increases the engagement of ethnic minority viewers.

Whilst we might instinctively expect this to be the case, the suggestion by Garrett, above, that audience engagement with characters is a far more complex process than it might appear would throw this into doubt. Indeed, the data gathered from my participants presents a far less simplistic picture. As discussed in the previous chapter, *Belle*, as with most of the films and television episodes shown in the study, attracted a range of different responses. Table 5.1 shows how the participants from different ethnic backgrounds rated *Belle*, with five indicating maximum enjoyment and one that they did not like it at all. As we can see, many participants did rate this film highly, and this includes several from ethnic minority backgrounds. The high average for Black participants is due to many of these rating the film at a maximum rating of five out of five, although one participant from a Black – Caribbean background rated it one, bringing this average down. Given that the film explores Dido's struggles to reconcile the different ethnicities she derives from, we might be surprised that the two participants who report mixed ethnicities (one identified as White and Black – Caribbean, the other as mixed – any other backgrounds) also gave the film a less resounding rating. Many participants from other ethnicities also rated the film highly, including some from groups made up entirely of members identifying as white.

Reported Ethnic Group	**Average Rating (*Belle*)**
White (n=20)	3.8
Mixed (n=2)	3.5
Asian (n=4)	3.75
Black (n=5)	4.2

Table 5.1 Average Ratings for Belle *broken down by reported ethnicity*

Looking at the survey responses to the characters in the film, the discourse of the strong woman is again very apparent, with many participants commenting that they appreciated the character traits of the central protagonist:

> Dido was easily the most sympathetic character as her efforts to stop her story being brushed under the carpet felt modern and hugely important. She was good at making fast retorts to others and seeing an intelligent, beautiful black woman in a period drama is a rarity so she stood out. (MSP35, Somerset College, F, White – any other background)

> Dido. She was a strong black woman (MSP7, Waltham Forest College, M, Black – Caribbean)

[29] Monk, *Heritage Film Audiences*, p. 68.

> Belle, I liked how she was strong and never gave up on what she believed in. (MSP19, Norfolk College, F, White – British)

Here we can see that, as with some of the dramas discussed in the previous section, the presence of a strong woman who displays the ability to stand up for herself is appealing to many of the participants. Whilst Dido's ethnicity is commented on by MSP7 (who is also quoted above as approving of the presence of a strong woman in *Peaky Blinders*), and MSP35, it is her strength of character for MSP19 that is the key source of her appeal. It is worth noting here that none of the participants quoted here can be seen to exactly conform to the demographic characteristics of the character they are discussing, and yet all of them have found elements of her characterisation to engage with. This is consistent with the work of Landsberg, who argues that:

> When [a] film takes the historical past as its subject, the possibility of acquiring prosthetic memories is even more pronounced. Sometimes, in such films, viewers are brought into intimate contact with a set of experiences that fall well outside of their own lived experience, and, as a result, are forced to look as if through someone else's eyes, and asked to remember those situations and events.[30]

The ways in which these white female participants, and the black male participant, engage with the character of Dido, demonstrates that despite surface level differences, they have been able to empathise with her struggles and admire her strength of character. Amma Asante, the director of *Belle*, has stated that the film explores 'who we have been, as people of colour, going back in time, before the Windrush'.[31] However, although this rationale arises from Asante's own experiences as a black British woman, the responses to this film indicate that the representation of Dido Belle speaks powerfully to viewers from a range of backgrounds.

Dido was not the only popular character in this film, however. Many participants also reported liking supporting characters such as John Davinier, who serves as Dido's love interest:

> Davinier was very likeable as he was undeniable the love interest from the start. He also upheld morals that other characters did not which made him more identifiable. He constantly refused to accept skin colour or class to be of more importance than personality and morality. (MSP83, Haringey School, F, Mixed – any other background)

> I liked the guy Lindsey [Dido] ends up with in the end. This being because he's a gentleman and he follows what is right and is firm about what he believes in. He also doesn't [c]are about the opinions of others only about what is eighth [right?] and should be done. (MSP1, Waltham Forest College, F, Asian – Indian)

> John because he stood up for the rights of all humans. (MSP92, Lancashire College, no Initial Survey data provided)

[30] Landsberg, 'Memory, Empathy and the Politics of Identification', p. 222.
[31] Amma Asante, interviewed on 'A Double Whodunnit', *Fake or Fortune*, BBC1, 2 September 2018, 8 pm.

Although Mikos et al observed that their male participants tended to be drawn more to characters that represented values that they upheld, here we can see three female participants reporting a liking for this character based on the principles he stands for in the film.[32] Once again, we see here the tendency of film to encourage empathy with characters notably different to the viewers, with MSP83 explicitly describing cross-gender identification when she states that Davinier is 'more identifiable'. The fact that both she and MSP1 are from mixed or non-white ethnicities also indicates that there is cross-ethnicity identification at work here. Rather than select the character who might appear to most closely resemble them, in terms of skin colour and gender, she, and MSP1, have both favoured a character who represents the values and behaviours that they most admire.

In addition to Davinier, other participants also identified favourite characters that demonstrated their appreciation of the diverse range of issues that *Belle* explores throughout the course of its narrative:

> Belle's cousin/sister displayed how even she was trapped in her own way through society. This contrasted what you would expect. (MSP23, Cambridgeshire College, F, White – British)

> Oddly enough I liked the cart driver. Although a simple character, it showed that despite the racial segregation clearly presented in the production. There is also class segregation- Despite who gave him orders he had to obey & do as he was told. He gave no quarrel to giving service to any character in the play so was a fundamental connective for Dido to meet her love. (MSP10, Waltham Forest College, M, White – British)

The survey responses demonstrate that the participants are here very attuned to the identity politics explored through *Belle*'s narrative, and have found many ways to appreciate, engage with and even identify with the various characters in the film. As I have demonstrated, responses to the films and individual characters cannot be reduced to simple cases of participants identifying with the demographic characteristics most like themselves. In many of the examples given here we see participants engaging with values and attitudes towards specific issues, rather than superficially obvious characteristics that might appear to be more directly relevant to them.

The complexity of responses is also evident in the focus group discussions. Whilst two of the discussions were held with participants from exclusively white ethnic groups and the other two were held in schools with a diverse ethnic make-up, this is not necessarily reflected in the levels of enthusiasm the film attracted from each group. The Lancashire College group, who responded so negatively towards *Far from the Madding Crowd*, were highly enthusiastic about *Belle*, as shown in this extract:

> MSP29: I mean, if I had to rank them all this [*Far from the Madding Crowd*] would be 5th, *Downton Abbey* would be 4th, *Peaky Blinders* would be 3rd, *Belle* would be 2nd and *The Imitation Game* would be 1st.

[32] Although MSP92 did not complete an Initial Survey, as previously noted, she did present as female during my visits to the college.

SG: Interesting.

MSP26: I'd swap *Belle* and *The Imitation Game* but basically that's my list as well

MSP29: Well *Belle* and *The Imitation Game* were very close to each other…

MSP26: Yeah, yeah, they're very good, they're both very good.

MSP29: They're both fantastic films.

SG: But… they're quite different films aren't they?

MSP29: Oh yeah.

SG: So what is it about… do they have a similar appeal, or do they appeal in different ways?

MSP92: Again, I think… it's the stories that they tell. A lot of like… when I think of a period drama it's a lot of like… everybody… people talking to each other in fancy clothes in fancy rooms.

SG: Could you not say that *Belle* was exactly that though?

MSP92: In a way, but the conversations went somewhere. It wasn't like… it didn't feel like what they had to say was completely irrelevant to me, it felt like each conversation kind of drove the story a little bit more… And that it kind of… it was trying to express an idea that was very uncommon in historical drama, so I think that that interested me a bit more… um… there were still elements of *Belle* which I thought were a bit like that… there were some scenes which I thought… where I thought it wasn't doing anything, but with *Belle* it was like, there was more of a destination… Something that they were trying to say.[33]

Despite many of these participants claiming to not particularly like period dramas, they are very enthusiastic about *Belle*, which aesthetically is arguably the most generic period drama in the entire selection. (Recall too, from the previous chapter, MSP25's report that she found the film so interesting that she wanted to find out more about the subject matter.) In response to my challenge to MSP92 that *Belle* is actually highly typical of the period dramas she is attempting to disparage, she appears to struggle slightly with this apparent contradiction, but is clearly very invested in the identity politics of *Belle*. Here again the values that she sees the film as promoting are significant, with this participant finding relevance in 'what they had to say'. Whilst this group, led by MSP26, reported feeling disappointed by the failure of *Far from the Madding Crowd* to live up to the feminist potential of its opening, *Belle* is a far more satisfying watch for them. This film is less difficult to negotiate than the more complex moral predicaments that Bathsheba gets herself into, with *Belle* combining the popular figure of the strong woman with progressive values in relation to the issues of racial and class equality. For

[33] All participants are from Lancashire College, MSP29 (M, White – British), MSP26 (M, White – British), MSP92 (no Initial Survey data provided). Participants were recruited through a Media Studies teacher and were drawn from the same class.

the Lancashire group, for whom liberal values appear to be of great importance, these features make *Belle* a less complicated film to engage with.

Once again, the responses of the Lancashire College group contrast greatly with those of the Camden School group. As I reported in the previous chapter, this group disliked *Belle* so much that the entire set of participants left half-way through the screening. This reaction was something that I was keen to explore in the focus group, particularly as the ethnic make-up of the group and the school's proximity to the area in which the film is set might suggest that they would find it of particular interest:

> SG: OK, which ones… uh… which ones were the least relevant?
>
> MSP72: *Belle*
>
> MSP64?: *Belle*
>
> MSP69: *Belle*… *Belle*
>
> SG: I find it interesting that you say that….
>
> MSP72: That and *Downton Abbey*…
>
> MSP69: We probably didn't give it a chance… but in fairness it was bare long…
>
> MSP72: You could say that it was relevant because it's about, like, a mixed-race girl….
>
> MSP68: No, the least relevant is definitely the farm one…
>
> SG: The farm one… *Far from the Madding Crowd*
>
> MSP68: That had nothing to do with my life whatsoever…
>
> MSP72: No no, like *Belle*… I could relate to it….
>
> MSP68: I could only relate to Kenwood…
>
> MSP72: But it was boring…
>
> SG: It was boring, ok.
>
> MSP72: No, cos it's about like a mixed-race person growing up…
>
> MSP69?: She's good looking
>
> MSP68: That's like you, innit, you're a mixed-race person growing up in a white society….
>
> MSP72: Yeah, but it's a more white society… her society…and she's a girl, innit…
>
> MSP68: So it's even harder…
>
> SG: OK.
>
> MSP72: But that's the only relevance it has to me, and the fact that I've been to Kenwood House.

> SG: I mean, that sounds quite relevant to me, but…
>
> MSP71: Yeah, that makes it more relevant that the others…
>
> MSP72: But it wasn't entertaining… if it's that relevant and I still find it boring then there must be an issue.[34]

Whilst on paper this group would seem to have characteristics that would lead them to feel interested in the story of *Belle*, these responses operate as a warning against simplistic assumptions of this nature. As David Morley argues,

> social factors cannot be treated as if they somehow directly 'intervened' in the communication process. These factors can only have an effect on communication as they are articulated through discourses – through the meaning-systems or codes within which members of a given class live and understand their experience.[35]

This group clearly struggled to appreciate the full emotional resonance of the narrative, despite demonstrating a good understanding on an intellectual level. This resonates with Gorton's argument that audiences need to engage emotionally with characters in order to feel invested in the narrative. Thus, whilst MSP72 is able to identify ways in which the character of Dido relates to his own experiences, his failure to find any emotional similarity with the character has led to his complete rejection of the film. He himself is able to articulate the apparent incongruity of this reaction, stating that 'if it's that relevant and I still find it boring then there must be an issue'. Whilst these participants perceive the 'issue' as being the poor quality of the film, repeatedly stating elsewhere in the interview how poorly made it was, they are not able to appreciate that the 'issue' may actually be their difficulty in engaging with the emotional life of the protagonist. As Pam Cook notes, melodramatic narratives of this nature tend to privilege feminine subjectivity and blur boundaries between femininity and masculinity.[36] I noted in the previous section that this all-male focus group also struggled to engage with the complexity of the character of Bathsheba, quickly resorting to defining her in terms of her alleged sexual and moral misconduct. Although cross-gender identification and enjoyment was clearly experienced by other participants, this group particularly enjoyed the more male-dominated case studies, *Peaky Blinders* and *The Imitation Game*. Their preference for these dramas may be related to their own male dominated social group, and the added difficulty of engaging with more feminine experiences that this brings. Given *Belle*'s privileging of the feminine in both its aesthetic style and its treatment of the emotional lives of both female and male characters, it is unsurprising that this film proved difficult for this group to decode, and was thus an unsatisfying viewing experience for them, despite what might appear to be features of interest for them.

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[34] All participants from Camden School and male, ethnicities as follows: MSP72 (Mixed – White and Black African), MSP64 (Mixed – White and Black Caribbean), MSP69 (Any other background), MSP68 (White – British), MSP71 (Asian – Indian). The participants were recruited through a Media Studies department, but were not all from the same class.

[35] David Morley, *Television Audiences and Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 90.

[36] Cook, *Screening the Past*, p. 78.

Class

In the previous sections of this chapter we have repeatedly seen that participants appear to engage most frequently with characters who have responded positively to a perceived social disadvantage. This is evident in the approval of the strong and complex women who are seen to be battling the patriarchal nature of their society. It is also evident in the approval of Dido as both a strong woman and an advocate for the rights of ethnic minority people, alongside her lover John Davinier, who was also well received by the participants. The more negative response to Bathsheba Everdene demonstrates the boundaries within which the participants felt able to positively engage with characters. The fact that various participants perceived the choices she made to be morally and ideologically unsound, and therefore questionable, highlights the fact that characters who represent a struggle against social inequalities (many of which are recognisable contemporary issues) whilst also demonstrating morally commendable behaviour were most likely to appeal to the participants. The fact that Gabriel Oak was a far more popular character than Bathsheba in *Far from the Madding Crowd* may be due to his steadfast moral stance, including his position as the only character in the film to actively criticise Bathsheba's less laudable decisions, even at the risk of endangering his own livelihood. In addition to his admirable behaviour, Gabriel also represents the working classes, suffering misfortune towards the beginning of the film and enduring personal hardship and a humiliating reduction in circumstances, before finally being rewarded for his demonstrable skill, as well as his unselfish actions. The fact that Gabriel can also be recognised as an individual battling the inequalities of the class system may have contributed to his popularity with the participants.

