

Classic Comedy as a Barometer for Present Times
or the Debunking of Categorical Delineations of
Nationality in *Passport to Pimlico* (Henry Cornelius, 1949)

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Comedy is a funny business. You can watch a film and find it absolutely hilarious, but go back to the same movie a few years later and be totally unimpressed by it. Changes in appreciation of the sort show that comedy is not constituted solely by its texts, but also by surrounding and intersecting discourses, all of which presuppose familiarity with or recognition of *here-and-now* sociohistorical concerns. This said, through or by means of the process called “articulation”, developed by Stuart Hall in the eighties, my aim in this paper is to tease out how a classic comedy like *Passport to Pimlico* can respond to and *can* be remodelled by social change. Indeed, while Cornelius’s film parodied the not-so-funny situation of post-war England, its fun-poking at the consequences of freedoms obtained by independence gains new or re-newed resonance in the wake of devolution in Scotland and Wales and the potential for national fragmentation it throws up.

Keywords: *Passport to Pimlico*; comedy; Ealing comedy; articulation; identity; devolution

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La comedia clásica como barómetro de la época actual
o el desmantelamiento de delineaciones categóricas
de nacionalidad en *Passport to Pimlico* (Henry Cornelius, 1949)

La comedia es un género peculiar. Podemos ver una película y encontrarla divertida, pero ver la misma película años después sin que cause ninguna impresión. Tales cambios de estimación demuestran que la comedia no está constituida únicamente por sus textos, sino también por discursos que se agregan y entrecruzan, lo que presupone un conocimiento de los temas de *aquí y ahora* relativos al momento sociohistórico. Mediante el proceso denominado “articulación”, desarrollado por Stuart Hall en los ochenta, el objetivo de este artículo consiste en desentrañar cómo una comedia clásica como *Passport to Pimlico* puede dar respuesta o puede ser remodelada por el cambio social. Aunque la película de Cornelius parodiaba la situación nada divertida de la Inglaterra de posguerra, su burla de las consecuencias de las libertades obtenidas gracias a la independencia adquiere una resonancia nueva o renovada cuando se sitúa en la perspectiva del traspaso de competencias en Escocia y el País de Gales y el potencial de fragmentación nacional que conlleva.

Palabras clave: *Passport to Pimlico*; comedia; Ealing; articulación; identidad; devolución

1. INTRODUCTION

Compared to Hollywood's vast production empire, film making in Britain has always seemed more of a cottage industry.¹ Invariably exposed to the unequal competition of this formidable 'other', the history of British cinema has therefore been, according to Gilbert Adair (1985: 14), "the history of an inferiority complex" — a defeatism, David Sutton adds, that has conditioned both the conception and perception of British films since the earliest days of the industry (2000: 1). Indeed, British cinema has come up against constant criticism from as far back as the 1930s, when writer Paul Rotha dismissed British studios as being "filled with persons of third rate intelligence inclined to condemn anything that is beyond their range" (Jones 2005), right up to François Truffaut's spiteful comment, made in 1969, that "there was a certain incompatibility between the words 'cinema' and 'Britain'" (Barr 1996: 1). Such disdainful remarks logically led to a general lack of interest for British cinema. As a consequence, for many years a number of fine films and directors were under-appreciated, as Alan Lovell implied when he described British cinema as "The Unknown Cinema" (2001: 200). Eventually, this critical bias veered to more positive tenors with the publication, in the 1970s, of such works as Raymond Durnat's *A Mirror for England: British Movies from Austerity to Affluence* (1970), Rachael Low's *The History of the British Film, 1918-1929* (1971; 1985), and more importantly, Charles Barr's authoritative *Ealing Studios* (1977) and *All our Yesterdays* (1986), both of which proved fundamental in developing an altered vision (and knowledge) of British cinema (Lovell 2001: 205). Considered to this day a "definitive study" of Ealing (Fitzgerald 2009), Barr's first book charts the evolution of the company from its beginnings as a little backwater studio facility, through to its becoming a significant cinematographic corporation with a string of classic films to its name, and on to its decline and fall. It was, as Barr explains, between 1947 and 1955, when Ealing produced a number of highly successful and critically acclaimed comedy films, that the company really came into its own.² Dramatising so thoroughly and entertainingly Balcon's call for "a projection of the true Briton to the rest of the world" (Kardish 1984: 67), films such as *Hue and Cry* (Charles Crichton, 1947), *Passport to Pimlico* (Henry Cornelius, 1949), *Whisky Galore!* (Alexander Mackendrick, 1949), *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (Robert Hamer, 1949), *The Lavender Hill Mob* (Charles Crichton, 1951), *The Man in the White Suit* (Alexander Mackendrick, 1951) and *The Ladykillers* (Alexander Mackendrick, 1955) were soon internationally perceived as almost synonymous with 'Britishness' and the British way of life (McCabe 2005: 27). The French critic André Bazin was later to refer to the Ealing comedy cycle as a distinctive filmic

¹ Financial assistance from the Ministry of Science and Education and the Diputación General de Aragón, under project grants FF12010-15263 and H12, is gratefully acknowledged.

