

Films and british
national identities: the
shift from past glories
to present rea...



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Introduction

Identities were expressed through numerous films that created the image of the British national identity for an international audience. Film productions served an important role in influencing a picture the British life (Storry & Childs 2002, p. 15). The term “Britishness” emerged and was attributed to the characteristics of British people. It was also something that referred to the sense of national identity found in the common culture of the United Kingdom.

There were two films that can represent different national identity of British people. The first film would be the award-winning film, *Chariots of Fire* (Hugh Hudson, 1981, UK) that was based on events concerning a British athletic team during the 1924 Olympics. The lead character of the film revolved around Eric Liddell, a Christian athlete who ran for the glory of God and another runner who runs for his own glory. The second film that would be discussed would be *The Full Monty* (Peter Cattaneo, 1997, UK). This movie is a comedy that featured six unemployed men that decided to form a group that stripteased in order to earn money.

British Individualism

During the 1920s, patriotism seemed to have been conditional. There was an observed resistance that combined Britishness with abstract concepts such as the State and the Empire (Cashmore 2008, p. 160). There was a time wherein the superiority of the United Kingdom was threatened after it has been going strong for 300 years. During the years of superiority, the British did not associate themselves with arrogance; instead they placed upon

<https://assignbuster.com/films-and-british-national-identities-the-shift-from-past-glories-to-present-realities-essay-sample/>

themselves responsibility for civilizing the world by sharing their language, culture and institutions on global level (Cashmore 2008, p. 160). However, British dominance was slowly losing its power, even for the people.

Individualism was viewed to be an ideology that represented the sentiments of the British people.

On a paradoxical level, this time provided a need for the British to put out the flag in order to cultivate national sentiment and to look for national monuments and national rituals (Cashmore 2008, p. 160). The film *Chariots of Fire* was considered as a chronicle of the 1920s that served as the period setting by which the film was based. It was also viewed as an allegory of the period of the 1980s when the film was released (Cashmore 2008, p. 159).

The story of British Olympiad athletes was set in a culture of individualism and when British patriotism was considered to be conditional and instrumental. However, it was released at a time wherein the nation was in need to cultivate a sense of nationalism.

During the 1920s, class inequalities were rampant and unemployment was also a national problem. It was a period wherein Victorian values were shifting because the end of the British Empire was near (Cashmore 2008, p. 159). The question that the film presented in terms of conditional patriotism revealed that a strong nation or a global empire was useless if there was no sense of individual well being amongst the members of the British nation. It also revealed the shifting British national identity.

The film portrayed the different lives of athletes Eric Liddell and Harold Abrahams. Both were preparing for the Paris Olympic Games of 1924.

<https://assignbuster.com/films-and-british-national-identities-the-shift-from-past-glories-to-present-realities-essay-sample/>

However, while they were both athletes that were competing for the same prize, they were different in so many ways. While Liddell was a missionary's child and a devout Christian, Abrahams was a view and challenged by anti-Semitism. Liddell ran for the glory of God and as a means of fulfilling God's purposes.

When this film was released, the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher supported the film's patriotic motifs, especially in during the Falklands War of 1982 (Cashmore 2008, p. 159). Even if the film was based on historical characters, the film was perceived as a figurative reconstruction that was relevant, even in the late twentieth century.

The film was set in the context wherein military campaigns in the Second Afghan War brought the so-called Empire to an end. The national consciousness or national identity rested on shaky foundations. The film symbolized the dissipation of the unity of purpose that was catalysed by the war and replaced with the shift in individualism. The sense of Britishness that was observed in the *Chariots of Fire* was described to be highly utilitarian and not emotionally nationalistic (Cashmore 2008, p. 160).

Patriotism was measured according to its practical value for the individual.

However, even if the British identity was indifferent to the nation in the 1920s, they still kept their memberships and identified themselves to other associations. The film did not show Liddell or Abraham to be overtly patriotic. Their triumph did not really proclaim their allegiance to UK, such as the way today's athletes did (Cashmore 2008, p. 160). The men in this film

represented the narrow, specific commitments they held that were consistent with British individualism during that time.