Discussing *Downton Abbey*'s attempts to operate as a period drama that explores the experiences of both aristocratic characters and those that work for them, Katherine Byrne suggests that 'while the show aims to follow the lives of servants as much as their employers, it is the Grantham family's glamor and charm that really command the attention of most viewers.'[37] In the previous chapter I noted that some participants commented on the attractive setting as one area of appeal for the drama. I also noted that many participants reported finding little of relevance to their own lives within the narrative of the drama. However, when asked to identify a favourite character in the drama, the majority identified a character from the servant classes, rather than the aristocratic Grantham family. Despite the aesthetic appeal of the aristocratic lifestyle and Byrne's contention that the Grantham family are the most appealing characters in *Downton Abbey*, the survey respondents were far more likely to identify servant characters as being most appealing to them.

The most popular character in *Downton Abbey* was the valet, Bates, who was named by six survey respondents. This is likely to be due partly to the fact that this character has a fairly substantial role in the narrative of this episode, with his determination to work despite his disability making him a particularly likeable character here. The character of Daisy (Sophie McShera) was also named by three respondents. She is clearly marked out as the most socially inferior, looked down on by the other staff members and not even acknowledged by the family she serves, and therefore may have elicited sympathy from the participants. She is also a very positive character, with her interventions providing some comic relief, which also makes for a character with uncomplicated appeal. When asked about the relevance of this drama, MSP25

[37] Katherine Byrne, 'The Recent Dark Side of *Downton* "Downer" *Abbey*', in *Upstairs and Downstairs: British Costume Television from* The Forsyte Saga *to* Downton Abbey', ed. by James Leggott and Julie Anne Taddeo (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), p. 178.

explicitly discussed her ability to identify with the character of Daisy, commenting that 'I can relate The young maid as she seems rushed off her feet and still tries to stay positive even though she has to abide by stric rules and I have felt a similar way' (MSP25, Lancashire College, F, White – British). This participant was also the only respondent to name the footman Thomas as a character who stood out to her, stating that 'I didn't like any of the characters in particular, although I felt sorry for Thomas as he had been betrayed by his lover.' Whilst she is clearly less than enthusiastic about *Downton Abbey* as a whole, MSP25 has been able to engage and even identify with some of the emotional experiences of the servant characters, feeling sympathy for the largely unlikeable Thomas when he is rejected by his aristocratic lover and relating to Daisy's positivity in the face of hardship and negative treatment.

Amongst those participants who identified members of the Grantham family as the characters they most liked, Lord Grantham was the most popular character, being named by three respondents in this question. This was followed by Sybil (Jessica Brown Findlay) (two), and Dame Maggie Smith's Dowager Countess (one). Lord Grantham is instrumental in the storyline featuring the disabled valet, Bates, the most popular character, and it seems that his intervention in Bates' fate may be a contributing factor to his popularity:

> I particularly liked the lord, I knew the actor from another program (w1a) and so that may have influenced me. I also liked the characters manner, his mix between compassion and upper class honour- almost showing how one can combat the other (MSP24, Cambridgeshire College, M, White – British)

> The lord of the Manor, he was passionate and kind (MSP18, Norfolk College, F, White – British)

The perception of Lord Grantham as someone who is willing to show 'compassion' and be 'kind', despite his high social status, are key influences in his popularity. His perceived moral behaviour and willingness to bend the social etiquette in order to provide opportunity to his disabled servant are seen as commendable by these participants. This is also likely to be key to Sybil's popularity, as both participants who named her had prior knowledge of the show, and this character is shown to be increasingly progressive in her views as the series goes on.

Once again we see the participants favouring characters who represent values that they feel invested in, regardless of the extent to which these characters might appear to resemble the demographic characteristics of the participants themselves. Emotional investment also remains an important factor, with the most emotive storyline, that of Bates's desperation to avoid unemployment and implied destitution, clearly having the widest impact on the participants. I have noted throughout that the participants appear to have an instinctive sensitivity to matters of class, despite indicating less strength of feeling with regards to this issue in the Initial Survey. Sympathetic responses to characters such as Daisy, John Davinier and Gabriel Oak suggest a liking for characters who operate in the role of class underdog within a narrative. This tendency is accentuated by the 'upstairs downstairs' structure of *Downton Abbey*, with the dominance of servant classes in the answers on participants' preferred characters demonstrating their inclination towards the hardworking, put-upon servants, and against the privileged aristocrats.

Conclusion

As we have seen throughout this chapter, participants' responses to characters in the case studies, and by extension, to the films and television episodes themselves, are often influenced by a combination of the values they perceive the characters as embodying, and the extent to which they emotionally invest in the characters' experiences. Characters who battle against social inequality, be it discrimination on the basis of gender, ethnicity or class, are often approved of by the participants, emphasising the centrality of their own value systems when forming judgements. This was no less in evidence when the participants expressed disapproval, with the character of Bathsheba coming in for censure on the basis of both her failure to conform to modern liberal values and more traditional expectations of feminine behaviour.

Whilst participants were typically underwhelmed by *Downton Abbey*, they were able to engage emotionally with the plight of the servants Bates and Thomas, both of whom are disadvantaged due to a combination of their lower social status and other minority characteristics (disability and homosexuality respectively). This demonstrates the importance of emotional engagement in opening up the viewers to the social messages contained within the text, as identified in Landsberg's writing about prosthetic memories. The failure to engage emotionally was most notably seen in the Camden School group's dramatic rejection of *Belle*, with their difficulties in investing in the emotional journey of the characters making the viewing of the film an exceptionally uninteresting experience for them.

I would like to end this chapter by returning to a case study that has received relatively little attention thus far, *The Imitation Game*. As identified in Chapter 4, this film has a good claim on the position of most popular drama in the study. Whilst many participants clearly found the story, and its claim to be based on real events, to be very interesting, the appeal of this film goes far beyond the intellectual. The title of this thesis is drawn from the refrain, repeated throughout the film, that 'sometimes it is the people no-one imagines anything of, who do the things that no-one can imagine'. This sentiment clearly resonated with many of the participants. The Norfolk College participants identified it as something they had talked about after the screening and one member of this group wrote in their survey response

> i can understand the struggle he went through, i can be a little bit odd and its nice to see a quote accepting peoples weirdness (MSP20, Norfolk College, F, White – British)

The film's focus on the emotional experience of being different, whether through Joan's struggle to fit into 'a man's world' or through the central depiction Alan Turing's social difficulties (not explicitly named in the film but strongly suggestive of Autistic Spectrum Disorder) means that the wartime storyline is never allowed to detract from the invitation to the viewer to invest in the emotional journey of the characters.

Chapter 1 identified common themes in many teen or 'coming-of-age' films, such as the confusing in-between-ness of adolescence and the ways in which young people can struggle to reconcile a sense of their own identity with the social world they experience. Whilst the characters in *The Imitation Game* are some of the oldest protagonists in the five case studies, these themes clearly apply to this film. The character of Joan frequently references her parents' expectations as presenting difficulties to her career development, before she has a moment of self-actualisation towards the end of the film, declaring to Alan that 'I have spent

entirely too much of my life worried about what you think of me, or what my parents think of me…and do you know what? I'm done! This is the most important work I will ever do, and no-one is going to stop me'. Similarly, whilst he isn't constrained by gendered or parental expectations, Alan is shown throughout the film to be haunted by his experiences at boarding school, with the one powerful friendship he formed there being shown to remain influential for the rest of his life. Through being forced to work as a team with his fellow code breakers, Alan also (temporarily) overcomes his social difficulties. The narrative of the film does demonstrate the tragic result of Alan's isolation, taking the story up to his suicide some years after his war work was completed. However, the final scene of the film returns to the wartime segment, showing Joan and Alan as they stand arm in arm with the rest of the codebreaking team, casually drinking beer as they fulfil the direction to destroy their wartime work, therefore leaving the viewer with this image of the culmination of their personal growth. Both characters have developed throughout the course of the wartime segment of the film and, in a similar way to protagonists of teen and coming-of-age films, end the film in a more emotionally mature and self-confident place.

This appeal to viewers to emotionally engage with the characters is clearly a significant factor in the popularity of *The Imitation Game* amongst my participants. Hand in hand with this depiction of the emotional journeys of the characters is also the film's appeal to liberal values. By essentially placing at the heart of the film a sentiment that all people have value, despite what may be apparent on the surface, the film creates a universality in its address to the audience. Whilst some participants identified with the themes of discrimination on the basis of sexuality or gender, the film's celebration of 'the people no-one imagines anything of' speaks directly to any viewer who has ever felt different, marginalised or invisible. *The Imitation Game*'s success lies in its combination of broadly liberal values that are open to interpretation with an invitation to identify with the characters by aligning their experiences with emotions that we will all have felt in one way or another. However, it does all this whilst purporting to tell a true story, and it is to this aspect of my case study dramas that I turn in the next chapter.

Chapter 6

Style over Substance? Adapting Literature and History in the Period Drama

The period drama genre has long been dogged by the question of authenticity, and the extent to which any audio-visual reconstruction of the past can even attempt to present historical periods with any real sense of accuracy. In addition to what we might consider to be the historian's approach to accuracy, as we have seen, viewers also bring their own sense of 'what [they]… presume life was like then' (MSP20, Norfolk College, F, White – British). As we shall see in this chapter, this received perception of the past brings with it its own criteria for judging the accuracy of historical representation, further complicating the question of what can really be considered an accurate, or authentic representation of the past. This distinction between accuracy and authenticity is also crucial here. Whereas the concept of accuracy conjures almost scientific associations of an adherence to a specified original, authenticity is a less tangible concept. Whilst accuracy can be assessed using a somewhat simplistic 'spot the difference' style exercise, authenticity relies more on the audience accepting that the representation is 'true to its time' (MSP2, Waltham Forest College, M, Black Caribbean). As we shall again see in this chapter, creating a sense of authenticity does not always mean that historical accuracy is strictly adhered to.

The lavish aesthetic of some period dramas has lent itself to a suspicion of the genre's ideological leanings. As discussed in Chapter 1, criticism by Andrew Higson and others of the heritage film in the 1990s centred on the perceived over-valuing of the lifestyles of the privileged, at times apparently in direct contradiction to the narrative themes of the films in question. This perceived superficiality is still a feature of criticism of the period drama today. Writing about critical responses to the nostalgia film, Roberta Garrett, for instance, observes that 'the nostalgia film's interest in the past was condemned as all style and no substance, a mish-mash of coded historical styles which failed either to engage with their own time or reflect critically on the cultural forms they evoked.'[1] Garrett goes onto link this 'style over substance' criticism to what she calls British costume drama, noting that such films are often 'castigated for peddling a sumptuous, sentimentalised, class-bound version of Edwardian and Victorian England that fails to acknowledge the historical experience of the struggling, impoverished masses'.[2] This description is also highly reminiscent of the objections made by participants from the Lancashire College focus group to some period dramas, such as MSP92's comment that they are often comprised of 'people talking to each other in fancy clothes in fancy rooms' (no Initial Survey data provided).

Garrett's comment that nostalgia films were often perceived as failing to really be *about* anything is also reminiscent of much criticism of depictions of history on film. Marnie Hughes-Warrington notes that many theorists make a distinction between historical films, and those which are more commonly called period or costume dramas. Whilst all writers will have their own definitions for the specific features of each classification, the distinction typically focusses on the opposition between a fascination with surfaces and a genuine desire to engage with

[1] Roberta Garrett, *Postmodern Chick Flicks: The Return of the Woman's Film* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007), p. 128.
[2] Garrett, *Postmodern Chick Flicks*, p. 129.

historical complexities. Hughes-Warrington notes that a common approach, held by theorists such as Pierre Sorlin and Leger Grindon, holds that

> The makers of costume film are more enamoured by the look of the past than by the social and political issues favoured by the makers of historical films. Historical fiction films may include and foreground the activities of particular historical agents or fictional characters, but there is always some link to wider political concerns.[3]

According to this approach, mainstream period dramas are unable to effectively address social and political issues due to their excessive interest in recreating a superficial impression of times gone by. As with Garrett's discussion of criticism of the nostalgia film, the nostalgic impulse is seen as negating the ability of these historical representations to engage with matters of wider significance, either by interrogating the 'truth' of the historical period represented, or by addressing contemporary issues. This distinction was also raised by the participants of the Lancashire College focus group:

> MSP26: Yeah, when I think of period drama I don't think of kinda, the 1940s, and I don't think of war films, I consider those historical films, and I consider period dramas more to be…
>
> MSP25: Victorian era…
>
> MSP26: Yeah, Victorian era, and all walking around with top hats and suits (puts on an accent) 'Oh absolutely, top of the morning for you…the best of the evening to you sir… tally-ho'…
>
> ….
>
> MSP26: …I enjoyed The Imitation Game, but I didn't personally consider that to be a period drama. It weren't so much drama it was erm… a film about a historical event. It was important and it was clever and it was well done…[4]

Here, MSP26 succinctly sums up this perceived difference between historical and period dramas, identifying historical dramas as being 'important' and 'clever', whilst his amusing impersonation of a character in a period drama emphasises the costume and mannered language. It is notable that his imitation of a character in a period drama is made up entirely of phatic utterances, emphasising the view put forward by this group in their discussion of *Belle*, explored in the previous chapter, that *Belle* had 'something… to say' (MSP92, no Initial Survey data provided) which set it apart from other period dramas.

In this chapter, I address the perceived distinction between more weighty historical films and frivolous period dramas, whilst considering the ways in which these arguments link to my participants' responses to the dramas. The idea of adaptation, and the relationship of each of

[3] Marnie Hughes-Warrington, 'Introduction: History on Film: Theory, Production, Reception', in *The History on Film Reader*, ed. by Marnie Hughes-Warrington (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), p. 3, citing Pierre Sorlin, 'The Film in History', in *The History on Film Reader*, ed. by Marnie Hughes-Warrington (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), pp. 15-16 and Leger Grindon, *Shadows on the Past: Studies in the Historical Fiction Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).

