CLASS CONCERNS IN A HERITAGE SETTING: VIEWERS' RESPONSES TO *DOWNTON ABBEY* ON IMDB

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ABSTRACT
This article examines the TV series *Downton Abbey* (2010-15) from both a class and a reception perspective. *Downton Abbey* belongs to the heritage film genre with its claims to detailed historical accuracy, and is thereby separated from conventional costume drama and period TV series. 'Official' books on the series, written by Julian Fellowes's niece and others, will be important references in the article. *Downton Abbey* comes close to presenting a conservative defense of the values and lifestyles of the aristocracy, but this vision of the elite and its values is challenged by some of the series' (re)viewers. Non-professional reviews posted on the website International Movie Database include very critical opinions on class struggles and aristocratic privileges. Some respondents are satiric and forcefully oppose the values and interests of the propertied classes in the series; other reviewers in the same vein present analyses of power and class aspects in the series. These comments and criticisms are relevant to today's class issues in Britain and elsewhere.

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1. **INTRODUCTION**

The six seasons of the British period drama *Downton Abbey* (2010-15) were produced by Carnival films for ITV. The series was mainly written by Julian Fellowes. The first episode in the first season, aired on ITV in September 2010, had an audience of 9.2 million viewers (Sperati and Schreiner 2013: 5). The first season as a whole took a Guinness World Record for the best critical review ratings for a TV series, as it scored 92 % on Metacritic (a site that aggregates reviews), making it the highest-scoring reviewer-rated British TV series ever (Rowley 2013: 271-2). In 2014 the series had been seen by at least 270 million people worldwide, and was boastfully dubbed by Jessica Fellowes as "the most successful British-made television export ever" (Fellowes 2014: 38)[1].

The man who can be ascribed most of the winning formula is Fellowes. He was credited as the show's creator, writer as well as executive producer. It is well known that Fellowes has for years supported the Conservative Party in British politics, and has been part of a speech-writing team for the conservative politician Iain Duncan Smith. Fellowes was made a life peer in 2011 by the Cameron government, and took a seat in the House of Lords. His official title is Baron Fellowes of West Stafford, and he is officially addressed as Lord Fellowes. He is a longstanding friend of the Carnarvon family at Highclere Castle in Hampshire, the location for the imaginary estate and grand house Downton Abbey (Sperati and Schreiner 2013: 30).

Downton Abbey is a multifaceted universe which nurtured conflicting reactions and interpretations. In this article I will first present the genre to which *Downton Abbey* mainly belongs, and the claims to "authenticity" the genre makes. The "truthfulness" and the visual splendour in the genre tend to hide the ideological grounds on which *Downton Abbey* is built, i.e. the moral and political world view the series carries, its underlying political values. My main concern is some viewers' negative reactions to the series' sumptuous presentation of privileged upper class life in Britain. Some viewers had the will and energy to write about their reactions and opposition in the User Reviews on the Internet Movie Database pages, which is open to everyone for comments on movies and TV series. I have studied a large sample of these reviews and chosen 35 that have some common traits in wanting to "strip" the series of its pretentiousness and point out its ideological bias. These 35 reviewers directly oppose the world of privilege we follow at Downton. My presentation and analysis of these reviews will focus on three discursive strategies used in the attacks on the series. These strategies are: reversion, historical abstraction and contemporalization. The quotes from some of these reviews will cast light upon *Downton Abbey*'s connection to today's British class society and power issues in the eyes of the reviewers.

The series is clearly founded in a sort of realism and a sense of historical accuracy. This makes György Lukács's concept "triumph of realism" a useful idea. Panoramic, realistic universes can be thoroughly scrutinized from very different perspectives (for example feminist, anthropological, Marxist) and give a lot of information from any of these angles – which, according to Lukács, is due to an inherent quality in realism as a creation strategy. That producers neglect to emphasize certain themes (in the case of *Downton Abbey* class injustice and exploitation) does not matter. The reader or viewer is able see social realities and conflicts that seem unimportant or are relatively invisible to the Author because of his or her political preferences. The realistic universe triumphs over its Author's biases and "his pet ideas" (Lukács 1964: 91). But what is the main pet idea in *Downton Abbey*?