Both of the main characters' patriotism was doubted at different points in the movie. Abrahams was accused of not running for his country but for individual glory. However, this was canceled out when he sang the song "He is an Englishman." The British Olympic Committee also doubted Liddell's loyalty to his country when he refused to compete on a Sabbath. The film utilized a different kind of vocabulary in order to convey its nationalism. Despite the presence of the representation of British perseverance, there was also the presence of resolve and indomitability (Cashmore 2008, p. 165). The movie *Chariots of Fire* was also distinguished because of its plausible depiction of Britishness, as something that was not without class distinctions, prejudice and snobbery.

More than this, the movie explored the pressures on the idea of nationhood and national identity (Leah 2004, p. 7). It reflected the reality of how nationalism was perceived in the nation, as well as how this British nation was viewed from the outside. *Chariots of Fire* conveyed tensions and contradictions in the concept of national characteristics that were apparently displayed in this film.

Thatcherism

Chariots of Fire was associated with a complex piece of work. It was closely identified with a refurbished national sentiment and a Thatcherism outlook because of the circumstances by which it was received (Hill 1999, p. 21). It was undeniable that despite the individualism ideologies that were observed, <https://assignbuster.com/films-and-british-national-identities-the-shift-from-past-glories-to-present-realities-essay-sample/>

the film still celebrated British success. This factor evoked different traditional values that were similar to those of what Thatcherism sought to revive in the 1980s. Thatcherism referred to Margaret Thatcher's political style. It was viewed as a political project that emerged in the wake of the Conservative election defeat in 1974 (Hill 1999, p. 4). It was also a response to the problems that the British economy was experiencing in the seventies.

The early eighties was a period wherein a demand for rose-tinted and nostalgic views of the past of an orderly and exclusive upper-class nation emerged (Christopher 1999, p. 91). These films were considered as heritage films and *Chariots of Fire* was one of the films that represented this batch. Despite the fact that it featured unconventional and rebellious characters, they still represented the proud and nationalistic victory of their Britishness. The morally satisfying ending and the attention to the period's details made it a comforting picture of British life and institution despite a time of increasing social hardships. The movie's release was considered to have perfect timing. The nostalgic theme of British superiority came at the time wherein Prince Charles married Diana in 1981 and they achieve victory over Argentina in the Falkland Islands in 1982 (Christopher 1999, p. 91).

The focus of the film revolved around sports and the celebration of traditional values that were associated with it. In some ways, the film sought to resurrect the ideal Olympic spirit of competitive sportsmanship and the ideals they represented. Similar to the American cinema, *Chariots of Fire* was also linked to the return of the hero. After an array of films that represented unmotivated heroes, the mid-seventies reflected the return of films to linear narratives that presented goal-oriented action and positive heroes.

<https://assignbuster.com/films-and-british-national-identities-the-shift-from-past-glories-to-present-realities-essay-sample/>

This was film that was perceived as a reaction to the breakdown of traditional British models of filmmaking and a return to the convention treatment of British cinema (Hill 1999, p. 22). The trailers of this film were even associated with the traditional British film about British heroes and were linked to the popularity of the earlier tradition of British cinema. This still reflected the need of the country to revive British nationalism.

While some texts represented the heroism in *Chariots of Fire* to be linked to traditional versions of masculinity, it was also significantly linked to nationality. The role of presenting a hero represented a vessel for national virtues and qualities (Hill 1999, p. 22). The thematization of national qualities was something that the hero embodied. It was something that celebrated the national virtues of the British.

Athletics and sporting achievement were widely identified with traditional English education and traditional English virtues (Hill 1999, p. 23). The education of an Englishman was linked with athletics because of its capacity to build character, foster courage and leadership in an individual. Sporting achievements were also encouraged because they created a spirit of loyalty, comradeship and mutual responsibility in individuals.

The film endorsed this through a character who came across as snobbish and a bigot. However, more than endorsing the character, the film presented these values that had claim in this film and what it was trying to portray. Sporting endeavor was viewed to provide a loose allegory for national effort and achievement (Hill 1999, p. 23).

The ideological resolution by which the film provided represented the incorporation of the fusion of the old and the new in the period of Thatcherism. The film was viewed to link directly to Thatcherite ideology through Abraham's traditional and tradesmanlike spirit that was reflected in the film.

