

# Britishness analysis essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The discussion of Britishness has become so widespread in recent years, be it through politics or film. I will be looking at how British films aimed at a worldwide market contribute to the long debate over the representation of Britishness and also the representation in films aimed at a national audience.

Looking back at British films that have been successful worldwide it would seem that worldwide the British film industry has only had one style of film it can import, this being the heritage film, it is this representation of Britain and the British people that is popular with the worldwide market. It is through these films that people around the world recognize and identify the British, but are these portrayals an honest depiction? Or are they the reason that British citizens do not even fully comprehend what “Britishness” is? Films such as *Howard’s End*, *A Room with a View*, *Sense and Sensibility* that are successful worldwide all giving the same representation of a historic Britain. But even modern set films such as *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Notting Hill*, *Bridget Jones’ diary* still give the same representations. These portrayals are successful.

They sell worldwide, are enjoyed worldwide and certainly do wonders for the British tourist industry. What we see when we watch these films, are a picturesque setting of a large family home in the countryside, an upper middle class well educated family who bizarrely have difficulty in being emotionally expressive. Darren Slade argues that this representation is negative and false. He notices that in the film *Four Weddings and a Funeral* that Andie McDowell’s character at one point asks whether all English people live in castles, and the film suggests they do – except for one scene in which

we see a token shot of a working class estate. It's the funeral scene, of course i.

He questions whether this false representation is down to the country's insecurities, it is these representations that add to the discussion of Britishness. But recently there have been many British films which have broken the mould and which have tried to give a fairer more honest representation of Britain and that have also managed to be internationally successful. iiProfessor Linda Colley points out that both Great Britain and the United Kingdom are and have always been composite states made up of different nations, with considerably different cultures. Although an obvious statement, the way the British have been represented in the past does not match the description. Films such as *Chariots of Fire*, *Howards End* and *a Room with a View* to name a few were successful worldwide and going by their representations the whole of Britain is white and upper class, recent films have tried to give a more honest realistic view. The multi-cultural society and class variation is rarely shown or rarely successful, there have been very few British films that have been both representative of Britain and successful.

Films such as *Trainspotting*, *East is East*, *Billy Elliot* and *The Full Monty* have all been universally recognised have tried to be more representative of Britain, but at the same time it came be said that they are doing the exact opposite of the heritage films. The British film industry does not have enough money to fund the “ risky” films, films such as *Four Weddings...* or the two *Bridget Jones'* were successful because more money was put in to them and they had well known actors.

For smaller British films that want to represent something out of the norm it is difficult. Money is the main factor, the British film industry go back to the “safe” choice of film because it will bring in money. Brian Tufano comments that one of the problems of British cinema is that it never found its own voice-it was lost somewhere between Europe and Hollywoodiii I agree with these comments, British films do not seem to have their own identity but at the same time I think that not enough money is invested into the British film industry for it to be able to make one itself. Or maybe the blame can be shifted again to the producers of films being too eager to break the American market.

It seems that in the British film industry if one type of genre is successful another 10 of the same are pointlessly produced, in the mid 90's after *Trainspotting* when because of its success fresh new filmmakers were given a chance, *Lock Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* was produced. Guy Ritchie produced a unique success and British breath of fresh air to the industry; he closely followed this with *Snatch*, which with his directorial respect and Brad Pitt was again an international success. In between these two films, other producers seemed to want to jump onto the gangster film revival, films such as *Love, Honour and Obey* and *Honest* which starred three members of the pop group All Saints seemed like a desperate attempt to follow the successful footsteps of *Lock Stock...*

, of course the opposite happened with dire results, *Honest* was pulled out from many of Britain's screens, and *Love, Honour and Obey* flopped as well. It seemed that these producers were too eager for the American money and were unoriginal enough to jump on the back of somebody else's success. But

would British films that are internationally successful be so if it were not for the help of famous “Hollywood” names. *Four Weddings and a Funeral* would have undoubtedly not been so successful if it were not for the including of the actress of Andie McDowell.

The same can be said for *Notting Hill*, which apart from being criticised for its poor portrayal of Notting Hill included Julia Roberts who at the time was the biggest, most sought female actress. For smaller films such as *Trainspotting*, it seems that the narrative is far more important than bringing in named stars, without the name it enables audiences to concentrate on what is being shown. The recent success of *Love Actually* was headlined by mainly British actors, but had a list of big American names with cameo appearances such as Billy Bob Thornton, Denise Richards and Claudia Shiffer (Although not American, but with the same pulling power) to name a few. We have often seen the representation of a typical “Engliush woman” played by an American actress, purely because they can pull in double the number any British actress could. *Bridget Jones’s Diary* saw the Texan actress Renee Zellweger take the lead role, *Sliding Doors* and *Emma* saw Gwyneth Paltrow headlining the cast and *The Hole* saw Thora Birch playing a young English girl.

A British actress could easily have played these parts just as well or even better but would not be given the chance because again money being the main factor, they would bring in large enough audiences. The Britishness debate continued and throughout the 90’s films were breaking the “heritage” portrayals, but only on national success. Brian McFarlane comments that films such as *Bhaji on the Beach*, *Beautiful People* and *East is*

East articulate awareness that WASP, middle class, Southern England is not all there is to British life; it never was, but it was many years before British cinema registered the heterogeneity of British society in a sustained, serious way. Although the above films were not globally successful they were a success in Britain, they show a more honest picture. It would seem that these films are plainly too raw for the international market, nationally they are successful because they represent what many British people see and maybe go through in their lives British people can understand these films.

On an internationally level people may want to hear well spoken charming English voices and see the beautiful countryside and though the rare success small films such as *The Full Monty* and *Billy Elliot* we have very recently seen the success of *Love Actually* internationally, which saw the return of the same British representations of Britain as *Four Weddings... and a Funeral* was packed with well known actors, Michael Radford states What we have in Britain is essentially a suburban cinema-safe, cosy and anonymous. This statement is true, we have a safe market that sells, but is it true to Britain, too much of a risk would be taken for any form of branching out which is why what we call heritage films and representations will continue for a long time to see.

Nationally British people can appreciate the heritage film and what it represents but at the same time recognise a film, which has slices of reality.

The debate will forever continue and until the global market, or more precisely the American more dominant market can open their minds to these small “risky” films, or until the British government realise the potential in the British Film industry and invest money into the industry then the old familiar representation of Britain will continue.