2. **HERITAGE FILMS**

In the 1980s, Britain started producing films that today make up a genre of its own, called "heritage film", which is distinct from conventional costume drama. Heritage films demand many historically correct details, with meticulous historical accuracy a considerable part of its production arrangements and visual display. Heritage movies and television series "recreate with anthropological zeal the fashions and objects of the periods" in which they are set (Vidal 2012: 10). This (relative) historical trustworthiness gives the films a special aura, different from the traditional, more inaccurate Hollywood and European costume dramas. In heritage dramas many of the buildings, interiors and sometimes even clothes, jewels and other details, are authentic from the period in which the action takes place. Perfect authenticity is of course an unreachable ideal, but the aspiration towards it is shown in the extra material on DVDs and Blu-ray discs about the careful, demanding and expensive research behind the details in a heritage movie production. According to Belén Vidal, these dramas usually have "an opulent if static mise-en-scène exhibiting elaborate period costumes, artefacts, properties and

1 "Downton Abbey was more than just a television series: it was nothing less than a cultural phenomenon" (Chapman 2014: 133).

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heritage sites." (2012: 8) In the end, many of the movies display both a "museum aesthetics" and a luxurious visual "grand style"[2]. The viewers typically experience life in "an English stately home in all its splendor, decorated in the riches of its aristocratic past" (Rowley 2013: 36). The everyday habits, mentality and lifestyle is as important as the big events in the family circle and in national or world history.

Most heritage films tell stories of aristocratic or upper-middle class social circles, of people with an existence full of privileges unavailable to the common lot. We usually get to watch iconic images of aristocracy and empire, especially grand houses and palaces. According to Andrew Higson, the English heritage films represent a highly selective vision of Englishness: "At the level of the image, narrative instability is frequently overwhelmed by the alluring spectacle of iconographic stability, permanence, and grandeur, providing an impression of an unchanging, traditional, and always delightful and desirable England" (Higson 2003: 78). In spite of this, sensitive themes like adultery, domestic abuse, homosexuality, desperation for a male heir, bribery and fortune hunting are often included in the plots. Some film researchers therefore pinpoint the *gap* between form and plot: the form is visually pompous and nostalgic, while the plot certainly often contains social critique and irony towards the upper classes, even a revisionist perspective (Higson 2003: 149, Monk 2012: 102). There tends to be a discrepancy between the glorious and nostalgic visual display, and some sad and harsh themes. Several heritage dramas are seemingly progressive by exposing "neglected" groups in history, like women, homosexuals and servants (Monk 2012: 19). Still, the audience might experience a kind of "good old times" from the plots, with the slow pace of life in in a more "civilized" age, with moral certainties containing a vision of an aristocratic, morally and socially *Great* Britain. So there are several ambiguities, open to interpretation in every particular film or series.

3. **LIFE AT DOWNTON ABBEY**

Downton Abbey is a heritage drama, but also a soap-like, melodramatic production[3]. Here are sisters who hate each other, manipulating servants, bribery, economic fraud, fortune hunting by marrying rich heiresses, a secret childbirth in the aristocracy, a murder, rape and other social scandals. These intrigues are essential to the show, with dramatic situations playing to the taste of a mass audience. The series contains a web of stories about a big house with many lives in work and idleness. One of the most central figures in this ensemble production, Robert, the 7th Earl of Grantham, is the "pater familias" for everybody on the estate. His actions and dealings should make him easy to like for most viewers. The series presents him as a particularly good "specimen" of the aristocracy. He is kind, loyal, sensitive, just, thoughtful, relatively humble, as well as friendly and fair to his many servants. So the series credits him with a lot of sympathy, very much in contrast to the evil, lustful Sir William McCordle in Altman and Fellowes' movie *Gosford Park* (2001). Once in the series (2.07) Robert comes very close to being unfaithful to his wife, Cora, but it seems he is seduced by a female servant, rather than himself being the seducer. He saves his butler from a blackmailer (1.02), showing the audience on this and several other occasions how miserable the world would be without an aristocrat in charge. He is no snob, and imagines himself having crossed the class divide by hiring his former comrade in arms, John Bates, as his valet (Fellowes and Sturgis 2012: 25). Still, later in the series Robert tries to pay off his chauffeur and future son in law, because the man is not an aristocrat (2.08).