The central characteristic of Thatcherism was the combination of economic neo-liberalism and social neo-conservatism (Hill 1999, p. 26). This was viewed in the ideological nostalgia for the imperial's past glories and traditional values but it also involved economically advancing and the attempts to restructure British economy. The mix of traditional and modernity within Thatcherism was directly linked to what the heroes of *Chariots of Fire* provided. The term "regressive modernisation" was used describe this. Liddell was traditionally religious and unwilling to compromise. This was linked to the social and moral conservatism of Thatcher and, as well as her faith in conviction politics (Hill 1999, p. 26). On the other hand, Abraham's aggressive individualism and self-help philosophy reflected the entrepreneurial values of Thatcherism (Hill 1999, p. 26).

British Class and Masculinity

A decade after, Britishness economic stability still influenced the national identity of the British people. While the superiority of the Empire eroded further in the 1990s, films that realistically portrayed the status of the British identity emerged. *The Full Monty*, released in 1997 was a story about six men who found themselves at the margins of their masculinity and in the journey to move back to the center. The movie opened with a clip of the

town of Sheffield in 1970s at a newsreel (Addelston 2002, p. 337). It was a thriving still town in Yorkshire United Kingdom. Then the first scene cut to the 1990s, wherein the town was desolate with closed steel mills and many unemployed workers. The six men that served as the main characters in the film were either unemployed or worked lousy jobs. The movie revolved around different ideas of British masculinity. The main characters were marginalized and needed an audience to display their bodies in order to reify their masculine status (Addelston 2002, p. 337).

The movie was set a time wherein the decline of manufacturing and traditional heavy industries had eroded the British tradition for the working class. Industrial labour was always the central way by which the working class defined themselves and the changes weakened the ideologies of masculinity. British masculinity was perceived to be associated with pride in hard and physical labour. The introduction of new technologies and the eradication of the traditional male jobs changed the traditional working class masculinities (Hill 1999, p. 168).

The film joined the array of movies that suggested the crisis in the traditional definitions of masculinity, as well as the shift in the roles in the family, which were historically reinforced to build up a the superior sense of male identity. The film was viewed to link deindustrialization and unemployment to the loss of traditional masculine roles and identities for British men (Hill 1999, p. 168).

Even if *The Full Monty* explored masculinity within the context of an economic backdrop, Howard (1999) noted that British culture had only began

to conceptualize gender in such terms during the 1990s (p. 22). This could explain how working-class comedies were viewed as a new genre during that time. Films that represented the exploits of working-class men symbolized a break with cultural tradition. These films disavowed the relationship between gender and economics (Howard 1999, p. 22)

There were debates about the socioeconomic implications of industrial capitalism but these discussions excluded gender, even as an entrepreneurial class. Male capitalism was always viewed as a brute economic force (Howard 1999, p. 22). The entrepreneurial class was not associated with masculinity. The British male identity revolved around their strength and their ability for physical labour. Factory owners and businessmen were not identities that the British male sought to emulate. The defining traits of the British male identity included soldier-heroes, Green intellectuals, athleticism and monastic figures (Howard 1999, p. 22). Thus, Liddell and Abraham of *Chariots of Fire* represented the traditional views of British masculinity.

The Full Monty connected the politics of entrepreneurialism with the non-traditional image of the 20th century British masculinity. The male characters of the film were highly impacted by economic factors in their milieu. The film was placed inside the setting of the harsh reality of the 1990s after the recession that accompanied that Thatcherite downsizing (Howard 1999, p. 23). It represented the dire state as the British national identity shifted from reminiscing past British glories to having to deal with

the realities of a general lack of hope for the country's economy, especially for the middle-class.

The film *The Full Monty* represented the growing awareness for the changing identity of masculinity in the nation. Even if the British identity was characterized by its loyalty to traditional values, this film dared to represent the shifts that society had experienced towards the unconventional.

Changing gender roles were closely linked to economic power. The male was no longer the breadwinner or the superior mate. The film provided a controversial approach of how the man's economic emasculation drove him to assuming a traditionally female role of the stripper as a means of overcoming the powerlessness (Goddard 2000, p. 23).

In comparison to *Chariots of Fire*, the women played supporting roles. The superiority of the male characters was still evident. However, in *The Full Monty*, the tables had turned and the men took it upon themselves to prove something to the women in their lives. The act of being naked or doing the "full monty" was not something that was considered absolute in their shift in the roles or the final establishment of identity. Instead, it was viewed as a fluid means of currency between the gender roles that was necessary because of the impact of external forces outside the male-female relationship (Goddard 2000, p. 23). The final act of exposing themselves signified the identity of the liberated men in the early 21st century. It was something that redefined the traditional British national identity.