² Although the studio name has become almost exclusively associated with the comedies, its production cycle was quite varied. For example, *It Always Rains on Sundays* (Robert Hamer, 1947) interwove themes from the 'woman's picture' and the thriller with a 'realist' portrait of London's East End, while *The Blue Lamp* (Basil Dearden, 1949) and *I Believe in You* (Basil Dearden, 1952) were socially orientated films about the police force and the probation service respectively (for detailed analyses of the films, see Barr 1998).

strand that signalled “the appearance of a British cinema that was original and free from the influences of Hollywood” (Ryall 2005).

Together then, Ealing comedy, Comedy and British identity constitute the starting point for my proposed exploration of how a genuinely British, post-war classic like *Passport to Pimlico* might be seen to acquire new or re-newed resonances in the totally different, twenty-first-century context of the *post*-national. Indeed, with a devolved parliament and assemblies already in place in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, respectively, the once *United Kingdom* appears to be entering an irreversible drift towards rupture or what Tom Nairn called, over thirty years ago, “The Break-Up of Britain” (1981).³

In trying to read contemporary concerns into a film of the past, my analysis of *Passport to Pimlico* can therefore be presented as an attempt to put in practice the theory of articulation developed by Stuart Hall in the eighties when he argued that the meaning of cultural texts and practices is invariably the result of “a linkage between the articulated discourse and the social forces with which it can, *under certain historical conditions* . . . be connected” (Hall 1997a: 141; Slack 1997: 115; my emphasis). Put simply, the process Stuart Hall labelled “articulation” is the exercise of mapping connections, establishing correspondences, linking “this text to that meaning, this meaning to that reality, this experience to those politics” (Lawrence Grossberg, qtd. in Daryl Slack 1997: 115), but with a view of meaning as always expressed in (and determined by) a specific context, a specific historical moment, within specific discourse(s).

Hence, after a brief preamble on certain distinguishing features of Comedy, the film will be examined historically, that is, as a spoof on ongoing, post-war hardships. This background information will then enable me to concentrate on how this comic depiction of the establishment of a ‘nation within the nation’ somehow relates to the general situation of Britain today.

2. COMEDY

In keeping with Aristotle’s definition of comedy (Wimsatt 1955: 10-11; Corrigan 1981: 9-10), *Passport to Pimlico* deals with ordinary characters in everyday situations in an amusing way. Set in a close-knit London ‘village’ community of small shopkeepers, the film brings alive the tensions and rows as well as the values and loyalties of “lower types” who suddenly find themselves in a totally “ludicrous” (as opposed to “serious”) situation which “is not painful or destructive” (Corrigan 1981: 9). Following another strand of the comic genre, the ordinary and everyday in *Passport to Pimlico* can also be viewed as transformed into a brief, carnivalesque liberation from the established authority of Whitehall and, more so, from ‘official’ British citizenship (Scott 1990: 175; Gray 1994: 35).

³ The issue of the “Break-Up of Britain” has recently made national and international headlines as Prime Minister David Cameron is contemplating the possibility of staging a Westminster-led referendum on Scotland’s secession from the United Kingdom.

Operating as it does in a 'middle zone' between the serious and the absurd, comedy is widely perceived as a refuge for people in search of light relief. And yet, as Andy Medhurst insists, the genre also has a deeper side. "Comedy", he states, "is a barometer of social change" (2007: 11), hence my partial appropriation of the expression in this paper's title. The crucial point here, as emphasised by Medhurst, is that comedy is not constituted solely by the text (in this case a visual text) or the text's contents, but also, and more importantly, by a number of other surrounding and intersecting discourses concerning the socio-historical moment. From this perspective, *Passport to Pimlico* can also be viewed as a satirical comedy, designed to expose the follies and vices of individuals and/or the perceived weaknesses of society at a given moment in time. As John West cautions (2000), however quaint, cosy and backward-looking this classic of the Ealing comedy genre may appear to be, it also "hints at darkness and conflict". In order to understand the comedy in *Passport to Pimlico* we need to be alert to the ways in which it expresses the nature of the historical moment.