The countess Violet Grantham, Robert's mother, represents the aristocratic elite's rigidity in the period covered by the series (1912-1925), with her ultra-conservative values and principles. She is concerned with impeccable appearances and keeping with traditions. She has a very clear sense of aristocratic distinction: regional power over hands and minds, accumulated cultural capital, and economic wealth. More than any other in the series, she represents a society obsessed with respectability – at least on the social surface. She relies on social certainties, but is portrayed with more than a touch of satire. The same applies to Downton's butler, Charles Carson. He firmly invests his existence in the established social order, with the monarchy and the aristocracy at the top (Fellowes and Sturgis 2012: 38). He has based his whole life on upholding standards of loyalty and discretion. Carson is head of all the servants at the big house, and he finds no problem with the class system at Downton or in the society, being in thrall to his employer. He wants a humble and grateful staff. "The more sympathetic characters below stairs, such as the maid Anna Smith and valet John Bates, tend to be those who accept their place in the social order" (Chapman 2014: 139).

2 The latter being called 'eye-candy' in an anonymous review of *Downton Abbey* on International Movie Database (by 'lhhung_himself from United States' on January 21th 2012).

3 The series is classified as a (period or costume) soap opera in Byrne 2015: 1 and Leggott and Taddeo 2014: 59.

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The viewers can frequently watch the frenzied preparations downstairs by the servants, contrasted with leisure activities among the aristocrats upstairs (where Robert's daughters are often bored). Brian Percival, who directed the series' first episode, compared the contrast between upstairs and downstairs with the concealed effort that underpins the graceful glide of a swan across a lake. Fellowes' niece has used the same striking metaphor: "much as Downton Abbey likes to appear calm, just below the surface the action is as frantic as a swan's paddling feet" (Fellowes 2014: 32).

4. **IDEOLOGY AND CLASS**

Some revealing comments on the ideology, values and class aspects in the series have come from Alastair Bruce, the historical advisor who is responsible for the authenticity of the details in the series. Bruce is a member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire, a royally ordained honour, and has several other close connections to royal Britain. In an interview, Bruce tried to explain some of the attractions of a series like *Downton Abbey*. "Although the stratification depicted at Downton is intrinsically unfair," Bruce says, "everyone had a place and felt that they were contributing to the great scheme of things." He continues: "People long for the strong bonds of courtesy that feed through it all [...] [the audience] embrace it in all its splendor, as it appears in *Downton Abbey*" (Boyes 2014). According to Bruce, the old aristocratic society we see in the series conveys a kind of anchoring for today's audience, in a culturally and aesthetically admirable way. But, we have to add, there is an ambivalence in the series, which emerges by viewing all those privileges in the society of the early 20th century, a period when democracy and meritocracy became ideals in society at large. Old and new principles clash.

The aristocrats at Downton like to conceive of themselves as the moral backbone of society, setting the standard for a decent, respectable life. Their enormous economic privileges are legitimized by this, and by giving employment to large staffs of servants. They are hardly able to see that their unproductivity and extravagance is the opposite of meritocracy, in a deeply unfair class system (Liptay and Bauer 2013: 52). Some are born to money, others to hardship, but the aristocracy still has a vital role to play: keeping up standards and traditions. The world of *Downton Abbey* takes these aristocratic values of the early 20th century to an audience in the 21th century. And the audience of today can see a part of the system still living on, as Britain and other European countries – together with the USA and probably all other modern (and postmodern) countries – remain class societies. There are "prevailing barriers created by money and privilege [that] encourages the wealthy to flourish at the expense of others" (Val Gillies in Atkinson et al. 2012: 92)[4].