[4] Both participants from Lancashire College, MSP26 (M, White – British), MSP25 (F, White – British). Participants were recruited through a Media Studies teacher and were from the same class.

the dramas considered to notions of accuracy and authenticity, is the central concern of this final chapter. This section of the thesis draws less on direct quotation from participants because much of the material that this chapter responds to has already been quoted in previous chapters. The fact that, with the exception of the focus group extract quoted above, all the quotations from participants referenced so far in this chapter have already been encountered in the thesis highlights the central place that these issues hold in the minds of the study participants. It is for this reason that I have chosen to use the final chapter of the thesis to consider how the process of adaptation, and the expectations of viewers that arise from this, may have influenced some of the responses received.

Only one of the dramas that feature as my case studies, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, is an adaptation of a literary text, but I also consider two of the other case study dramas, *Belle* and *The Imitation Game*, because of the ways they can be seen to adapt historical sources, a process that is increasingly seen as holding significant similarities with the literary adaptation.[5] *The Imitation Game* is perhaps a more straightforward adaptation, due to the film's explicit claim to be based on Andrew Hodges' biography, *Alan Turing: The Enigma*.[6] Although *Belle* was not based on a biography, the story was developed following research into the historical figure of Dido Belle, and the film's release was accompanied by the publication of a tie-in book which also operates as a form of biography for the 'real-life' figure of Dido Belle.[7] To explore the ways in which the process of adaptation impacts on the participants' responses to the dramas, I look first at *Far from the Madding Crowd*, before moving on to consider the biopics, *Belle* and *The Imitation Game*.

Far from the Madding Crowd: Adapting Literature

The process of adapting a canonical literary text for film is not a simple one, particularly when some audiences are likely to have previously encountered both the source novel, and pre-existing adaptations. Here again, the tension between fidelity to the text of the novel and the demand for authenticity, in this case the recreation of viewers' previous experiences of watching adaptations of the source (or, indeed, of similar period dramas), can result in a surprising amount of conflict. As I have observed elsewhere, Cary Joji Fukunaga's intention to create a supposedly more accurate adaptation of *Jane Eyre*, namely by making his film more scary, appears to have been stymied by the need to create a film that lives up to the target audiences expectations of what a *Jane Eyre* adaptation should look like.[8] The 2015 film adaptation of the Victorian novelist Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd* which featured in the study also follows in the footsteps of a famous and much celebrated previous adaptation (John Schlesinger, 1967). In this case, however, the producers of the film explicitly chose to take a different approach, acknowledging their desire for this adaptation to 'feel different', in order to avoid these comparisons.[9]

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[5] See Jeremy Strong, 'Straight to the Source? Where Adaptations, Artworks, Historical Films and Novels Connect', *Adaptation*, 12 (2) (2019), pp. 165-84.
[6] Andrew Hodges, *Alan Turing: The Enigma*, rev. edn. (London: Vintage, 2014).
[7] Paula Byrne, *Belle: The True Story of Dido Belle* (London: William Collins, 2014).
[8] See Shelley Anne Galpin, 'Auteurs and Authenticity: Adapting the Brontës in the Twenty-First Century', *The Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 11 (1) (2014), pp. 86-100.
[9] Andrew Macdonald, quoted in 'Promotional Featurette: Thomas Vinterberg', *Far from the Madding Crowd* Blu-Ray, Twentieth Century Fox (2015).

Whilst the 1967 film focussed more on Bathsheba's relationship with the character of Sergeant Troy, the 2015 adaptation screened in the study foregrounds her relationship with Gabriel Oak, a decision which arguably demonstrates greater fidelity to the source text. As we shall see, some of the participants felt the narrative of this film was somewhat predictable, and this can be read as arising partly from its closer adherence to the plot structure of the novel. The re-centering of the narrative around Bathsheba's relationship with Oak, and away from the character of Troy, the more iconic figure in the 1967 film, results in a presentation of the story in which Bathsheba's early fascination with Oak holds greater significance. This is followed by her continued reliance on both his practical skills and his companionship, inviting the audience to interpret Oak as clearly the most suitable partner for her. This reading is further reinforced by the casting of Matthias Schoenaerts, reinventing Oak as a rather more physically attractive prospect than the 1967 adaptation of the novel. When Bathsheba finally follows her feelings for Oak, this plot point therefore comes as far less of a surprise than the 1967 version, resulting in a somewhat predictable ending, as shown by this extract from the Norfolk College focus group:

> SG: … I'm interested to ask the guys what you thought of today's one?
>
> MSP17: It was good yeah, it's just that the ending was so, like, predictable…
>
> SG: You think?
>
> MSP17: Yeah, from when I first saw it, the first twenty minutes I was like, 'well, she's marrying that guy'…
>
> SG: OK – it took her a while to do it.
>
> MSP17: Well she didn't marry him but…it implied that they lived happily ever after, kind of thing.
>
> MSP14: I thought it was pretty obvious from when he ended up at her farm…
>
> MSP17: Yeah.
>
> MSP14: …without knowing it was her farm. It was kind of obvious from that they were going to get together.[10]

And this extract from the Camden School focus group:

> SG: The last one was *Far from the Madding Crowd*… You thought it was predictable…
>
> MSP68: You know it was two hours long… I predicted everything that was happening…

[10] All participants from Norfolk College, male and White – British. Participants were recruited as a class, and were all studying Media Studies BTEC.

MSP66: I don't think it was predictable… we just predicted everything that happened, apart from one thing…

….

SG: You were talking about what was happening a lot…

MSP68: Yeah…

SG: Which suggests to me that you weren't entirely bored? Or were you entirely bored?

MSP68: No, we were…

MSP72: I think they predicted everything, so it got to the stage where if you can predict everything then there's no point in watching it…

….

MSP66: We knew everything that was going to happen within the first ten minutes…

SG: So you didn't find it enjoyable?

MSP71: No, not really…

MSP68: I wouldn't sit down to watch it… you know, in the evening…

….

MSP68: I kind of enjoyed *Far from the Madding Crowd*, it wasn't boring… we were talking about it… but then again it wasn't particularly interesting…

MSP72: What's Far from… what's it about, what's the story like?

MSP66: Although it's about (a farm?) there was still a storyline… it's better that than nothing…[11]

As alluded to in this extract, the Camden School group took great pleasure in commenting on the film throughout the screening, turning their ability to predict what was going to happen next into a form of game, and taking huge satisfaction from frequently being proved correct. This group also seemed slightly confused as to exactly how they felt about the film. When I asked them about the fact that they appeared quite engaged during screenings they were initially resistant, with MSP68 initially insisting that they did find it 'boring', then re-evaluating his response, before reasserting that it 'wasn't particularly interesting'. MSP66's comment that 'there was still a storyline… it's better that than nothing' appears to be a tacit acknowledgement that the rather relentless nature of the storytelling required to include all the necessary plot points from the novel did result in a storyline that at least kept his attention, even though it may not have been one that particularly appealed to this group. This highlights one of the key differences between *Far from the Madding Crowd* and the two

[11] All participants from Camden School and male, ethnicities as follows: MSP68 (White – British), MSP66 (White – British), MSP72 (Mixed – White and Black African), MSP71 (Asian – Indian). Participants were recruited through a Media Studies department, but were not all drawn from the same class.

biopics considered below, including *Belle*, which this group took an extreme disliking to (as discussed in the previous chapter). Films claiming to represent history need to maintain a level of credibility and realism in order to conform to what audiences perceive to be an authentic depiction of past lives. However, adaptations from literature also need to prize fidelity to the source over realism. Whilst none of my participants had read Hardy's novel, other viewers of this film will bring their own memories of the book to any new adaptation, and so the filmmakers need to ensure that the expectations raised by these memories are also met.

Many readers of Thomas Hardy's novels recognise a characteristic emotional intensity in his work, often challenging the social and sexual standards of the Victorian period.[12] Perhaps some of the most well-known examples of this approach come from his later novels, such as his defence of unmarried mother Tess Durbeyfield as 'a pure woman' in the subtitle of his 1891 novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, or his highly pessimistic account of the life of the intelligent and ambitious working man Jude Fawley in 1895's *Jude the Obscure*. A characteristic feature of Hardy's narratives is the series of misfortunes that the protagonist typically endures, spread over a significant period of time and occasionally stretching credulity.[13] These features can result in a narrative style that can appear somewhat contrived when compared to more realistic approaches to storytelling; as MSP14 points out, Gabriel Oak's appearance at Bathsheba's farm is quite a coincidence, and just one of the many examples of the reliance on chance, and seemingly unlikely occurrences, upon which this and other Hardy novels often rely. Once these narrative features are adapted from their original form of the extended Victorian novel and compressed into a two-hour film, the more unrealistic and overwrought aspects of the storyline can become even more apparent. This was noted in critical reactions to the film when it was first released, with Peter Bradshaw commenting that *Far from the Madding Crowd* 'is a faintly rushed, crushed version, a quart-in-a-pint-pot account of the novel', which 'skips smartly and with sometimes rather dreamlike suddenness from famous moment to famous moment'.[14] Rather than consisting of all style and no substance, it is perhaps more accurate to say that the film was attempting to cover too much of the novel's substance.

In promoting the film, Thomas Vinterberg refers to Hardy's novel as 'the Bible', commenting that all the filmmakers felt a 'desire to very loyal to Hardy'.[15] This felt need on the part of the filmmakers to condense the extended narrative of the novel into a feature film running time, whilst still staying 'true' to the novel, can go some way towards explaining the predictability that some participants perceived whilst watching the film. The inclusion of so many key plot points may also explain MSP66's almost grudging acknowledgement that the film did have 'a storyline'. This group's total disengagement with the biopic *Belle* suggests that this was one attribute that they considered that film to lack. The 'crushed' nature of the narrative in the

[12] See for example Dale Kramer, 'Hardy and Readers: *Jude the Obscure*', in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy*, ed. Dale Kramer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp, 164-82.
[13] For a discussion of the role of chance in Hardy's novels, see Mary Rimmer, 'Club Laws: Chess and the Construction of Gender in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*', in *The Sense of Sex: Feminist Perspectives on Hardy*, ed. Margaret R Higonnet (University of Illinois Press: Chicago, 1993), pp. 203-4.
[14] Peter Bradshaw, 'Far from the Madding Crowd Review: Carey Mulligan Shines in Hardy Perennial', *The Guardian*, 2 April 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/apr/02/far-from-the-madding-crowd-review-carey-mulligan-shines-in-hardy-perennial [accessed 18 December 2019]
[15] 'Promotional Featurette: Adapting *Far from the Madding Crowd*', *Far from the Madding Crowd* Blu-Ray, Twentieth Century Fox (2015).

2015 *Far from the Madding Crowd* may also serve to explain the more heightened levels of involvement that I observed in some of the screenings. In Chapter 4 I discussed the fact that the Norfolk College group appeared to particularly enjoy the experience of watching this film. Whilst they were typically rather quiet during screenings, the group displayed many signs of engagement during this screening, frequently reacting verbally to what was happening, either speaking to each other, or directly to the screen. They were also physically more active, gesturing at the screen at various points to express their emotional reactions. This was a feature of the screening that they discussed during the focus group:

> SG: Those of you who said they liked *Far from the Madding Crowd*, what did you like about it?
>
> MSP19: I really liked how we were all really involved in it (some laughter and 'yeahs'). It made it a lot more interesting and like… I feel like I followed the storyline a lot more than I probably should have done.
>
> MSP18: Yeah.
>
> MSP20: Yeah, cos like, if I was watching it on my own I would just be like 'urgh, this is so annoying' but now I was like 'for goodness sake!' Oh my God! It makes me so frustrated that I just want to watch more!
>
> SG: What makes you frustrated about it?
>
> MSP20: She's just like, really indecisive! She's just like 'ah, this man, oh no no' and then he makes you unhappy and you're like, just make a decision! You claim to be independent! But you're like, 'oh no I need a m….'[16]

Here we can see the female members of the group acknowledging the rather convoluted nature of the film's plot, particularly in relation to the characterisation of Bathsheba. Whilst they are not aware of the plot of the source novel, they recognise that the plot moves rather fast in this film. MSP19's comment that she 'followed the storyline a lot more than [she] probably should have done' acknowledges her simultaneous awareness of the more ridiculous aspects of the plot, and her enjoyment whilst watching it. MSP20's comment that she recognised features of the plot that were 'annoying' and 'frustrating', again, even as she was enjoying watching it, also demonstrate that these participants were fully aware of the rather contrived nature of some of the plotting. Whilst it is, of course, true that all fictional narratives are by their nature contrived, the fact that the group have become aware of this highlights the reliance on unlikely coincidences in the film, a feature that derives from its adherence to Hardy's own plotting. This participant's annoyance at Bathsheba's indecision, which echoes some of the responses discussed in the previous chapter, is likely to have been exacerbated by the fact that this film, as Peter Bradshaw comments, moves quickly from one plot point to another, therefore heightening the impression of Bathsheba's inability to make satisfactory decisions about how to respond to the attentions paid to her by her three male suitors.

[16] All participants from Norfolk College, female and White – British. Participants were recruited as a class and were all studying Media Studies BTEC.

This feature of the pacing is also acknowledged in the more critical responses of the Lancashire group. For example,

> The story line was too quick and the film seemed to last for ages (MSP25, Lancashire College, F, White – British)

> I thought the pacing of the film was dreadful which meant that the character development was stunted and unrealistic. (MSP92, Lancashire College, no Initial Survey data submitted)

Whilst the Norfolk College group were able to recognise the more contrived aspects of the storyline whilst still enjoying the experience of watching it, the Lancashire group took a different approach. For this group the film's drawbacks were too apparent for them to find enjoyment in the process of watching the film. The rather confusing comments that the film was both 'too quick' but also 'seemed to last for ages' reflect their awareness that the plot was full of events, but despite this, their lack of engagement with the characters' emotional experiences meant that they felt thoroughly uninterested in the action of the film in general. MSP92, despite not having a personal knowledge of the source novel, appears to instinctively agree with Bradshaw's review, implying that the film placed too much narrative focus on the 'famous moments' from the novel, therefore neglecting to allow the characters to become fully developed. (This participant was also one of the few to indicate a liking for the character of Bathsheba, as noted in the previous chapter.)