3. THE FILM IN ITS HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As several historians and critics have noted (Ford 1988: 6-8; Lloyd 1993: 294-301; Barr 1998: 80-107; Aldgate and Richards 1999: 154-58; White 2008: 69-74), after the sacrifices of the Second World War, ordinary people demanded change. They wanted new freedoms and a society that would guarantee a "fairer deal for all" —key words of the National Health Service, set up by the new Labour government (Ford 1988: 6).⁴ Despite a number of other significant domestic reforms introduced by the government, all aimed at improving people's lives,⁵ Britain was burdened with a huge post-war debt that seriously affected the country's economic wellbeing —a situation exacerbated by persistent financial crises (Morgan 2001: 62-64). As a result, there were continuous shortages of raw materials and of basic food supplies that made the maintenance of rationing and austerity seem all the more oppressive to a population by then weary of so much State-administered planning and control over their lives.

In part, it is this frustration that *Passport to Pimlico* expresses. Even before the story begins, spectators are presented with a full screen title, "dedicated to the memory of", followed by a still shot of personal points coupons, clothing books, ration books surrounded by a wreath. This funereal opening points two ways, combining as it does a solemn look *back* in time: a remembrance of the war and ordeals undergone during the war, and a dream-bid for a better future when the daily grind of frugality, restrictions and coupons will have disappeared from

⁴ In this respect, Labour's resounding electoral victory of 1945 and the ousting of the great wartime leader, Winston Churchill, can be interpreted as a sure sign that the electorate was not prepared to revert to the unjust society of the pre-war years, with its rigid class system and 1930s-style economic hardships.

⁵ Apart from legislating publicly financed social welfare, other notable measures included the national insurance system, increased old age pensions, a major education reform, a new drive for State-subsidised council houses, together with the nationalisation of industries and transport (Lloyd 1993: 294-301).

people's lives for ever.⁶ Thus, once the plot is set in motion, the recent war and its domestic after-effects are constantly underlined and/or recalled by means of a proliferation of realistic details, ranging from bomb sites, ration queues, press headlines, documentaries, TV news reels, siege, barbed-wired demarcations, evacuation, hunger, to community resistance and patriotic singing.⁷ And yet, for all the film's apparent faithfulness to the documentary-realist tradition of British film-making, it very soon becomes evident that these iconographic and thematic reminders of wartime experiences and on-going difficulties merely serve as the backdrop for a tongue-in-cheek, wish-fulfilment *fantasy*. In this respect, the opening scenes already playfully invite spectators to travel away from the drab reality of post-war Britain. To the accompaniment of 'exotic' Latin music, a 'Humphrey-Bogart-type' figure in a white suit stands by a fan mopping his brow with a handkerchief. The camera then pans outside to take in a woman lounging on a sun-bed and removing her South American-style sun hat, before making a slow descent to arrive in front of a notice, outside a fish shop, announcing "frying today". Almost immediately, therefore, any illusion that the action might be transporting spectators to some distant tropical location is cut short, especially when a radio announcer is heard informing listeners that they have just been treated to "lunchtime music by Les Norman and his Bethnal Green Bambinos". In thus raising the audience's expectations only to shatter them, this opening scene epitomises the public's deeply felt yearning to escape post-war gloom and disenchantment. Once the brief flight into the fantasy world of 'foreign' sunshine has 'evaporated', there follows a montage sequence of vignettes, each reflecting the uneventful daily routines of several Pimlico characters. Together, these brief fragments provide a panoramic view of how ordinary British men and women fared four years after the end of the war. Spectators are thus introduced to residents of the area: the fish shop owner, Huggins (Roy Gladdish); his assistant Molly (Jane Hylto); Elie Randall (Hermione Baddeley), the local fashion "expert"; the friendly police constable, Ted Spiller (Philip Stainton); Mr Wix, the bank manager (Raymond Huntley), and the greengrocer, Mr Pemberton (Stanley Holloway), his wife (Betty Warren) and their daughter Shirley (Barbara Warren). Amidst this amalgam of different experiences, small private tensions come to light. Molly's —perforce limited— glamorousness is thus shown to 'fall flat' on her boss, who is besotted with Shirley Pemberton. Meanwhile, Wix's subordinate position within the financial institution he works for —we meet him submissively enduring a reprimand from a superior— is contrasted with Arthur Pemberton's affable disposition and relaxed business orientation.