Judgments of films and series like *Downton Abbey* tend to follow political lines, which Higson states:

> For Norman Stone and those on the right, heritage films are to be celebrated for their joyously patriotic take on a traditional, authentic, indigenous Englishness. For Tana Wollen and those on the left, the same nostalgic take is problematic for the way in which it promotes the out-moded and elite cultural values and social relationships of a country-house version of Englishness, 'a certain sense of Englisness that ... should have no place in the future'. [...] it is perfectly possible to read these films as decidedly ironic perspectives on traditional Englishness and the culture of privilege, rather than as straightlaced celebrations of those values. (2003: 75)

Costume dramas and heritage films can expose or falsify (often both in a combination) truths about injustice and a lack of opportunities, about oppression and exploitation. It can be politically revealing for the audience to see power patterns that last over centuries, as well as historical conflicts with clear connections to today's class struggles, and thereby with political implications for today. As Katherine Byrne writes in her analysis of the series:

> the Abbey itself deliberately functions as a microcosm for the state, and it is difficult to ignore the implication that twenty-first century Britain would be more successful if it were organised in the same hierarchal and patriarchal way, even if that is not 'necessarily right' to the modern mind [...] Its critics have received it as an ideological tool of the Right, a conservative nation in microcosm that puts forward traditional values of loyalty and order (Byrne 2013).

4 In *Class Inequality in Austerity Britain: Power, Difference and Suffering*, Will Atkinson et al. (2012) describe class aspects in Britain today, with class inequalities and different opportunities to make a good living ("difference in life chances"; p. 2). Class and social division play a large part in the patterning of economic income, education, lifestyles, etc.

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5. **SAMPLE AND METHOD**

My sample consists of 133 viewer responses at www.imdb.com to all the seasons of *Downton Abbey*. They are dated from 2010 to 2017, and make up all the viewer responses posted in this time span. The responses contain reactions, opinions, evaluations, criticisms, observations, comments, reservations, analyses, interpretations, and judgements. They vary in length from a few words up to 986 words. This material was produced independent of any research, not produced for any systematic examination, and not in any way (to my knowledge) influenced by a researcher's questions or sampling. The 133 respondents' identities are usually unknown, and the majority use a nickname. A nickname like '(outerprint)' gives us no clues to the person's identity. Even full and "normal" names cannot be taken as actual names, but could be a hiding strategy[5]. However, some respondents have uploaded portrait pictures, and their age and country are given in the post's heading (but the profile pictures are small and it may be difficult to see age indications or whether it's a man or a woman). How reviews are written – whether based on brooding, or in the spur of the moment – it is impossible to say for sure, but the language tends to be somewhat colloquial.

Research challenges with using reviews at IMDb have been commented on, for instance by Jahna Otterbacher (2011 and 2013) and Karen Boyle (2014). User-generated content like IMDb reviews tend to come in messy bulks with little information about the respondents. A few IMDb reviewers establish personal profiles, which can be read by clicking on the username. In the *Downton Abbey* reviews there are reviewers who write small essays about their film taste and about their personal background (family, education, illnesses, etc.), but hardly anything, for instance, about their political views and values. The following two personal comments are typically short and vague: "Just a welsh girl – who loves films and telle – especially period stuff!!", and "I am just me. That's all that matters". The tendency is to post a view on the series, and then leave the site without being challenged by other comments. If a reviewer don't read other comments on the site, the possibility of them reflecting upon different reactions – and upon different aspects and interpretations of the series – is reduced. The responses to *Downton Abbey* at IMDb do not really create a reviewer community, but consist of a lot of isolated reactions. A further element here is the large number of responses, which can easily overwhelm a reader. The reviews appearing first, at the top of the list, are of course more visible and readily available and likely to get more attention than those further down in the list. Interestingly, 'tieman64', with his/her long and harsh comments on the political aspects of the series, is one of the first to appear, and is therefore a rather visible review (in March 2018, 74 out of 122 persons had found that review useful).

None of the reviewers have written more than once, unless their names/nicknames have been changed[6]. Each of them has given the series or a specific season their judgment by assigning stars from 1 to 10. There is some indication of how their opinions have been received by other reviewers because of a "useful or not" function at the end of each post (which will indicate for instance "64 out of 101 people found the following review useful" – provided by a click, not containing a comment)[7]. Most of the 133 reviewers come from the USA and the UK, but there are also respondents (assuming their own information is correct) from Australia, Belgium, Canada, China, France, Germany, Holland, Hungary, India, Ireland, Lithuania, Macedonia, New Zealand, Palestine, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, South Africa, Sweden and Turkey. Some of these persons have reviewed other films or series on IMDb as well (which can easily be found because their names/nicks are hyperlinked), so it would be possible to create a profile of their taste, and perhaps their worldviews. This has not been undertaken for the purpose of this article. According to Monk, the period film audience is not a homogenous group, but a number of "overlapping, dynamic groups, positioned in varied relationships to both commercial and art cinema, who make sense of the films from a variety of cultural-political perspectives" (2012: 167).