The representation of the working-class male body in this film represented the state of individual masculine identities. While class divisions still existed

<https://assignbuster.com/films-and-british-national-identities-the-shift-from-past-glories-to-present-realities-essay-sample/>

in the 1990s, there was a shift in the gender roles and a shift in the power between men and women. The power status that men held was significant in the image of British national identities because of the traditional values it portrayed. However, *The Full Monty* reflected the post-imperial identities of the British male that experienced emasculation as an effect of Thatcherite politics. (Farrell 2003, p. 119).

Realism and Regional Identities

The 1990s was defined by the practice of taking traditional design and making it more practical and relevant. The reinvention of traditional stories was something that the British audience observed in different forms of art. The influence of realism was overwhelming in this century. While there were frequent attempts to go back and find drama in the setting of authentic daily life, the British films sought to create works of reality, instead of works of fantasy and imagination (Christopher 1999, p. 20).

Marked by the growing popularity of reality television shows, the young British identity was viewed to become more provocative and original in their choices and in their ideologies (Christopher 1999, p. 20). The cultural scene was seen to renounce American influences and began to stand proud and alone in isolation. The new image of the British emerged and was represented by the international success of films like *The English Patient* and *The Full Monty*. There was a clear trend towards presenting the real nature of the British identity that was not entirely reliant on the glories of the past Empire. *The Full Monty* epitomised the trend for new realism and was very successful for it.

Regional identities also emerged in this film. They were still described to be conservative in a sense because of how they were accepted by the status quo. The popular resurgence in the regional identity in *The Full Monty* was by the community-rooted identities that were under threat by de-industrialisation (Ward 2004, p. 70). The campaign that emerged in regional assemblies that were reflected by the film symbolized the sense of neglect of the region in the Thatcher years.

The construction of regional identities was viewed as a powerful force. While this was originally viewed to be against a more progressive and forward-looking Britishness, the regions experienced a sense of alienation of national identity that was associated with urbanization (Ward 2004, p. 71). This was presented through the reflection of the dire state of the town setting of the movie. The middle-class members of the regions experienced the impact of economic instability. Thus, regional identity was perceived to be in need of receiving a renewed essence of Britishness.

Conclusion

Throughout the 1980s and the 1990s, British films have connected notions of heritage culture. The British landscape was viewed to revolve around heritage drama (Hutchings 2004, p. 27). *Chariots of Fire* was set to remind the audience of the glories of the traditional British national identity. The film provided a nostalgic approach to promoting the traditional nature of the national identity that was closely associated with Britishness. It was something that reflected and promoted the Thatcherite values that emerged in the 1980s. The contrast that existed in the films that were presented was

in the fact that *The Full Monty* represented an opposing view of the British landscape. It was something that symbolized a realistic view of the British national identity that was original, individualist and unconventional. The film's provocative nature challenged the trend of heritage films and present a more realistic view of Britishness in the 1990s.

Bibliography

Addelston, Juddi. (2002), ' Doing the Full Monty with Dirk and Jane: Using the Phallus to Validate Marginalized Masculinity.' *The Journal of Men's Studies* , vol. 7, 3, pp. 337.

Christopher, David (1999). *British Culture: An Introduction* . Routledge, London.

Cashmore, E. (2008), " Chariots of Fire: Bigotry, Manhood, and Moral Certitude in an Age of Individualism ." *Sport in Society* , vol. 11, no. 2, March/May, pp. 159-173.

Farrell, Kevin, (2003) " Naked Nation" *Men and Masculinities*, Vol. 6, No. 2, , p. 119-135.

Hill, John. (1999). *British Cinema in the 1980's: Issues and Themes*. Clarendon Press, Oxford.

Howard, Greg. (1999) ' Exhibitionism and Repression in the Full Monty' . *Film Criticism* , vol. 24, no. 1, pp. 22.

Hutchings, Peter, (2004), *Uncanny Landscapes in British Film and Television*. Manchester University Press, United Kingdom.

Goddard, Kevin. (2000), " Looks maketh the man": The Female Gaze and the Construction of Masculinity ." *The Journal of Men's Studies* , vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 23.

Leach, Jim. (2004), *British Cinema*. Cambridge University Press, United Kingdom.

Storry, Mike. & Childs, Peter. (2002), *British Cultural Identities* . Routledge, London.

Ward, Paul (2004), *Britishness since 1870*. Routledge, London. Publication