Almost immediately, however, it turns out that larger, more ominous forces are also at work in Miramont Place. Greed and self-interest presently surface, threatening to submerge

⁶ Apparently, the film was inspired by a newspaper item spotted by its screenwriter, T.E.B. "Tibby" Clarke, which related that during the war, in order to maintain the full legislative authority of a Dutch law which decreed that the Dutch royal succession must be born on national soil, a room in Ottawa where the family was in exile from the German occupation was officially declared Dutch territory (Brown 1984: 37; Perry 1985: 112).

⁷ In this respect, *Passport to Pimlico* reproduces many of the conventions of wartime films (see, for instance, Street 1997: 50-60; Barr 1998: 13-38).

the *community* interests of Pimlico families. During a Borough Council meeting, Albert Pemberton's scheme to convert a derelict area in the neighbourhood into "somewhere decent for the children to play" is voted down by the Council-members who prefer to go for big money by having the place sold as "valuable building land". Pemberton's project is so far removed from the acquisitive concerns of the majority that even Wix (no longer the timid subordinate) is shown disdainfully dropping ash from his cigar on the model of the playground Pemberton has constructed. Meanwhile, the mayor, evidently satisfied with the vote, decrees that "the borough is in no position just now to finance daydreams". Exasperated, Pemberton accuses his fellow councillors of being obsessed with "pounds, shillings and pence".

This said, as Charles Barr notes, it is important to remember that "by using the form and tone of comedy, the film is able to say the startling things that it does" (1998: 105-6). It would appear that, for all its playful caricaturing of various Council members, the scene barely disguises a serious argument. Indeed, audiences at the time could not have failed to recognise in the voting session an ironic send-up of the ideological split that pervaded the political scene in post-war Britain, made manifest through growing contentions between supporters of Labour's socially-oriented, interventionist measures (Pemberton's dream of a community leisure space) and those sectors who clamoured for liberty of enterprise and free-market capitalism (the winning money-making option; see Lloyd 1993: 294-301).

Recalling the period in his autobiography, Michael Balcon wrote: "the country was tired of regulations and regimentation, and there was a mild anarchy in the air. In a sense our comedies were a reflection of this mood . . . a safety valve for our more anti-social impulses" (Aldgate and Richards 1999: 156). Certainly the key phrase here is "a safety valve for our more anti-social impulses", since it expresses in a nutshell the nature of the release offered in *Passport to Pimlico*. As the council meeting is drawing to an end, an unexploded bomb suddenly goes off, revealing a Burgundian treasure, accompanied by a historical document which Professor Hatton-Jones (Margaret Rutherford) soon brandishes as proof that Pimlico is legally independent of the British State. The local bobby's exclamation, "Blimey, I'm a foreigner!" thus sets in motion a Bakhtinian, carnivalesque inversion of the prevailing state of affairs. Now that Pimlico —or more concretely, Miramont place— is, legally speaking, Burgundian land, the locals find themselves gloriously free of government laws, controls and regulations. Ration books are torn up, identification papers destroyed and licensing laws ignored. Details apart, the liberating nature of this 'make believe' situation stems from its offering fulfilment for *everyone's* dreams, Pimlico residents' new-found freedom presumably being longingly shared by audiences at the time —at least for the duration of the film.

In little time however, problems —and more comedy— ensue as black marketeers flood in to Pimlico on a scale which threatens to unleash anarchy onto its streets. Before local citizens can appeal to the state for help, they come up against the shock discovery that Whitehall has decided to suppress the existence of this unrestricted zone inside London

by sealing Pimlico off from Britain and imposing its own frontier controls around the district. At this point, even Pemberton, till then a firm defender of negotiations with the government rather than the ‘everyman for himself’ stance advocated by Wix and Garland, is stung into defiance and exclaims: “In future we’ll ruddy well *be* foreigners!”. Now faced with an outsider threat, an enemy to be vanquished, Pimlico inhabitants recover the spirit, the resilience and, more importantly, the *unity* of wartime London. The ‘Burgundian’ community start fighting the war again in miniature. In short, Whitehall bureaucrats are eventually beaten by communal effort and self-sacrifice. Pimlico re-enters the United Kingdom and, in the open-air celebration that marks the end of hostilities, the newly issued identity cards and ration books are actually welcome by the district residents. A sudden downpour and consequent temperature-drop neatly brings this fantasy holiday from restrictions to a festive close. This is, the film seems to say, Miramont Place, Pimlico, England, the UK, with its rain and ration books (Barr 1998: 106).

4. “ARTICULATIONS”: NATIONAL, GENDER, CLASS IDENTITY

Without doubt, to watch the film today is to find more laughter coming from the screen, as the characters laugh at themselves and each other, than from spectators. *Passport to Pimlico* is, like the whole cycle of smart, satirical films, known today simply as “Ealing comedies”, strictly a period piece. And yet, it is precisely in view of the film’s datedness that the concept of “articulation” becomes such a vital resource for the unearthing/uncovering of how certain meanings produced in very specific conditions may resonate within *another* cultural and historical moment.