In drawing attention to the divisive nature of this film, I have argued that its ability to be both highly engaging and infuriating to my participants can be linked directly to its position as a literary adaptation. As noted in Chapter 2, I had expected that in a study of period drama, I would need to engage with a series of literary adaptations. However, a look at the genre in recent years highlighted for me the increasing popularity of period dramas focused on 'real-life' historical figures or events. Thus, the highly fictionalised treatment of the past, in which plotting can be contrived without raising too many eyebrows, appears to be waning in popularity. We see this here in the lack of tolerance expressed by my participants towards the more melodramatic features of the storytelling in this film. An increased expectation that period films draw on historical fact was also suggested to me by comments from the Camden School participants during the screening of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, when they asked questions implying that assumed Bathsheba was based on a real historical figure. The fact that this film was based on a work of fiction, and a long one at that, meant that its own concerns of fidelity pertain most pressingly to the source novel, and to meeting the expectations of those familiar with Hardy's story, than to wider notions of realism. Clearly, in the case of my participants, previous knowledge of the book did not influence their responses, and this may go some way to explaining both the strong expressions of pleasure or of dissatisfaction that this film elicited amongst the different groups. As participants did not know what to expect before watching, unlike viewers who knew the novel, the they were either taken by surprise with the eventful plotline, or confused by what they perceived as the overly-complicated narrative. This was not the case for other films and television dramas featured in the study, which took as their source material either pre-existing historical sources or broader information about life in the past. These examples might therefore be considered to have a responsibility to adhere to arguably different notions of historical accuracy. It is to this subject that I now turn.

***Belle*: Adapting History**

In her study of heritage film audiences, Claire Monk found that her National Trust (NT) cohort were more likely to be interested in issues of period authenticity than her younger, more cosmopolitan *Time Out* (TO) cohort.[17] The older participants of my pilot study of *Viceroy's House* were also particularly concerned with issues of historical accuracy. However, the discourse of accuracy was also a frequent feature of the data gathered from the younger participants in my main study. This issue frequently arose in survey responses and especially in focus groups. Whilst this was sometimes in response to questions from me relating to expectations of accuracy, often participants raised it without any prompting. I noted at the beginning of this chapter that period dramas are often perceived as failing to truly engage with history, and criticised for presenting only a surface impression of past times. But in fact, the discussions held with my participants demonstrated that many had high expectations regarding the accuracy of the depictions of history in the films and television shows screened in the study.

As we have seen above, participants frequently allude to their perceptions of the relationships between the depiction of the past in the dramas screened and what life was really like during the historical periods. This might be in the form of references to the perceived accuracy of the historical representation, such as MSP29's comment on 'how accurately [*Peaky Blinders*] captured England of the time', MSP9's reference to the 'realistic' setting of *Belle* and MSP59's comment that *The Imitation Game* was 'a true story and provides a history lesson as well as entertainment'. The participants were also clearly attuned to representations that they perceived to be less strictly realistic. This was particularly the case with the representation of women, such as the approving comments about the characters of Polly in *Peaky Blinders* and Joan in *The Imitation Game*, both of whom were perceived as ahead of their time in terms of their strength and determination to achieve respect in male-dominated worlds.

As well as various comments on the perceived accuracy of the ways in which the film and television shows featured in the study represented their historical periods, the issue of accuracy also came up in more general discussions, such as in this extract from the Camden School focus group:

> SG: …Alright, so we've all been watching various period dramas as part of the study…. did you have any expectations, before we started?
>
> MSP72?: No.
>
> MSP68: Do you mean about the sort of things we were going to watch?
>
> SG: Yes…
>
> MSP66: Historical accuracy
>
> MSP68: Yeah…
>
> SG: Oh you expected historical accuracy?

[17] Claire Monk, *Heritage Film Audiences: Period Films and Contemporary Audiences in the UK* (Edinburgh: EUP, 2011), p. 121.

> MSP68: Yeah, to some extent…[18]

And this exchange about *Far from the Madding Crowd*, taken from the Lancashire College focus group

> MSP92: Well it wasn't really though, cos it started out with her, you know, making her own business, doing her own farm and then eventually, you know… it was always her choice, she didn't always make the right choices, and some of those came back to bite her, but at the end of the day it was always her choice…. So I think it is one of those…
>
> MSP25: And I think if it had of followed the whole… feminism on her own thing…
>
> MSP92 and MSP25: It wouldn't have been historically accurate.[19]

The extract from the Camden School focus group is taken from the beginning of the discussion, demonstrating the primacy of the issue of historical accuracy for at least some of the participants. The fact that MSP66 raises the concept immediately, without any prompting, suggests that this is a feature strongly associated with the period drama in his mind. This is in contrast to those definitions of period drama identified by Hughes-Warrington, above, as a type of drama that is interested only in surfaces, and which therefore bears little resemblance to 'real' history. The extract from the Lancashire College group also demonstrates the centrality of historical accuracy to these participants' image of the period drama. The fact that MSP92 and MSP25 speak in unison, both knowing what the other was thinking, demonstrates that the requirement to be 'historically accurate' is inseparable for them from the period drama genre. As with the Camden School participants, the argument that period dramas might have little to do with representing the 'truth' of the past clearly has no currency. For these participants, accuracy in representing the past is both a basic expectation and a marker by which to assess the quality of the drama. Indeed, given the relentlessly negative discussion that the Lancashire College group had about *Far from the Madding Crowd*, it is significant that both MSP25 and MSP92 are here presenting a form of defence against its perceived betrayal of feminist principles through an argument that this would have compromised its ability to accurately represent the period.

Reflecting on the relationship between cinema and biography, Kathryn Millard draws on Paul Carter's concept of a "spatial history", which she identifies as producing literatures which

> are not like novels, and their narratives do not conform to the rules of cause and effect that have dominated empirical history. Instead they must be read as unfinished maps, and records of journeys. The literatures of spatial history are not about smooth progression but

[18] All participants from Camden School and male, ethnicities as follows: MSP72 (Mixed – White and Black African), MSP68 (White – British), MSP66 (White – British). Participants were recruited through a Media Studies department, but were not all drawn from the same class.

[19] Both participants from Lancashire College, MSP25 (F, White – British), MSP92 (no Initial Survey data provided). Participants were recruited through a Media Studies teacher and were drawn from the same class.

> about fragmentary asides, observations, reminiscences, and scraps of dialogue. Above all, they make no claims for completeness…[20]

This description of the fragmentary nature of historical sources, and particularly those relating to less established figures from the past, is highly reminiscent of the inspiration for *Belle*. A significant historical figure whose existence was almost lost to history, little is known of the realities of the life of Dido Belle. This is made clear in Paula Byrne's book, the slightly misleadingly titled, *Belle: The True Story of Dido Belle*. Whilst this book was released as a 'tie-in' with the release of Amma Asante's film, in reality the book provides little information about Dido Belle's life, primarily because sources providing insight into this subject are scarce. The book does provide information on Belle's family, including the significant cases overseen by her Great Uncle and guardian, Lord Mansfield, and outlines what life was like for black citizens of Britain, but presents relatively little concrete detail on Dido Belle's life. In short, the content of the book bears little resemblance to the narrative presented in the film.

As the previous chapters have shown, many participants reported that their enjoyment of *Belle* was linked to their understanding that it was based on real events. This is evident in MSP25's description of going away and 'googling up' on the figure of Dido Belle and the portrait that is referenced in the film; it is also evident in the various comments approving of the 'realistic' nature of the setting and the interesting qualities of the 'true' story (see Chapter 4). The film does feature elements of historical fact, such as the references to the Zong court case, and the existence of Dido Belle and her privileged position at Kenwood as the great-niece of Lord Mansfield, who was an influential figure in altering attitudes in Britain towards the slave trade. However, as noted in Chapter 2, the storyline involving Dido's marriage prospects and the film's emotional climax, in which she and John Davinier declare their love for each other, owes much more to the Austenian template of period dramas than it does to historical sources.

Belle ends with intertitles that present a series of facts, informing the viewer of 'what happened next', after the end of the story depicted in the film. In her discussion of *The Return of Martin Guerre*, Janet Staiger observes that the use of voiceovers or intertitles can lend historical films a position of authority:

> … intertitles take on a kind of distance from the events which are embedded and presented as diegetic. Because framing information is a "separate" text, at a distance and not part of the enclosed story, it can easily take on an authenticity in comparison with that which it embeds. When this voice-over of masculine authority assures (or perhaps reassures) us of an educational value of this true story, it doubles and redoubles its claims.[21]

Whilst *Belle* does not employ a voiceover, these intertitles are clearly intended to lend the film's representation of history greater authority. Although Staiger argues that such separate information 'take[s] on an authenticity in comparison to that which it embeds', I would suggest that the use of intertitles at the end of *Belle* (and many other films claiming to depict the

[20] Paul Carter referenced in Kathryn Millard, 'Projected Lives: A Meditation on Biography and Cinematic Space', in *Screening the Past: Film and the Representation of History*, ed. by Tony Barta (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1998), p. 232.
[21] Janet Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* (New York: NYU Press, 2000), p. 200.

events from the lives of historical figures) lends an authority to the film as a whole, asserting its 'educational value' and obfuscating the fictionalised aspects of its narrative.

As my discussion of how this film was received shows, many participants were highly engaged by *Belle*. Although there were exceptions, with the Camden School group being the most notable, this film produced some highly enthusiastic and emotional responses. I demonstrated in the previous chapter how this film engaged the Lancashire College group, despite at least some of them claiming to seriously dislike the period drama genre. This was evidently due to the fact that they perceived the narrative to have purpose, and to represent values that they felt able to invest in. In Chapter 4 I also showed that many participants engaged emotionally with the film, such as MSP9's enthusiastic comment that she 'loved everything about it' and MSP24's description of it as 'powerfully emotive'. While the emotive nature of the film might be linked to its claim to be a true story, the enthusiastic responses to the characterisation in the film seen in the previous chapter suggest that it is in fact more likely to be down to the effective narrative arc constructed for the film, which encouraged investment in the personal growth of the characters. Likewise, the values represented by the film, which were so important to the Lancashire group's positive reactions to the film, can also be considered to be a product of the fictionalised depictions of the characters, as opposed to the historical circumstances depicted.

The narrativization of history on film is a much-discussed concept. Film theorists and historians grapple with the tension between the positive potential of film, namely its ability to reach a large audience, as noted by Robert Rosenstone,[22] and its undeniable educational potential,[23] and the tendency for oversimplification that inevitably accompanies these attributes. Rosenstone describes the 'unsettling' tendency of film to '[compress] the past to a closed world by telling a single, linear story with, essentially a single interpretation…. [which] denies historical alternatives, does away with complexities of motivation or causation, and banishes all subtlety from the world of history.'[24] Pierre Sorlin makes a similar argument:

> Films, like historical novels and history books, concentrate upon a period, in other words a more or less defined time with its beginning and its end. They narrate and, in order to make the narrative more thrilling, they seize upon some sort of climax…. By playing on quick movements and by editing contrasted pictures of different characters, [history films] make us *feel* how people perceived the challenges they had to face and how they reacted. Nevertheless, these movies inevitably culminate with both a great historical event and a private affair…. Plots end once history and personal fate have joined.[25]

This description by Sorlin reads as a sort of manual for the plot of *Belle*. The film utilises the historical event of Lord Mansfield's ruling on the Zong case as the 'thrilling' climax, following this immediately with a scene in which Dido and Davinier's relationship is finally sanctioned

[22] Robert A Rosenstone, 'History in Images / History in Words', in *The History on Film Reader*, ed. by Marnie Hughes-Warrington (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), p. 32.
[23] See Hughes-Warrington, 'Introduction: History on Film', p. 2.
[24] Rosenstone, 'History in Images / History in Words', p. 31.
[25] Pierre Sorlin, 'Television and Our Understanding of History: A Distant Conversation', in *Screening the Past: Film and the Representation of History*, ed. by Tony Barta (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1998), p. 209.

(again by Lord Mansfield) leaving them free to marry. Thus, the film concludes 'once history and personal fate have joined'. When asked to identify the scene that most stood out in the film for them, many of the participants described the courtroom scene, highlighting this scene's climactic impact in the narrative. I noted in Chapter 5 that many participants were able to invest emotionally in the characters of Dido and Davinier, conforming to Sorlin's description that historical films 'make us *feel* how people perceived the challenges they had to face'.

We can therefore see that much of what the participants found effective about *Belle* can be attributed to the way in which it has narrativized the past. Taking the highly fragmentary source material, Amma Asante's film constructs a coherent and linear story that adheres to many of the conventions of the historical film. The film engages the audience with the discriminatory treatment of people from black or mixed ethnicity backgrounds by making the heroine of the film an active participant in the development of the Zong court case and thus using her growing understanding of the racism embedded within her society to inform the audience about the same. The film also uses Dido's personal struggles over how best to find happiness within marriage to invite emotional investment in the central characters, resulting in a film that many of my participants found both intellectually and emotionally satisfying.

Daniela Berghahn argues that *Belle* is a classic example of the 'style over substance' approach to the representation of history, arguing that 'the film's production history deftly illustrates that heritage cinema, though seemingly concerned with the "conservationist desire of[sic] period authenticity", actually does not care all that much about authenticity, as long as it succeeds in creating a credible fake.'[26] Berghahn then goes on to suggest that

> The fact that neither Johann Zoffany's painting at Kenwood House [represented in the film] nor the location where *Belle* was shot are genuine deftly illustrates heritage cinema's fascination with mere surfaces, with a certain look or style that can pass as the real thing. It is an example of postmodern pastiche that, while purporting to be concerned with the historically authentic recreation of the past, actually reflects "our ideas or cultural stereotypes about the past".[27]

It may be true that the film contains inaccuracies in its representation of history; indeed, we can go so far as to say that history has been largely fictionalised for some aspects of the film's narrative. As we have seen, many writers have argued that the consequence of this 'fascination with surfaces', so often associated with mainstream period drama, is the avoidance of social and political issues. However, despite appearing, in some ways, to be a typical example of a period drama with no true interest in historical accuracy, many of my participants clearly connected with *Belle* precisely because of its engagement with themes they deemed to be socially and politically important.

Many participants reported feeling surprise at the subject matter of *Belle*, as in this exchange from the Norfolk College focus group:

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[26] Daniela Berghahn, 'Rewriting History from the Margins: Diasporic Memory, Shabby Chic and Archival Footage', in *Screening European Heritage: Creating and Consuming History on Film*, ed. by Paul Cooke and Rob Stone (London: Palgrave, 2016), p. 101, citing Andrew Higson, 'Re-presenting the National Past: Nostalgia and Pastiche in the Heritage Film', in *Fires Were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism*, ed. by Lester D. Friedman, 2nd edn (London: Wallflower Press, 2006), pp. 91-109.

