

European Heritage Cinema: Grand Visions, Grand Problems

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Heritage cinema has been understood primarily as a national project, a means of presenting the national past on film. But so much of what passes as heritage cinema is actually the product of transnational circumstances and pitched at transnational, even global markets. The synergies that cinema has developed with the heritage sector, and especially with heritage properties and heritage tourism, underlines the potential to use drama to engage with the past while speaking to the present. But it also underlines the propensity to commoditise both the past and the cultural practices that emerge from and engage with it. Meanwhile, the European project has been developed as a form of unity in diversity, a transnational vision that at the same time finds room for the diversity of the national. Concepts like “European heritage” beg an enormous number of questions: Whose heritage? Whose Europe? Who benefits?

My paper will examine such issues, partly through looking at a new €1m, HERA-funded project, “Mediating Cultural Encounters Through European Screens”, which will examine, amongst other things, the European production of historical drama on film and television, the extent to which such drama circulates across national boundaries within Europe, and the ways in which audiences use such drama to know and understand the identities of other Europeans.