Traditionally associated with Karl Marx, Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci, the notion of articulation has taken on a special resonance in Cultural Studies thanks to Stuart Hall’s writings. Hall defined his use of articulation in the following terms:

“articulate” means to utter, to speak forth, to be articulate. It carries that sense of language-ing, of expressing, etc. But we also speak of an “articulated” lorry (truck): a lorry where the front (cab) and back (trailer) can, but need not necessarily, be connected to one another. The two parts are connected to each other, but through a specific linkage, that can be broken. An articulation is thus the form of the connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time. You have to ask, under what circumstances can a connection be forged or made? (1997: 141)⁸

⁸ As explained by Stuart Hall, his definition of articulation was prompted by the need to distance himself from the postmarxist conception of articulation voiced in Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony & Socialist Strategy: Toward a Radical Democratic Politics* (1985). Hall’s disagreement with Laclau and Mouffe centred on their conceptualization of all cultural practices as discursive: “[Laclau and Mouffe think] that the world, social practice, is language, whereas I want to say that the social operates like a language . . . [They] have let slip the question of the historical forces which have produced the present, and which continue to function as constraints and determinations on discursive articulation” (1997a: 146-48). See also Stuart Hall, “The Problem of Ideology: Marxism without

In short, articulation describes the means by which cultural elements can be joined, as well as the contingent nature of those linkages. Hall claimed in this interview that there is nothing essential in these cultural combinations (just as a trailer section can be moved onto any truck), but that under certain conditions specific combinations are most likely and have something to tell us about the nature of those conditions. Following Raymond Williams, Hall has also insisted that “[m]aterial circumstances are the net of constraints, the ‘conditions of existence’ for practical thought and calculation about society” (1997: 44).

The advantage of this concept of articulation in the context of *Passport to Pimlico* is that it allows an examination of Henry Cornelius’ film as part of a cultural pattern, rather than as an isolated creative act. Indeed, if upon release, *Passport to Pimlico* provided audiences with the opportunity to momentarily escape drab, post-war reality through a nostalgic, backward-looking commemoration of wartime solidarity, another key theme in the film is the insightful meditation it offers on contending versions of national identity —an issue that continues to be as pertinent today as it was in those difficult times.

During the partition, that is, during the brief period when ‘Burgundy’ erects itself as a ‘nation within a nation’ and as the siege against the independent territory goes ahead, Connie Pemberton emphatically voices the residents’ bulldog determination to ward off “foreign” aggression and “never, never to be slaves”:

If the Nazis couldn’t drive me out of my home with all their bombs and rockets and doodlebugs, you don’t catch me packing up now . . . We always have been English and we always will be English, and it’s just because we are English that we’re sticking up for our rights to be Burgundian.

At first sight, these words appear to reinforce an outmoded, ‘John Bull’ notion of plucky, ‘little England’ nationalism. From our twenty-first century stand however, Ms Pemberton’s heartfelt assertion also raises the issue of the relationship between present-day notions of Britishness and Englishness. In comedy-theory terms, the beauty of the conceit of transforming Pimlico and its citizens into Burgundy and Burgundians respectively is that it dodges any *fixed* notion of nationality, allowing the protagonists to temporarily negotiate their own version of who they are or wish to be. Hence, for all its shoring up of a shared stock of images, values and traditions, generally accepted as making up the essence of Britishness, *Passport to Pimlico* seems bent on demonstrating that national identity does not exist in any singular, uncontested form. On the contrary, by emphasising the way in which certain, specific —even ludicrous— circumstances affect an imagined community’s sense of itself (as well as its perception of those not pertaining to the ‘in-group’), *Passport to Pimlico* shows how vulnerable identity is to challenge, and consequently how easily the certainties of a prescribed national identity are made subject to change. From this optic,

Guarantees’ (1997b: 25-46); Jennifer Daryl Slack, ‘The Theory and Method of Articulation in Cultural Studies’ (1997: 112-27).

the ambiguities of national identity are already strategically evoked in the film's 'pseudo-tropical' opening —the heat-wave scenes playfully effacing the dividing line between an anchored British (or rather, English) identity and 'otherness'. Amusing as this scene is in the assumptions it offers of what it might be like *not* to be English, it also reflects a deeper ambivalence towards national identity.⁹ Indeed, by swiftly and suddenly bringing viewers back down to earth after a flight of fancy, the British 'reality' the narrative comes round to is, comparatively speaking, deadening and deflating. From this same perspective, the film's conclusion, which sees the Burgundians' reabsorption into the United Kingdom accompanied, as commented before, by typical British weather, likewise only serves to reinforce a sense of identity as entrapment (West 2000).