[27] Berghahn, 'Rewriting History from the Margins', p. 102, citing Frederic Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', in *Postmodern Culture*, ed. by Hal Foster (London: Pluto Press, 1985, pp. 111-125.

SG: …So was there anything that wasn't how you thought it was going to be, or was there anything that didn't really fit in with your expectations of what you thought a period drama was going to be like?

MSP13: Er… some differences…

MSP19: I think it sort of fitted in. I think *Belle* was the only one that… cos I haven't really seen like… the differences between like… the people before… so I was like… I hadn't really thought about the history like behind… like where we've come to now, so… I think that was quite, like, good to see… yeah.

MSP13: To be fair, I've never seen a period dra… a British period drama about… er…like black people before, so that was cool.

SG: Yeah. Anybody… else? Anyone agree or disagree?

MSP20: You… when you first, like… *Belle* was very, like, different, but it was also, there's bits in it a little bit predictable…

SG: Right.

MSP20: Like, the love interest, it's always going to be predictable…[28]

Here we can see the participants acknowledging the more generic aspects of *Belle*, such as the 'predictable' ending, alongside features they found quite surprising, and especially the fact that it had a black protagonist. It is in this combination of the familiar and different that *Belle* ultimately operates as a political text. The fictionalisation and narrativization of history work to engage viewers on an emotional level, particularly the melodramatic focus on the inner lives of the characters and the attention paid to the difficulties faced by women. It also employs generic period drama tropes such as the lavish *mise en scène* that Berghahn sees as an example of the film's lack of authenticity. However, the placing of a biracial woman within this highly conventional diegesis serves to heighten the impact of the issues raised by the narrative, particularly that of racial inequality. The embedding of this contemporary political issue into what is often perceived as a highly traditional, and iconically British, mode of historical representation serves to emphasise what is arguably the film's key message: not only do people from ethnic minority backgrounds deserve equal rights and treatment, they also need recognition as being as fully British, and as fully embedded within British heritage and traditions, as their white counterparts.

The Imitation Game: Adapting Biography

Mike Chopra-Gant argues for the distinction 'between a film that is 'about' historical events and one that merely uses these to establish the *mise en scène* within which an explicitly fictional narrative takes place.'[29] Whilst *Belle*'s emphasis on the factual nature of the characters and events depicted suggests that it is the former type of film, its reliance on

[28] All participants from Norfolk College, MSP13 (M, White – British), MSP19 (F, White – British), MSP20 (White – British). Participants were recruited as a class, and were all studying Media Studies BTEC.
[29] Mike Chopra-Gant, *Cinema and History: The Telling of Stories* (London: Wallflower, 2008), p. 79.

fragmentary historical sources and its utilisation of standard period drama plot features suggests that is actually something of an amalgamation of the two approaches, with much of the film conforming more to the latter type. *The Imitation Game*, with its basis in more recent history and its explicit claim to be based on Andrew Hodges biography, would seem, at first glance, to be a much more straightforward example of the former. Like *Belle*, much of the appeal of this film for the participants in my study, arose from its claim to depict a true story, and the fact that the participants perceived it as the most relevant to their own lives can be directly linked to its apparent representation of real world events. However, as we shall see, even the suggestion that *The Imitation Game* is an example of 'a film that is 'about' historical events' is over-simplistic. In arguing this, I further call into question Chopra-Gant's distinction between films that deal with supposedly 'real' history and fictional period dramas.

As noted above, the extent to which historical films can be considered as legitimate historical texts is the subject of some debate. Chopra-Gant sums up this debate:

> Since the scholarly written history possesses the same textuality as other ways of representing history and since all ways of representing history have some basis in 'facts' about the past, there is no reason for privileging one mode of historical representation over others. They are all valid (but different) ways of representing the past. Buried within the superficially seductive logic of the argument, however, are several assumptions that should not simply be taken for granted. Historical films may indeed have some basis in fact, but how closely do filmmakers actually adhere to these facts in practice?... what impact does the unique combination of historical discourse and specifically filmic discourses have on the ability of filmmakers to remain close to the facts… - to what extent may the historical narrative in a film be shaped by aesthetic considerations; by genre, drama, stars, spectacle?'[30]

Whilst *The Imitation Game* asserts its authority as a historical text with educational value through the use of intertitles at the end of the film, in a similar way to that utilised by *Belle*, a comparison with Hodges' biography also demonstrates that the relationship between the film and historical fact is not as straightforward as might be assumed. Many of my participants valued the film for what they perceived as its dissemination of a 'true' story about events in recent history that they could easily understand as being relevant to their own lives. However, as with *Belle*, the film departs significantly from the account of Alan Turing's life as represented in the source biography.

In answer to the questions raised in the quotation above, Chopra-Gant notes David Lean's approach to historical accuracy in *Lawrence of Arabia* (David Lean, 1962): 'while the plot of the film would endeavour to follow the historical 'facts' where possible, the director would not hesitate to substitute a fictional narrative for a historically accurate one whenever the overarching dramatic concerns of the film demanded it.'[31] The same tendency can be seen at work in *The Imitation Game*. Thus, the felt need to create drama and provide a climactic moment means that significant details of the narrative, including the means by which the Enigma code is broken, are altered substantially. The drama of this moment is heightened,

[30] Chopra-Gant, *Cinema and History*, p. 70.
[31] Chopra-Gant, *Cinema and History*, p. 75.

including a sudden stroke of genius on the part of Alan Turing (of course), followed by a late-night run across Bletchley. This highly effective sequence culminates in an emotionally satisfying moment, played out to a stirring theme from Alexandre Desplat's score, in which the cast of characters embrace, as they realise the magnitude of their achievement. These changes can be attributed, at least in part, to the 'specifically filmic discourses' that require the plot to reach a climax that is visually clear and exciting, easily explainable through limited amounts of exposition, and satisfyingly dramatic.

The Imitation Game also arguably over-emphasises the role played by Turing in this event, and in the development of the computer. This can partly be attributed to the fact that it is explicitly a biopic of Alan Turing, and therefore needs to maintain a clear focus on this 'character'. The film is dominated by the performance of Benedict Cumberbatch, despite its impressive supporting cast, and the simplification and alteration of Hodges' source material also serves to keep his performance at the centre of the action. Whilst the biography demonstrates that many of the breakthroughs in Alan Turing's work came as a result of work previously carried out by others, the film minimises this by attributing more of the inspiration to Turing himself. Given the film's construction of the character of Turing as a form of lonely genius who is forced to isolate himself from the world, the more collaborative nature of his work, as reported by Hodges, would undermine this characterisation were the film to attempt to capture it. By altering the information provided in the biography, the film creates a more dramatic and streamlined narrative, and presents a character who, in his isolation and his battles against an unjust system, operates as an identifiable and sympathetic protagonist.

In the previous chapter I noted that the character of Joan Clarke was received well by the participants in my study because of her perceived strength of character, along with her more feminine qualities. Here again, we can see evidence of the historical sources being adapted to meet the expectation of filmic discourses. The figure of Joan Clarke features far more prominently in *The Imitation Game* than she does in *Alan Turing: The Enigma*. This alteration can be attributed to several aspects of the filmic mode of representation. Firstly, as Chopra-Gant identifies, the use of particular stars impacts on historical representation, and in the construction of Joan's character within the film we can read an attempt to create a role more consistent with Keira Knightley's star image. As an actor known particularly for her association with period drama, the casting of Knightley increases the appeal of the film, particularly for female audience members. However, it also requires that the role she play be significant enough to attract an actor of this calibre, which suggests one reason for altering the significance of this 'character'.

The role of Joan also provides a satisfyingly empowering representation of women in a film otherwise dominated by men. This was an issue that was raised in one of the focus group discussions that I held as part of my pilot study, which arose in response to a screened extract from *The Imitation Game*:

> PFG1: … I feel mild annoyance when there's a really long scene with just men, like the one we watched… um, it maybe historically accurate but it just winds me up… um, six middle class men in a room (some laughter) especially if they're, yeah, posh…
>
> PFG2: But it's interesting about that because the er, um, character, Keira Knightley character, I think has been changed in that to bring her more into the fold, to give you a female presence, when in fact

> you just wouldn't have had that in reality. She just… you know, it's based on a character but not a character that would have been involved in the way she was involved, so it seems like they've tried to address that in some sort of way…
>
> PFG1: Ok
>
> PFG2: But…
>
> PFG1: Yeah. So there's a token female.
>
> SG: Mm-hm.
>
> PFG2: There's a token female where in reality there wouldn't have been… there was no token female at all (laughter)…[32]

In this extract, the pointed jokes about the 'token female' highlight the participants' tacit acknowledgement that this form of representation can still be considered as woefully inadequate compared to what might be seen as the ideal. Whilst PFG2 is arguing that steps have been taken to attempt to address the disparity in gender representation, the accusations of tokenism and the criticism that the film is still extremely male-dominated from PFG1 emphasise the difficulties faced by filmmakers attempting to improve the political correctness of their films, whilst also attempting to maintain some sort of fidelity to historical sources.

As we have seen in Chapter 5, few of the participants in my main study perceived Knightley's character as 'token', and most very much enjoyed the narrative exploration of the character's struggle for recognition. The narrative of the film foregrounds Joan Clarke's gender as a barrier to her success. Her character is explicitly questioned about her abilities by a smug underling in the first scene that she features in, before Alan Turing's credentials as an ultimately sympathetic protagonist are cemented for the audience by his refusal to disregard her because of her gender. Joan's struggles to reconcile her femininity with her talent are a frequent reference point in the film, with the pressure her parents put on her to find a husband being used to explain the apparently unlikely engagement between Turing and herself (an event that is featured in the biography, although with less explanation). However, this form of representation can be interpreted as arising more from a need to meet audience expectations than to maintain historical accuracy. Whilst Hodges' biography treats Joan Clarke as a relatively minor figure in Turing's life, with no specific descriptions of any difficulties faced by her because of her gender, *The Imitation Game* increases her significance in the narrative and uses her more central role to explore issues of gender equality, a theme that features in many period dramas.

This practice can be linked to comments from the main study participants such as the many references to the realistic depiction of the historical period and the specific comments about historical gender discrimination. Note, for instance, MSP22's comment that 'in reality, there were few [strong women]' in the time that *Peaky Blinders* was set. Such comments from my participants all relate to the *idea* of history that these individuals have accepted, an idea that is likely to be at least partly drawn from the representations of historical periods that they have seen in previous dramas. As Marcia Landy notes, 'films themselves… have played an increasingly important role in reshaping representations of history. Rather than reflecting

[32] PFG1 is a White – British female in the 35-44 age bracket, PFG2 is a White – British male, 25-34.

history through verisimilitude, films reflect our received notions of the past.'[33] Similarly, in discussing the ways in which some films deliberately depart from the advice of their historical advisors, Chopra-Gant cites Vincent DiGirolamo's observation that

> authenticity to a filmmaker is largely getting the look of the movie to correspond to what most people think is the look of the period. It means lifting details from other movies *about* the period as well as from source material *of* the period; hence the susceptibility to anachronism and stereotype.[34]

Robert Stow uses the phrase 'essence of history' to define the ways in which films adhere to a sense of historical authenticity whilst also departing from historical accuracy for dramatic effect.[35] The key factor here is not that the real life figure of Joan Clarke experienced discrimination because of her gender when working at Bletchley Park but that, based on prior experiences of watching historical representations, audiences expect that a woman in that environment would have to struggle against discrimination. Therefore, by making this a central feature of Joan's character and role in the film, audiences are having their prior conceptions confirmed. This is evidenced by comments from my participants such as MSP18's explanation that Joan was her favourite character because 'women were not seen as being able to use their brains' (Norfolk College, F, White – British), and MSP32 who liked her because 'despite it being frowned upon by society she still worked on the code and was key in breaking it' (Somerset College, F, White – British).

To return to the question of style over substance, it is worth noting again that *The Imitation Game* can be recognised as departing from historical fact and potentially indulging in a seemingly superficial impression of authenticity. Yet, at the same time, this is done with the aim of allowing the film to more directly engage in social and political issues that might be of relevance to contemporary audiences. Far from ignoring complex issues in the pursuit of an attractive veneer, *The Imitation Game* alters its source material precisely in order to address issues of gender equality more explicitly. As I have noted, these alterations to the historical record can be seen to serve many purposes, such as making the film more dramatically satisfying, attracting a higher calibre of female star and creating a product likely to appeal more to female audiences. However, these choices also allow the film to engage with pertinent issues, namely here the still pressing problem of female opportunities in the workplace, particularly in science and technology-based environments. As many of the comments from my participants show, this feature of the film made it particularly enjoyable for them. Therefore, whilst the film has departed from its source material and resorted to the inclusion of familiar period drama tropes, these can also be seen to result in a film which is both more enjoyable and more engaged with contemporary social issues.

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[33] Marcia Landy, 'The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media', in *The History on Film Reader*, ed. by Marnie Hughes-Warrington (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), p. 45.
[34] Vincent DiGirolamo, 'Such, Such Were the *B'hoys*', *Radical History Review*, 90 (2004), cited in Chopra-Gant, *Cinema and History*, p. 86.
[35] Robert Stow, 'Popcorn and Circus: An Audience Expects', in *The Return of the Epic Film: Genre, Aesthetics and History in the 21st Century*, ed. by Andrew B R Elliott (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 74-92.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to consider the ways in which the status of these three films as adaptations of previously existing material has shaped the ways in which the participants responded to them. In the case of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, the more contrived and melodramatic nature of the plot can be seen to result directly from the film's attempt to condense the original novel into a coherent storyline. This led to responses which either revelled in the relentless nature of the narrative, with it's 'multiple plot twists' (MSP13), or rejected the film as unrealistic and ideologically unsound. In contrast, the perceived realism of the films claiming to depict historical figures was a source of interest for many participants, with the impression that they were watching a true story being central to their enjoyment.