These ironic sequences also raise two crucial questions: is the film's portrayal of post-war Britain really the way the citizens perceived it at the time? Given the opportunity to construct a community in their own image "the Burgundians . . . recover the spirit, the resilience and local autonomy and unity of wartime London" (Barr 1998: 102-03). Dispensing with the inherited inflexibilities of gender, nationality and class, they "submerg[e] differences that are otherwise intractable" (Barr 1998: 103). Women become, if not prominent, at least included in the decision-making process. Pointedly too, the Duke of Burgundy (Paul Dupuis), although a foreigner, is made welcome — to the extent that the people of Pimlico are willing to surrender to his sovereignty, a scenario which clearly contravenes Britain's long-standing insularity, to the point of being almost jarring to those members of the film's current audiences who oppose greater (or sometimes any) involvement in the European Community.¹⁰ Pemberton, whose idealistic plans were out-voted when Pimlico was but a district within the capital, finds himself acting as Burgundy's first minister with the power to win the community its swimming-pool and leisure ground. Similarly, Wix is able to show his worth in both the negotiations with illustrious Cabinet members and in his adroit handling of the Burgundian economy. Indeed, it is Wix who hits upon the solution to the deadlock — "a Burgundian loan to Britain" — as he and Pemberton are unified in their pursuit of Burgundy's interests. This symbolic reconciliation of the previously estranged Wix and Pemberton affirms the consensual partnership of social and business interests which would emerge in the 1950s and 1960s.

Described as "an arch labour film" (Aldgate and Richards 1999: 155), defending the government's policy of sustained privations and continued national unity as the route to a better future for all, the question at hand is: in what ways can Pimlico inhabitants' 'break-away' experience be convincingly connected to more contemporary circumstances? Benedict Anderson proposes an answer in the introduction to his seminal *Imagined*

⁹ In the following section, I shall be drawing on John West's (2000) most perceptive delineation of the ideological/political correlations that may be established between the film's morale and changing perceptions of "national" identity in Britain.

¹⁰ Pushing the argument further, the Burgundians' more accommodating version of nationalism could be said to contrast with the chauvinism and xenophobia prevalent among the far-right in Britain today.

Communities (1983), where he argues that nationalistic feelings (and one might add, any form of identity politics) expropriate personal identity, transforming intimate experiences into the raw material of *politics*. With hindsight, therefore, it appears that Clement Attlee's 1945 government eventually foundered on the electorate's unwillingness to accept the prolonged hardships required for the creation of the "more just society" envisaged by Michael Balcon (Brown 1984: 32). This said, it is also worth remembering that it was only with the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 that consensus was dispensed with. As well as beginning a systematic erosion of all those social provisions initially implemented by Labour, Thatcher's hard-fisted rule proved to be as authoritarian and intransigent as the executive the Burgundians were faced with. During the eighties, the dogmatic inflexibility of the Conservatives induced a 'Burgundy style' retreat of many left-of-centre opponents. In the capital, Ken Livingstone's Greater London Council, which had proved a resolute, democratic and popular thorn in the government's side, was abolished. Mining communities were torn apart during the lengthy and highly emotive strike of the mid-eighties, which at times verged on becoming a small-scale civil war. The Greenham Common women who protested against the basing of US nuclear missiles in England likewise provide an image redolent of the Burgundians: ordinary people uniting in a determined opposition to the intransigent machinery of the state and a menacing foreign influence. Above all, voters in Scotland and Wales persistently rejected the Conservative party while England continued to return enough Conservative MPs to govern the whole of Britain. Consequently, the accrued resentment of the Scots and Welsh at having to live under policies which they themselves had vigorously opposed further echoes the plight of the Burgundians who became 'foreigners' in their own country.¹¹

5. DEVOLUTION

As is known, when the Iron Lady's dogmatism became a liability for her party, she was replaced by John Major, whose attempts to lead a less authoritarian administration did not

¹¹ From the mid-1980s onwards, the political climate in the UK was propitious for the re-emergence of Scottish and Welsh nationalism as an alternative to an increasingly unpopular Tory government. Some of Thatcher's policies, such as the poll tax, were unpopular across the country. But the effects of an economic policy that pursued privatisation as a means to an unregulated free market struck the Scottish and Welsh economies particularly hard. Moreover, Thatcher's more centralist, authoritarian style of governing antagonised many voters who resented the concentration of power among governing elites in Westminster. In particular, a belief in individual responsibility, linked to a strong sense of Britishness, were essentially middle-class, *English* values, clearly at odds with the tradition of collective solidarity and community prevalent in the Scottish and Welsh. As disaffected voters turned instead to Scottish and Welsh nationalist parties, the dwindling Conservative votes in those two parts of the UK exacerbated the perception that policies were imposed from Westminster by a British government which lacked a clear democratic mandate in Scotland and Wales (Elias 2008: 61). As mentioned before, the novelty today is David Cameron's proposal to hold an independence vote in Scotland within the next 18 months — a plan that somehow clashes with Scotland's first minister, Alex Salmond's intention of having the vote take place in 2014, making it coincide with the 700th anniversary of the battle of Bannockburn.

prevent his own downfall in 1997,¹² brought about by the huge appeal to British voters of Tony Blair's consensual and moderate stance. Intent on presenting New Labour as the tribune for "modern" Britain, the most striking initial symbol used by Blair to represent national renaissance was the image of "Cool Britannia" which sought to amalgamate traditional national authority with the cultural cachet of multicultural Britain (Oakland 2001: 40-45; 50-51). Labour's devolution of civil, economic and political powers from Westminster to new national assemblies in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast can be seen as a modern revival of the kind of consensus alluded to in *Passport to Pimlico*.¹³ And yet, looking across the United Kingdom now, undergoing as it is this radical devolution experiment, a paradox presents itself. Credited with providing a spur to Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish nationalism, the fact is that Labour's constitutional change appears to have rested precisely on the very division(s) it aimed to solve. In other words, the devolution processes set in motion by New Labour were founded on the assumption that identities are innate, primordial and exclusive rather than fluid and relational. Viewed in this light, it seems that, apart from drawing to a close the historical Act of Union of 1707, what devolution has brought into effect is the political legitimization of Partition and/or the drawing of internal boundaries as the best formula for good neighbourhood. In short, one way of apprehending these recent developments is to say that devolution is the best (indeed, the only) way of preserving the *United Kingdom* of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. However, the contrary argument also holds strong, insisting as it does that devolution is the prelude to inevitable and unavoidable disintegration (Dinwoodie 1996).¹⁴ Either way, the result is a current British constitutional settlement with differing forms of devolved government for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, with no devolved government whatsoever for England, and with Welsh, Scottish and Ulster MPs able to vote on English matters at Westminster, whereas English MPs cannot vote on similar issues for Scotland, Wales and Ulster. Not surprisingly, therefore, devolution has also been posited as the reason for the resurgence of nationalism in England (Rojek 2007; Cannadine 2007). Indeed, as nationalist Cynning Meadowcroft pointed out some years back, after centuries of military, economic and legislative dominance over the other component parts of the United Kingdom, the English are now "the poor relations —denied a nation-specific parliament and the culture absent from the classroom where it is not deemed politically correct" (qtd. in Davies 2000: 2). In a word, now that there is no longer a British Empire that gave the nations of Britain

¹² What actually happened was that, before resigning, Margaret Thatcher 'hand-picked' her loyal protégé, John Major, as successor, thus curtailing Michael Heseltine's and Douglas Hurd's aspirations to lead the party.

¹³ For a detailed account of how powers have been devolved from Westminster to the three regions since 1998, see Smith (2008: 1-8).

¹⁴ Although as leader of the Conservative party David Cameron deliberately kept a low front on the issue of devolution, several of his public declarations since he became Prime Minister after the elections in May 2010 hint at his fears of too much regional independence leading to a "broken Britain" (Macintyre 2009: 11). Indeed, on some occasions, Cameron set out this anti-devolution position in no uncertain terms: "When I say I am Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, I really mean it. England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland —we are weaker apart, we are stronger together, and together is the way we must remain" (<<http://www.britologywatch.wordpress.com>>).

common cause and interest, now that there is no British Steel, National Coal Board, British Rail, no national gas nor electricity corporations to glue the nations together, the concept of British national identity is undergoing substantial redefinition.¹⁵ Against these shifting configurations of identity, perhaps the idea of border controls, so comically dramatised in *Passport to Pimlico*, isn't too fanciful. In a much anthologised scene, the Burgundians are shown stopping the underground train for border formalities. While Wix fusses about currency, Pemberton obliges a tourist by stamping his passport with a Pemberton's stores imprint. However ludicrous this light and playful sequence might appear to be, it finds its matching part in the results of a pre-1997 referendum survey, undertaken in Cardiff, which revealed potential voters' fears that if devolution was successful, travellers would have to carry passports between England and Wales (Petro 1999).