Both *Belle* and *The Imitation Game* fictionalise many aspects of their narratives, sacrificing historical accuracy but achieving a sense of authenticity.[36] These interventions can be seen to result in the more emotionally invested and intellectually engaged responses indicated by participants. As the biopic goes from strength to strength, and more and more period dramas attempt to engage with the idea of the real, we can see the appeal of the opportunity to learn about a real life historical figure or event through the viewing of film or television. However, as numerous scholars and other commentators have observed, these notions of realism are themselves highly influenced by the ways in which we choose to represent the past. Whilst many historians are suspicious of the tendency of period dramas to oversimplify history, as we have seen, even in mainstream period dramas the manipulation of historical fact can be used to create narratives that both serve to raise interest about the past and engage with important social and political issues.

[36] See also Pam Cook, *Fashioning the Nation: Costume and Identity in British Cinema* (London: BFI, 1996), p. 25 for a discussion of the distinction between accuracy and authenticity in historical representation.

Conclusion

Two central questions have driven my thesis. First, what can we learn about period dramas from young people's responses to them? And, secondly, what do these responses tell us about the young people themselves? I make no claim to provide a representative picture of 16-19 year olds in general, but what the data gathered from this study does present is a range of significant insights into the diverse ways in which the young study participants responded to the dramas screened for them. Questions of value have also been central to this thesis from the outset: the value that we ascribe to the period drama genre, and, more implicitly, the value that we give to the young people themselves. Alongside this we might also consider the value of different research methodologies. A positivist approach to research would hold that data that provides some form of concrete assurance as to the generalisability of the information has the highest value. However, as my study, but also many of the smaller scale audience research studies referenced in this thesis show, qualitative data gathered from a smaller number of participants can be a rich source of information, providing the opportunity for patterns to be identified which allow generalised conclusions to emerge, even if no claim is made that these conclusions are indicative of the entire population.

Whilst the study was initially envisaged as combining quantitative data with more individualised, qualitative responses to the dramas screened, the final analysis draws primarily on the qualitative reports of the responses of the participants in the surveys and focus groups. A more stable set of quantitative data would have allowed for more reliable baseline data on aspects such as the whole cohort's overall enjoyment of the dramas, or the relevance they were perceived as having to contemporary lives. Similarly, a larger scale methodology, as favoured by some projects, would also have allowed for more concrete claims to be made about the scientific objectivity and generalisability of the data gathered. However, whilst I may initially have set out to collect more reliable quantitative data, the process of working with qualitative responses on a smaller scale has demonstrated to me the richness of this form of research. The information gathered is more indicative, reliant on anecdotes and reports of subjective experiences, resulting in detailed records of individualised responses to the dramas, albeit formed within a group context. As such, it further serves to emphasise the complex processes that result in our stated responses to texts, processes that, whilst often subject to social influences, are highly individualised and unpredictable.

Given that the research was also unashamedly exploratory in approach and did not proceed with a clear hypothesis in mind, the detailed qualitative data reported here also serves to illuminate an under-researched area of film and television spectatorship in ways that would not have been possible using quantitative data. The study was inspired by my perception that we often generalise about young people in ways that have no basis in evidence, and that the research that does consider young people's relationship with media texts has too often been dominated by pre-existing perceptions of the subjects' susceptibility to influence. By combining an audience group with a genre with which they are little associated, I sought to discover their feelings about examples of the genre, keeping my line of questioning as open as possible, in order to minimise any researcher effects. The data gathered therefore demonstrates a wide range of reactions, and whilst my own interests have inevitably

influenced the discussion in many ways, the raw data captures a highly diverse set of responses to the dramas.

In the process of responding to the dramas featured in the study, the participants have often demonstrated the capacity for highly thoughtful, intelligent responses, highlighting the emotional and intellectual depth of young people. Through the qualitative data I have presented here, we see the large number of different influences on how the participants responded to the material screened in the study. These include the values they perceive the texts to represent, their familiarity with, and feelings about, the period drama genre, and the reactions of their peers. These further demonstrate the complex ways in which films and television programmes are received and processed by viewers, and the difficulty with which reactions can be accurately predicted based on superficial information such as age, gender and ethnicity.

Audience research is itself a form of representation, and for readers of this thesis some of the most vocal or oft-referenced participants are likely to have emerged as 'characters' in their own right. This is, of course, to a greater or lesser degree, due to the ways in which I have selected examples from the raw data and have used them to illustrate points in which I have a particular interest. Although I have commented on the large number of insightful and detailed responses, inevitably with research of this kind, not every response collected can be characterised in this way. By quoting from a range of different responses I hope to have captured something of the diversity of the young participants, another key motivation behind the design of this study. Although, young people can be subject to rather negative or patronising generalisations, in quoting survey or focus group data which might be read as reflecting less glowingly on the individuals, or the groups to which they belong, I do not intend that this information should be used to reinforce negative assumptions about young people. Instead, by referencing a range of responses, I hope to demonstrate the diverse and often unpredictable nature of the young people's reactions. In some cases, I believe that the responses given do imply a lack of personal experience, which can be linked directly to the ages of the participants. However, more often I would suggest that the range of responses indicates their similarities to the older audiences that young people are sometimes perceived as being quite distinct from.

I began by raising questions of value, and I hope this thesis has demonstrated the value of this form of audience research. Whilst it may have been possible to gather statistical data on the proportions of young people engaging with the period drama genre, no other methodology would have provided such rich and detailed information about the ways young people respond to this genre. The study has demonstrated that we pre-judge or second guess the feelings of teenagers towards this genre at our peril, and the qualitative data has demonstrated the intelligence, strength of feeling and sense of humour with which young people are able to express their thoughts. More than this, the methodologies employed have allowed us to develop an understanding of the factors contributing to the formation of the judgements expressed. The young people frequently demonstrate an acute awareness of the values they consider texts to represent, demonstrating how central their sense of morality can be in determining their opinions. Some also demonstrate great capacity to empathise with characters, and to identify and follow up aspects of narratives that pique their interest. None of these insights into young people's responses to this genre would have been possible without the use of audience research methodologies to capture the precise nature of their reactions.

In addition to the emphasis placed on analysing the data collected within the study, this thesis has also made use of textual analysis techniques. These have been used to support my exploration of the data collected by drawing attention to aspects of the dramas that I considered to be particularly meaningful, and considering how these might have impacted on the data received from my study participants. Again, it is worth acknowledging that this is another way in which the thesis is reflective of my subjective experience of carrying out the study, and should not be approached as an objective representation of the participants' reactions to all the dramas featured in the study. By drawing attention to the subjectivity inherent within the study I do not seek to devalue it. Such subjectivity is inevitable in any project of this size, and does not detract from the validity of the arguments made, or the patterns identified through the analysis.

As I explained at the outset, this project was a very personal one for me in many ways. Underlying the development of the study were a number of concerns, some of which adhere to recognised theoretical positions, such as my allusions to feminist discourses on the valuing of gendered texts. Other concerns, such as my interest in the treatment of young people, belong to less entrenched modes of thinking. However, all the thinking that informed the development of this project sprang from my own experiences, whether my perception of how I myself have been treated, my observations of the treatment of others, or my personal academic engagement with issues raised within the study. It is therefore entirely appropriate and inevitable that the resulting thesis is led by my subjective point of view, even whilst it also represents the points of view of others.

In the rest of this conclusion, I highlight what I see as some of the key findings of the study, considering both issues that were integral to the initial development of the project, such as attitudes towards the period drama genre and to young people, and the subject of the representation of history, which became significant as the study developed.

The Period Drama Genre

The wide variety of different responses to almost all the dramas screened in the study makes drawing broad conclusions based on the responses to each one difficult. One feature that impacted on the ways the participants reacted is their perception of, and response to the characteristics of the period drama genre. The case study dramas were selected for the diverse approaches they take within the genre, and so it is unsurprising that some were perceived as more generic than others. *The Imitation Game* was the most popular of the dramas screened, given its universal approval amongst the participants. Although I have chosen to be deliberately broad with my use of the term 'period drama', for some of the participants this film did not conform to their expectations of the genre, with MSP26 of the Lancashire College group arguing that it should be classed as an historical drama. Although this particular group typically showed themselves to be very open to what might be termed liberal or feminist concerns, it is noteworthy that the aligning of *The Imitation Game* with historical texts, rather than period drama, could be read as classifying it as more masculine, concerned with factual representation, rather than a privileging of subjectivity.

The dramas perceived by participants as more generically typical also inspired a variety of different reactions. Perhaps the most expected case study was *Downton Abbey*, which several participants, both in the pilot and main research phases, referenced as an example of either a

typical period drama, or a typically British programme. This case study inspired the most underwhelming set of responses, with participants appearing to neither love it nor passionately hate it; however, as was typical of the study as a whole, in individual cases there were both favourable and unfavourable reactions to this drama. Whilst it is impossible to know why this drama did not inspire more strength of feeling, it may be related to the greater familiarity that participants had with this drama compared to the others in the study. *Downton Abbey's* utilisation of its famously opulent setting, and the 'upstairs, downstairs' format has arguably reinvigorated the period drama genre, and inspired many similar films and television shows in recent years. For the participants, it may be that they had an idea of what the drama would do, and it did precisely that, leading to less surprise, and therefore less strongly worded reactions.

Although *Downton Abbey* can be considered to be, in many ways, a highly typical period drama, it is noteworthy that in the episode screened, participants tended to respond most favourably to the male characters, such as Bates and Lord Grantham. Films such as *Belle* and *Far from the Madding Crowd* arguably adhere more closely to popular perceptions of the period drama as being dominated by more feminine concerns. Each focusses on the experiences of a female protagonist, including an exploration of the experiences of first love, enabling an interrogation of the most desirable characteristics when selecting a partner. Both films provide room for the emotional experiences of the characters to be explored; however, both also confront wider social issues. Inequalities of class and gender are central to the plot of both films, with *Belle*'s further examination of questions of racial equality also representing a less common intervention into modern social concerns. The adherence of the films to some of the more traditional period drama conventions generated some quite negative responses from some participants. Although many participants found *Belle* to be an engaging and moving experience, others such as the Camden School group struggled to read the meanings communicated by the film, due, I suggest, to their lack of familiarity with the ways in which period dramas infer significant plot and character information. This resulted in a wholesale rejection of the film, despite what the group recognised to be significant points of interest for them within the film.

In contrast, the Lancashire College group expressed great approval of *Belle*, an opinion that was arrived at despite many of the members of the group asserting their dislike of period drama conventions. In this case, the judgement appeared to be based on what the group perceived to be the important subject matter of the film. This group, however, objected vehemently to what they considered to be the 'cliché[d]' (MSP92) nature of *Far from the Madding Crowd*. Whilst they were able to forgive, or possibly even entirely overlook, the period drama tropes of *Belle*, these formed the basis of their extensively argued dislike of the final film in the study. This perhaps indicates the ways in which familiarity with genre interacts with other concerns in the formation of judgement. Genre theorists point out that a viewer's understanding of genre allows them to read texts, through the setting up of familiar expectations.[1] However, as the data collected in this study shows, the strength of these expectations is at least partly dependent on the other features the text is perceived to have. Where a text is seen as having particular value, the genre can become almost insignificant, but in the absence of any other significant factors, its power becomes all-encompassing. It would seem to be significant that the almost entirely male Camden group generally found depictions

[1] Andrew Tudor, 'Genre', in *Film Genre Reader III,* ed. by Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), p. 8.

of male protagonists far easier to invest in than female protagonists. The fact that this group walked out halfway through the screening of *Belle* was indicative of their unwillingness to invest time in understanding this more 'feminine' text better. Therefore, their lack of understanding of the storytelling conventions employed in this period drama may be due in part to a lack of effort, born of a lack of interest in the feminine experiences the film privileges.

In contrast, it is significant that MSP92 did not consider that her description of period dramas as being 'people talking to each other in fancy clothes in fancy rooms' was applicable to *Belle*. It is certainly possible to argue that this film precisely conforms to this description, but it evidently spoke to the Lancashire group, to which she belonged, in a way that transcended what they saw as the rather superficial concerns of the traditional period drama. Through this, we can infer that, whilst genre characteristics provide a significant framework through which the participants could interpret the case studies, in some cases leading to highly negative responses, these could be almost entirely ignored when more significant features, such as thematic or representational concerns, came to the fore. Indeed, MSP92's description of the period drama is evocative of much of the criticism of the heritage film, as being overly representative of the lifestyle and concerns of the wealthy. However, as is clear from both her, and others', approval of films such as *Belle*, dramas within this genre have the capacity to engage audiences through their exploration of a range of different social concerns which can transcend the lavish aesthetic style often associated with the genre.

Many of my participants found the historical narrative of *The Imitation Game* to be highly interesting, allowing them to regard the screening as an educational, as well as an entertaining, viewing experience. Indeed, this feature of the film was clearly central to its popularity. Whilst some participants might question my classification of this film as a period drama, it is significant that many of the responses to this film demonstrated high levels of emotional engagement. We might, for instance, recall the enthusiastic reaction to this film by MSP24 (quoted in Chapter 4), with the basis of his praise for this film lying in its prioritising of the relationships between the characters. We can therefore consider this film as benefitting from a 'best of both worlds' approach. By depicting relatively recent historical events in a supposedly factual way, the film attracts what might be characterised as the more masculine, authoritative approval of the historical drama. However, by also engaging in detail with the emotional experiences of its characters, and privileging the personal struggles of a gay man and a marginalised woman, it also adheres much more closely to some of the traditionally feminised features of the period drama than may be initially apparent.

Looking at the range of responses gathered over the course of the study, it is evident that specific traits of the period drama genre are significant in inspiring particular reactions from the participants. These might be positive, such as in some of the highly enthusiastic feedback to films such as *Belle* and *The Imitation Game*, in which a focus on the personal journeys of the characters resulted in an emotionally satisfying viewing experience for some viewers. In other cases, this was negative, such as when the specific mode of storytelling led some participants to find the dramas either difficult to comprehend, or extremely frustrating to watch. In either case though, we can see that it is only one piece of the puzzle. The specific characteristics of the period drama were read alongside features of the narrative and the time period in which the drama was set. This meant that details such as the characters represented and the approach to depicting the past were also significant features in determining how the case studies were received. It is to these areas that I now turn my attention.