In his essay "The Argument of Comedy" (1949), the by now classic critic and theorist Northrop Frye suggested that in ancient Greece there were two periods of comedy, "old comedy" and a later "new comedy". The first, he said, accepted that society was unchangeable and that vice and folly could only be ridiculed in such a way as to enable a brief 'carnavalesque' holiday before a return to conformity. The second suggested an alienating social order could be reshaped; it often involved an escape to nature before a return to a regenerated society (White 2008: 73).¹⁶ Considered in the tradition of "old comedy", Pimlico community's short (but intensively lived) emancipation from British law and government-imposed regulations decidedly recalls the gay, affirmative, and militantly anti-authoritarian, carnival spirit which, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, allows otherwise marginal figures, often not seen as participants in national decision-making, to become visible and powerful agents for a limited period of time (Scott 1990: 175; Gray 1994: 35; Medhurst 2007: 68-71).¹⁷ On this reading, the rebel citizens' eventual return to the national fold (and to familiar restrictions) denotes the film's determined effort to present a unified and unifying, monolithic image of the nation. On the other hand, from the prism of "new comedy", it would seem that *Passport to Pimlico* carries with it its own prophetic evocation of a new social order. If, as Northrop Frye states, "the movement of (new) comedy is usually the movement from one kind of society to another" (1981: 84),

¹⁵ On this point, the findings of the 23rd British Social Attitudes Survey, published by the National Centre for Social Research in 2007, make for salutary reading. Apparently less than half of Britain's inhabitants (44%) saw fit to describe themselves as "British" (Rojek 2007: 7-12). Likewise, although the issue of *race* is significantly absent in *Passport to Pimlico*, this state of affairs was not going to last long. Indeed, many British people today, conscious of living in a postcolonial world, find it dreadfully 'uncool' to adhere to the nationalist idea of Britishness as the nerve-centre of a world-wide, empire-building enterprise, nowadays generally associated with illegal invasions, slavery, the forced appropriation of wealth and the imprisonment of critics and foes.

¹⁶ These ideas are reiterated in Northrop Frye's "The Mythos of Spring Comedy" (Corrigan 1981: 84-99).

¹⁷ The fullest exploration of carnival in Bakhtin's work is *Rabelais and his World* (1984). In this book, Bakhtin argues that Rabelais' sixteenth-century novel *Gargantua and Pantagruel* is based on, and can only be understood through, late medieval-early Renaissance "popular-festive forms". *Rabelais and his World* describes an elaborate aesthetics of medieval peasant culture, referred to alternately as "the people", "the folk", "the second world", "the unofficial world", and "popular-festive culture", defined against the "official world" of civil and religious authority.

it might be affirmed that the makers of the film actually anticipated developments by pinpointing those cracks, already existent in post-war Britain, that were eventually going to lead to an increasingly compartmentalised nation.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Rather than a straightforward analysis of the Ealing classic, *Passport to Pimlico*, as an endearingly flippant comment on post-war hardships, I have made particular use of the process called “articulation” to establish connections and/or relationships between the film itself, comedy as a genre, social contexts and shifting configurations of national, gender and class identity. In comedy-theory terms therefore *Passport to Pimlico* —in which the residents of a London street briefly break from the national body and escape the ordeal of rationing— has been read as a celebration of the small man’s struggle against impersonal authority, as a wish-fulfilment fantasy, and as a carnivalesque liberation from the established order. This said, there is no denying the social function of comedy in voicing contemporary tensions, conflicts or grievances. From this optic, this eccentric visual narrative can be seen as having served the double purpose of humorously taking people’s minds off post-war shortages while also upholding the Labour government’s programme of austerity, based on war-time solidarity. However, by *re-examining* the film’s conventional wisdom from the perspective of the new social and political realities of Thatcher’s Britain and Tony Blair’s “Cool Britannia”, it appears that the rift, rupture or partition depicted so comically in *Passport to Pimlico* still makes plenty of sense decades later. Indeed, while Thatcher’s dogmatism *à l’anglaise* indirectly prompted the strengthening of nationalist identity in the three “Pimlico” peripheries of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, New Labour’s decentralising reforms have attracted much criticism from those sectors who fear —as David Cameron has recently insinuated— that devolution might ultimately trigger a ‘Balkanisation of Britain’. With hindsight the basic theme in this classic comedy is not so much its back-looking affirmation of national identity, based upon wartime unity and togetherness, but a farsighted warning concerning the danger of fostering unbridgeable territorial enclaves.

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