Representing History / Representing Society

A crucial factor in the selection of the five case study dramas was my wish to present the participants with representations of different social groups. The dramas eventually chosen featured both male and female protagonists, and explored the experiences of homosexual, disabled and minority ethnic characters, and characters from different class backgrounds. Alongside this, of course, is the equally significant fact that all also provide representations of the past. As I discovered whilst carrying out my pilot research, these two considerations are inseparable for many viewers. Many comments by respondents to the pilot survey indicated their belief that the positive representation of minority groups was inconsistent with historical accuracy, suggesting to me the extent to which popular perceptions of the historical presence of these demographic groups is influenced by a received understanding of history. That understanding is itself largely created by the representation of society in similar texts that have gone before.

Although the research did not set out to rigorously test pre-determined hypotheses, the decision to select case studies including a range of demographic groups was informed by my belief that young people might respond more favourably to period dramas that feature a wider range of representation than is often considered typical of the genre. The question of whether the young participants would respond positively to the representation of minority groups and working-class characters was inspired by my experiences of screening short extracts from films and television whilst working as a teacher. This line of research also builds on the findings of Claire Monk, whose research identified younger audiences as being more interested in period dramas that engage with identity politics.[2] Whilst the responses of the participants in my study were often too divergent for concrete patterns to be observed, there is evidence here that issues of social equality or injustice did often particularly appeal to them. Many commentators have considered the distinction between period drama and what some might term historical drama to centre on a perceived difference in intention. Whilst dramatic explorations of history are seen to represent some form of serious intention to interrogate aspects of history, period drama is characterised by frivolity and a lack of interest in engaging meaningfully with social and political realities. However, the consistent way in which the participants in my study identified and commented on the treatment of various social groups within the case study dramas suggests that this distinction is less meaningful than has been suggested.

The Initial Survey I undertook gathered general information about the backgrounds of my participants, as well as their attitudes towards media texts, history and the period drama genre. This early data identified the interest of many participants in questions of representation, with many agreeing that women and minority groups were underrepresented in British period dramas. The trend continued into the comments on the dramas screened over the course of the study, through which their interest in and sensitivity to the ways in which disadvantaged social groups were depicted was often clearly discernible. Although not universally liked, *Belle* was very popular with some groups, with participants from both ethnically diverse schools and colleges and exclusively white groups often responding enthusiastically to this film. Strong women were also commented on approvingly, with many participants seeing these characters as proto-feminist figures who provided empowering role models in the female battle for equality. However, this did have limits, with responses to the

[2] Claire Monk, *Heritage Film Audiences: Period Films and Contemporary Audiences in the UK* (Edinburgh: EUP, 2011), p. 134.

rather more complex character of Bathsheba Everdene from *Far from the Madding Crowd* suggesting that female characters still need to conform to approved codes of behaviour in order to achieve popularity amongst viewers.

When it came to representations of disability, the storyline involving the physically disabled valet, Bates, in *Downton Abbey* attracted interest from the participants, despite some scholarship on the drama that suggests the most appealing characters are the aristocratic family.[3] This interest also extended to *The Imitation Game*, with many participants appreciating the sympathetic depiction of Alan Turing's struggles with his social difficulties. Both these dramas also featured the representation of male homosexuality, in the context of its pre-1967 status as a criminal offence in UK law. This aspect of the dramas also attracted many positive comments from participants, with the homosexual footman Thomas in *Downton Abbey* received sympathetically, despite his rather unlikeable behaviour elsewhere in the episode; and Alan Turing's struggles felt to be in need of overdue recognition. For some participants the representation of homosexuality was something they particularly related to, with a few explicitly linking the experiences of Alan Turing in *The Imitation Game* to their own LGBT identity, or to that of their peers.

Janet Staiger has noted that depictions of history on screen often have to encompass seemingly contradictory requirements.[4] On the one hand, they need to create cohesive and credible depictions of the historical past which conform to popular ideas of historical accuracy. On the other, they also need to present relatable, possibly even universal, experiences, which allow audiences to perceive the subject matter of the dramas as relevant, and by extension, worthy of their attention. Through their engagement with identity politics we can observe that all the dramas screened in this study make a claim for relevance through their depictions of the struggles of particular characters. As noted, these depictions frequently became the subject of approving comments from participants, indicating that this feature of the dramas was an especially appealing element of the dramas screened. This finding is, of course, in line with much of the critical work on the period drama which has sought both to wrest it away from definitions of it as inherently conservative and to draw attention to the ways in which these dramas often provide representations of social groups who are marginalised both in many other mainstream genres, and in wider society.

The requirement for representations of history to be both specific and universal is compatible with the depiction of adolescence, which Catherine Driscoll has argued to be 'transhistorical and transcultural'.[5] Many participants in the study clearly found much of relevance in the case study dramas, finding ways to identify with the experiences of characters in very different temporal and social settings to their own lives. This was the case even when the dramas featured characters who were somewhat older than the traditional conception of adolescence. For instance, in *The Imitation Game* the emotional journey of the characters of Alan and Joan inspired a great deal of emotional investment and allowed the participants to find their own personal significance within the film. Even in cases such as *Far from the Madding Crowd*, which some participants found highly amusing due to its featuring of outdated attitudes to courtship

[3] See Katherine Byrne, 'New Developments in Heritage: The Recent Dark Side of *Downton* "Downer" *Abbey*', in *Upstairs and Downstairs: British Costume Drama Television from* The Forsyte Saga *to* Downton Abbey', ed. by James Leggott and Julie Anne Taddeo (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), p. 178.
[4] Janet Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* (New York: NYU Press, 2000), p. 192.
[5] Catherine Driscoll, *Teen Film: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Berg, 2011), p. 144.

and marriage, participants were often able to see beyond these unfamiliar elements to the more universal experiences underlying them. Although many participants found the multiple proposals received by the protagonist Bathsheba to be either funny or frustrating, and sometimes both, the favourable reception of this film by many participants demonstrates that these young people were able to find and appreciate universal emotional truths that exist beneath these changing social conventions.

The representation of relatable experiences is only half the story, though, with the dramas also being required to create convincing representations of the historical past. Many of the participants in my study also enjoyed the experience of watching dramas set in the past, with the historical settings frequently being commented on as one of the most enjoyable features of the dramas. Often these comments were related to notions of 'realism', with the settings being commended for their perceived accuracy in representing the historical period. Comments on accuracy may in fact reflect what might be termed an adherence to an established image of the period, Robert Stow's 'essence of history', which may very well have been influenced by previous period dramas set in the same historical era.[6] Nonetheless, the number of comments singling out the various settings as some of the most enjoyable aspects of the dramas indicates the extent to which the opportunity to experience a recreation of past epochs is central to the pleasure of watching period dramas. Although the participants enjoyed the exploration of social issues and relatable personal experiences in the various dramas I screened, something that is consistent with Staiger's comments on the expectations of representations of history, this enjoyment was not diminished by these being represented within a distinctly historical setting. Instead, the historical settings were another source of pleasure, highlighting the ways in which period dramas succeed in being both relatable and exotic. Thus, these dramas are simultaneously similar and different, exploiting the inherent tension between the lives of the viewers and the worlds they depict.

Young People

The data collected in this study sheds new light on the period drama genre, and the ways in which audiences experience this genre and use it to deepen their understanding of their own lives and the world they live in. There was of course another reason for carrying out this research, which was to develop an understanding of young people, and how they interact with film and television texts. I wanted to challenge what I perceived as the unjustifiably pervasive view that period dramas and younger audiences are not compatible. In particular, the study was intended to give prominence to the voices and experiences of teenage participants. The data my project has yielded demonstrates how audiences aged 16-19 engage with this genre in ways that are unlikely to be solely applicable to this age group, therefore further illuminating our understanding of the genre and its reception more generally.

Moral panics have been persistent feature of the discussion of young people's engagement with the media, leading to longstanding debates over the 'common sense' perception that young people's behaviour is likely to be negatively influenced by their viewing habits. As Martin Barker points out, to suggest that viewing films and television shows has an effect on

[6] Robert Stow, 'Popcorn and Circus: An Audience Expects', in *The Return of the Epic Film: Genre, Aesthetics and History in the 21st Century*, ed. by Andrew B R Elliott (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 74-92.

audiences is to state the obvious.[7] The more debatable consideration is the type of effect media consumption has, and the extent to which the young are particularly susceptible to this. As this thesis has shown, many of the young participants in the study gained great enjoyment from the experience of watching period dramas. Many also demonstrated high levels of empathy in engaging with what can be read as the more universal emotional experiences of the characters depicted, linking experiences depicted in the dramas to their own experiences, and using them to reflect on their lives and their place in society.

As we have seen, the emphasis placed on their enjoyment of the period settings demonstrates the interest that these participants had in the historical nature of the narratives. Significantly, the actions taken by some participants in following up these interests by researching aspects of the period depicted further highlights their interest in historical details. In what could be argued to be a positive example of a media 'effect', several of the young participants responded to the screenings by seeking out further information on elements of the story, or the period detail, which had captured their interest. MSP25's use of the phrase 'googling up' is clearly a product of the availability of information in the contemporary world, and we can see evidence of several participants taking advantage of this easy access to information. MSP25's research into the portrait featured in *Belle*, MSP66 and MSP68's interest in the IRA, arising from their viewing of *Peaky Blinders*, and the various aspects of Alan Turing's story that caught the attention of participants such as MSP84 and MSP92 all indicate the readiness of these young people to further explore historical details that captured their interest.

Another frustration that led to this research was with the tendency for commentators to talk about young people as if they are a single entity, with consistent and shared characteristics. The often considerable differences in the responses of my participants to the dramas screened meant that identifying patterns of responses across the five screenings was not always a very fruitful pursuit. It did, however, confirm for me what my experiences as a teacher had already suggested: that young people can respond very differently to the same material, and often in the most surprising and unexpected ways. One factor that should not be ignored is the impact of the group nature of the screenings on the responses of individual participants. Whilst we have seen the capacity for divergent opinions between groups, this was far less evident between members of the same group. This phenomenon emphasises what many audience researchers have previously argued, that we do not form judgements in isolation, but are subject to the influence of those around us. The experience of observing screenings was that the influence of the group mentality was often palpable. The feelings of the groups were frequently clear well before they submitted their survey responses, and the fact that groups tended to enjoy or reject the dramas collectively indicates the strength of this influence.

Despite the diversity in responses between the groups, the data collected here suggests that there is potential for some dramas to reach as yet untapped audience groups. Many participants found dramas such as *Belle* and *Far from the Madding Crowd* to be highly enjoyable and interesting, and yet the majority of participants had never heard of these before participating in the study. This suggests that filmmakers and distributors might want to be more aware of younger audiences as a potential market for them to target. In particular, historical representations exploring contemporary issues proved popular with my young participants, and showed potential to initiate wider debate and awareness of the historical

[7] Martin Barker, 'The Newson Report: A Case Study in Common Sense', in *Ill Effects: The Media / Violence Debate*, ed. by Martin Barker and Julian Petley (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 21-2.

treatment of women, minority groups and the working classes. Educators too might also find the information in the study to be of interest, with its suggestion that young people are open to engaging with a broad range of different texts.

One of the disadvantages of the decision to focus this research only on the 16-19 age range is that it lacks a comparative element that might shed light on the impact of the ages of the participants. I do not believe that this group influence is exclusive to this age range. Indeed, many audience researchers who have carried out studies with older audiences have also commented on the importance of social influences in determining audience responses. Even so, without carrying out the same research with an older set of participants, it is not possible to know whether this impact was more pronounced amongst younger viewers. Given that concepts such as 'peer pressure' often have a particularly strong resonance in relation to the young, it would be helpful to be able to further investigate this feature of the data by carrying out a parallel study to explore whether older viewers also tend to report relatively consistent in-group responses. Clearly that was beyond the scope of this study, but it does point towards other potentially fruitful areas of research.

Similarly, whilst I have identified that these young participants were often very interested in, and attuned to, the representation of potentially disadvantaged social groups, it is impossible to know, based on this data, whether this was the result of the ages of the young people in the study. Monk's research did involve a comparative dimension, and her findings that younger participants did tend to appreciate period dramas for their identity politics more than her older participants suggests that this may well be the case. However, without showing the same five case studies to groups of older participants and examining their receptiveness to the same representational features, it is not possible to conclusively identify this receptiveness as a product of the ages of the participants.

What I hope this thesis does show is that neither young people, nor period dramas, can really be thought of as homogenous groups. Of course, this conclusion is, in itself, not particularly helpful. What are genres for, after all, if not to provide us with a simple way of grouping together texts with similar characteristics? And, if we are honest, who amongst us has not judged other people based on easily perceptible characteristics such as age? These tendencies are inevitable, and in many circumstances, helpful and necessary. However, what is not necessary, and certainly not inevitable, are the values that we attach to these judgements. As *The Imitation Game* frequently reminds viewers, 'sometimes, it is the people no-one imagines anything of, who do the things that no-one can imagine'. It would be futile to expect that individuality, whether of texts or people, can always be recognised over and above an adherence to characteristics of the group to which the subject belongs. However, it is not futile to hope that both genres and groups of people that have hitherto been marginalised or patronised might be one day recognised for the value they hold.

Appendices

Initial Survey Questions

Your consumption of films and television

1. **How regularly do you watch TV? (This can be live or through recordings or on-demand services)** *
Mark only one
Every day
4-6 days a week
1-3 days a week
Never

2. **If / when you watch TV, how often do you watch dramas (as opposed to reality TV, documentaries, game shows etc.)** *
Mark only one
I mostly watch dramas
I watch dramas quite frequently
I sometimes watch dramas
I rarely watch dramas
I never watch dramas

3. **How often do you watch films, on average? (This can be in the cinema, on TV, through on demand services or in any other way that full-length films can be accessed.)** *
Mark only one
Several times a week
Once or twice a week
Once a fortnight
Once a month
Less than once a month

4. **Do you have a favourite film or TV show, or are there any films or TV shows that have had a particular impact on you? If so, please say what they are, and briefly describe what you like about them, or the impact they have had on you.**

Your national identity

5. **How would you describe your national identity?** *
Tick all that apply.
British
English
Welsh
Scottish
Irish
Other:

6. **How important is your national identity to your own personal identity? (It may help to consider the extent to which you think you would have the same personality and characteristics if you had a completely different national identity.)** *
Mark only one
Completely unimportant 1 2 3 4 5 Very Important

7. **If possible, can you briefly explain your answer to the above question?**

8. **Can you think of any films or TV shows that you would describe as being typically British?**
If so, please identify them and briefly explain why you have chosen them.

You and history

9. **How often do you take part in the following activities? * (Often, Sometimes, Rarely, Never)**

Taking part in historical reenactments
Visiting historical buildings or museums
Reading fiction set in the past
Reading books about history, or 'real-life' historical figures
Watching films or TV shows set in the past

10. **Thinking about the activities listed above, if you have stated that you do take part in any of them (even if it is only rarely), please identify who you are most likely to be with when you do them. ***
Mark only one
My school / college
Parents / Guardian
Friends
On my own
Another family member
N/A

Your attitudes to British period dramas

A British period drama is a film or television show that tells stories set in a historical period (up to and including the 20th century) and that features characters or events that have links to Britain (either fictional or based on fact).

11. **To what extent do you agree with the following statements? * (Strongly agree, Agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Disagree, Strongly disagree, Don't know)**
Mark only one per row.
British period dramas should feature more disabled characters.
British period dramas should feature more lesbian and gay characters.
British period dramas should feature more ethnic minority characters.
Women are generally represented positively in British period dramas.
British period dramas pay too much attention to the lives of the rich.
It is important that British period dramas portray historical periods accurately.
Watching British period dramas makes me feel more British.

12. **Please use the space below if you would like to explain any of the above answers, or give any more detail.**

About You

13. **What is your name? (Please give your first name and your surname. All your answers are confidential and your name will only be used for the purpose of collating your answers together.) ***

14. **Which college do you attend? ***

15. **What is your age? ***
Mark only one
16
17
18
19

Other:

16. **What course are you following?** *
Mark only one.
A Levels
BTEC (Level 3)
Other:

17. **Which subjects are you currently studying? (Tick all that apply)** *

Media Studies
Film Studies
History
English
Drama
Sociology
Psychology
Politics
Arts (Art, Music, Photography etc)
Science (Maths, Biology, Chemistry, Physics)
Languages (French, German Spanish etc)
Business Studies / Economics
Computer Science
Law
Geography
PE
RE / Philosophy
Other:

About You

18. **What is your gender?**
Mark only one.
Female
Male
Prefer not to say
Other:

19. **How would you describe your ethnic origin?** *
Mark only one
White - British
White - Irish
White - Any other background
Mixed - White and Black Caribbean
Mixed - White and Black African
Mixed - White and Asian
MIxed - any other backgrounds
Asian - Indian
Asian - Pakistani
Asian - Bangladeshi
Asian - any other background
Black - African
Black - Caribbean
Black - any other background
Arab
Any other background

20. **What is the highest level of education attained by your parents or guardian?** *
Mark only one
GCSE or other level 2 qualification
A Levels or other level 3 qualification

Bachelor (undergraduate) degree
Postgraduate qualification (other than Masters degree or PhD)
Masters degree
PhD
No qualifications
Don't know / prefer not to say

21. **What is the job title of whichever of your parents or guardians earns the most? ***

22. **When you were at school, where you eligible for free school meals? ***
Mark only one
Yes
No
Don't know/Prefer not to say

23. **Which of these descriptions best describes where you live? ***
Mark only one
A big city
The suburbs or outskirts of a big city
A small city or town
A country village
A farm or home in the country

24. **Do you support one of the UK political parties? (Please consider your thoughts about the UK political parties, even if you are not eligible to vote.)**
Mark only one
Yes, I strongly support a political party.
I have some support for a political party
I have slight support for a political party
I have no support for a political party

25. **If you have indicated that you have support for a political party, even if it is only slight, could you identify which party?**
Mark only one.
Conservatives
Labour
Liberal Democrats
Green
UKIP
Plaid Cymru
SNP
DUP
SDLP
Sinn Fein
Ulster Unionist Party

Consent

26. **I consent to the data I have provided being used for the purposes of the study described in Section 1. I understand that the data I have provided will be kept confidential, except in the unlikely event that disclosure of information provided is legally required. I understand that all data will be stored securely. I consent to the information I provide being used by the primary researcher for the purposes of the study described in the information sheet and for publications or presentations where appropriate. I understand that the data may be shared with other researchers in an anonymised form, but that where my data is used, I will not be identifiable.**
Mark only one.
Yes

Post-Screening Survey Questions

1. **Were you already aware of this film / TV show?** *
Mark only one
Yes, I have seen it before
I haven't seen it but I had heard of it
I wasn't aware of it at all

2. **If you had heard of it before, could you briefly say what you knew about it, or how you had heard of it? Did you have any expectations of what it would be like before you watched it?**

3. **Now that you have watched it, what rating would you give this film / TV show?** *
Mark only one
Didn't like it at all 1 2 3 4 5 Loved it

4. **Can you identify anything that you thought was particularly good about the film / episode?**
This might be the story, the characters, the actors, the settings, or anything else that you particularly liked. If yes, please say what it was and explain briefly why you liked it.

5. **Thinking about the same sorts of things suggested in the previous question, was there anything that you particularly did NOT like? Please say what it was and briefly explain why you didn't like it.**

6. **Is there a moment in the film / episode that particularly stands out to you? If so, please describe it briefly and say something about why it stood out to you.**

7. **Was there a character that you particularly liked? If so, please say which character it is (describe them or their role in the story if you can't remember their name) and say what you liked about them.**

8. **How relevant would you say this film / TV show is to your life? (It might help to consider how much it made you think about your own experiences, or the society that you live in today?)** *
Mark only one
Not at all relevant 1 2 3 4 5 Very relevant

9. **Can you explain this answer?**

10. **Do you think that watching this film / TV show has altered the way you think about English history at all? Briefly explain your answer if possible.** *

11. **What is your name? (Please write your first name and surname - remember that this will be used to link this survey to your other surveys only. All your answers are confidential.)** *

Consent

12. **I consent to the data I have provided being used for the purposes of the study described on the first page. I understand that the data I have provided will be kept confidential, except in the unlikely event that disclosure of information provided is legally required. I understand that all data will be stored securely. I consent to the information I provide being used by the primary researcher for the purposes of the study described in the information sheet and for publications or presentations where appropriate. I understand that the data may be shared with other researchers in an anonymised form, but that where my data is used, I will not be identifiable.** *
Mark only one
Yes

Summative Survey Questions

Your views on the films / TV shows you have been watching

Reminder, the five screenings you have had were: *Peaky Blinders* (TV episode about the Shelbys, a fictional group of gangsters in early twentieth-century Birmingham), *Belle* (film about a mixed race woman living amongst the aristocracy in the Georgian period), *The Imitation Game* (film about Alan Turing and the breaking of the Enigma code), *Downton Abbey* (TV episode about the aristocratic Crawley family and the staff that work for them), *Far from the Madding Crowd* (film about a young woman trying to run a farm independently in nineteenth-century Dorset)

1. **You have now watched all of the films and TV shows being featured in the study. Which would you say you liked the most?** *
Mark only one
Peaky Blinders
Belle
The Imitation Game
Downton Abbey
Far from the Madding Crowd

2. **Can you say why you have chosen this one?**

3. **Which did you like the least?** *
Mark only one
Peaky Blinders
Belle
The Imitation Game
Downton Abbey
Far from the Madding Crowd

4. **Why did this appeal to you less than the others?**

Your views on the films / TV shows you have been watching

5. **Did any of the films / TV shows make you think about anything particular in your own life?**
If so, can you indicate which one(s), and describe what it / they made you think about?

6. **How relevant did the films / TV shows feel to your life in general, or to the world you live in? Did some feel more relevant than others? If so, can you say which felt more or less relevant, and why?**

7. **Have you taken any actions as a result of watching any of the films / TV shows? (This might be, for example, reading a book about the subject matter to find out more information, research on the internet, watching more episodes of the TV shows or watching the films again. However, it could include anything that you have done as a result of watching these screenings.) If so, please say what you have done and which films / TV shows prompted you to do this.**

8. **How likely is it that you might take any actions in the future that are directly related to your participation in this study? This could be related to a particular film / TV show (eg finding out more about it) or to period dramas in general (such as watching more films or TV shows set in the past, visiting historical locations more, or learning more about historical periods in general).** *
Mark only one
Very unlikely 1 2 3 4 5 Very likely

9. **If you have indicated that there is any likelihood that you might take any actions as a result of participating in this study, indicate here what you might be interested in doing.**

Your views on period dramas

10. **Thinking about what you have watched as part of this study, as well as any pre-existing knowledge you had of period dramas, please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements. * (Strongly agree, Agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Disagree, Strongly disagree, Don't know)**
Mark only one per row.

It is important that British period dramas portray historical periods accurately.
Women are generally represented positively in British period dramas.
British period dramas pay too much attention to the lives of the rich.
British period dramas should feature more ethnic minority characters.
British period dramas should feature more disabled characters.
Watching British period dramas makes me feel more British.
British period dramas should feature more lesbian and gay characters.

11. **Have your views on periods dramas changed at all as a result of taking part in this study?**
Can you briefly say why / why not? *

Your views on history

NOTE: As all the examples used in this study are set in England, as opposed to any of the other countries that make up Great Britain, I have used the word 'English' in some of the questions that refer to the examples shown. You can choose whether you refer to just England, or to the whole of Britain in your answers. Please use whatever words feel most appropriate to you - there is no right or wrong answer!

12. **Would you say that watching the films / TV shows featured in this study has altered your view of English history at all (or history in general)? Have any of your expectations been challenged or reinforced? Explain your answer if you can. ***

13. **Has watching the films / TV shows in this study altered the way you think about English national identity - the traditions and characteristics that make up 'Englishness'? Can you say why/ why not? ***

14. **Would you say that your own sense of national identity, or your own feelings about living in Britain / England, have changed as a result of watching the films and TV shows in this study? Explain your answer if you can. ***

About you

15. **What is your name? (Please write your first name and surname - remember that this will be used to link this survey to your other surveys only. All your answers are confidential.) ***

16. **What is your current age? (This may be different from the age you gave at the start of the study.)**
Mark only one
16
17
18
19
Other:

Consent

17. **I consent to the data I have provided being used for the purposes of the study described on the first page. I understand that the data I have provided will be kept confidential, except in the unlikely event that disclosure of information provided is legally required. I understand that all data will be stored securely. I consent to the information I provide being used by the primary researcher for the purposes of the study described in the information sheet and for publications or presentations where appropriate. I understand that the data may be shared with other researchers in an anonymised form, but that where my data is used, I will not be identifiable.** *

Mark only one

Yes

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Belle (Amma Asante, UK, 2014)

Bend It Like Beckham (Gurinder Chadha, UK / Germany / US, 2002)

The Best of Me (Michael Hoffman, US, 2014)

Black Panther (Ryan Coogler, US, 2018)

Brideshead Revisited (ITV, 1981)

Call the Midwife (BBC, 2012-)

Cars (John Lasseter, US, 2006)

Cars 3 (Brian Fee, US, 2017)

Chariots of Fire (Hugh Hudson, UK, 1981)

Child's Play 3 (Jack Bender, UK / US, 1992)

The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe (Andrew Adamson, US / UK, 2005)

Clueless (Amy Heckerling, US, 1995)

The Crown (Netflix, 2016-)

Dallas (CBS, 1978-91)

A Dangerous Method (David Cronenberg, UK / Germany / Canada / Switzerland / US, 2012)

Django Unchained (Quentin Tarantino, US, 2013)

Doctor Strange (Scott Derrickson, US, 2016)

Downton Abbey (ITV, 2010-2015)

Downton Abbey (Michael Engler, UK / US, 2019)

The Duchess (Saul Dibb, UK / Italy / France / US, 2008)

Easy A (Will Gluck, US, 2010)

Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them (David Yates, UK / US, 2016)

Fantastic Beasts: The Crimes of Grindelwald (David Yates, UK / US, 2018)

Far from the Madding Crowd (John Schlesinger, UK, 1967)

Far from the Madding Crowd (Thomas Vinterberg, UK / US, 2015)

Fast & Furious (Justin Lin, US / Japan, 2009)

Game of Thrones (HBO, 2011-19)

Gangs of New York (Martin Scorsese, US / Italy, 2003)

Garrow's Law (BBC, 2009-2011)

Ghostbusters (Paul Feig, US / Australia, 2016)

Hard Sun (BBC, 2018)

Harry Potter and the Philopher's Stone (Chris Columbus, UK / US, 2001)

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Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire (Mike Newell, UK / US, 2005)

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The Imitation Game (Morten Tyldum, UK / US, 2014)

Jane Eyre (Cary Joji Fukunaga, UK / US, 2011)

Kingsman: The Secret Service (Matthew Vaughn, UK / US, 2014)

Kingsman: The Golden Circle (Matthew Vaughn, UK / US, 2017)

Lady Bird (Greta Gerwig, US, 2018)

Lawrence of Arabia (David Lean, UK, 1962)

The Lord of the Rings Trilogy (Peter Jackson, New Zealand / US, 2001-3)

Love and Friendship (Whit Stillman, Ireland / France / Netherlands, 2016)

Mamma Mia! (Phyllida Lloyd, UK / US / Germany, 2008)

McMafia (BBC, 2018)

Mean Girls (Mark Waters, US / Canada, 2004)

Moana (Ron Clements and John Musker, US, 2016)

Nationwide (BBC, 1969-83)

Northanger Abbey (ITV, 2007)

Peaky Blinders (BBC, 2013-)

The Piano (Jane Campion, New Zealand / Australia / France, 1993)

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Pride and Prejudice and Zombies (Burr Steers, US / UK, 2016)

Prison Break (Channel 5 2006-7, Sky One 2007-2017)

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Requiem for a Dream (Darren Aronofsky, US, 2001)

The Return of Martin Guerre (Daniel Vigne, France, 1984)

A Room with a View (James Ivory, UK, 1986)

Sherlock (BBC, 2010-)

Sicario (Denis Villeneuve, US / Mexico, 2015)

The Silence of the Lambs (Jonathan Demme, US, 1991)

Star Trek (BBC, 1969-71)

Suffragette (Sarah Gavron, UK / France, 2015)

Tangled (Nathan Greno and Byron Howard, US, 2011)

10 Things I Hate About You (Gil Junger, US, 1999)

Thelma (Joachim Trier, Norway / France / Denmark / Sweden, 2017)

13 Reasons Why (Netflix, 2017-)

Titanic (James Cameron, US, 1998)

Upstairs, Downstairs (LWT, 1971-5)

Viceroy's House (Gurinder Chadha, UK / India / Sweden, 2017)

Victoria (ITV, 2016-)