It is conspicuous that only one of the 133 responses refers to other respondents in the list, stating that "I didn't find it a bit draggy (as I have read in another review here)"[8]. These viewers and reviewers seem to write as though unaware of each other. There is no real dialogue, negotiation or mutual communion, except of course for a shared interest in the series (positive or negative as the case may be) and perhaps clicking on the "useful" or "not useful" buttons. I have divided these 133 "solitary" responses into two categories, based on my own reading or interpretation of them: those that directly touch upon the class/power aspect in the series, and

5 We can assume that names like 'Neil Doyle' and 'susan worden' are real names, but cannot be certain.

6 In one single case there is not given any name or nickname at all.

7 These click responses could be given by anybody visiting the IMDb web pages.

8 Written by 'mtl-9' on November 14th 2010.

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those that do not. The first category contains 35 responses (far from all are quoted below in this article); the second category contains 98 responses, but these are not coherent categories. The 35 responses that openly discuss class/power are my focus material, but I make no comment on whether they are representative of opinions held by other viewers. The whole sample (i.e. the 133 responses) cannot be taken as statistically representative of anything, even though I make weak general claims concerning the focus sample. My research is qualitative, studying subjective audience reactions in a subjective, analytic way, making abstractions and pinpointing ideas through quotes from a few of the reviews. No demographic variables are considered.

The concepts of class, power, injustice, exploitation, etc., are socially, historically and subjectively experienced. Still, it is meaningful to study the series and the responses to it as a "vehicle for messages". Among the reviews there are many individual differences in how class and other aspects are commented upon. There is a continuum from short comments to long analyses, and from anger to admiration. The way a given character or incident in the series is described varies to a great extent. The respondents are creating meaning, generating significance, making different interpretative "moves". I have tended to notice those voices that are (in my opinion) especially well articulated. I have also noticed especially those that mention Julian Fellowes explicitly (his name appears 42 times in the 133 responses) and show interest in Britain today, and find the contemporary significance of the series to be at stake. I am particularly interested in the views and arguments against admiration for the family at Downton and other aristocrats today – voices from critical minds not seduced by the grand display of the rich and elegant.

6. **REACTIONS IN IMDB**

The interesting thing is how and why the reviewers feel provoked, their moral and social judgements, and why they do not write writes eulogies about the series, its actors and Fellowes like the majority does. In the 35 selected viewer responses we can directly, but mostly indirectly, study viewers struggling to come to terms with all the beauty and grandeur in a series that handles what might easily be seen as a socially unjust, oppressive system. Some reviews are markedly polemical, even aggressive attacks. An example is the person 'superh13 from United States', who on 17 October 2013 comments:

> If had lived in those times and under those circumstances, first thing I'd done would have been to kill myself. [...] Is it middle-aged lord Fauntleroy (Earl Robert Crawley), whose only concern day in day out seems to be what to wear, when to wear it and how to wear it. Seriously, what's with that uniform he wears from morning to evening, it's hilarious :) Thanks to this show I now understand better why the french needed guillotines :)

The handling of Robert in the series – as a gentleman inside and out – is here turned on its head. Wearing a uniform during the WW1 when he was not actually fighting is ridiculed by the reviewer. So aristocrats like Robert deserve to be executed – maybe not for their oppressiveness, but for their pompousness and stupidity. And these aristocrats do not belong to the past according to 'Mouth Box (mail@mouthbox.co.uk) from United Kingdom' (19 September 2012): "It still seems incredible, doesn't it, that in some circles, even in this day and age, people like Carson dress people like Lord Grantham every morning, and then undress them and put them to bed every evening." And when Robert may have to sell Downton because of a bad investment (season 3, episode 1) he gets no sympathy by 'gkeith_1' (4 February 2013), rather he is being gloated over: "Robert, don't miss a spot when you mop those floors." A reversed situation is imagined with glee. It seems like a revenge to imagine the lord doing the dirty work, and it is certainly a reversion of the elegance in the series.

Reversal is a discursive strategy used in several of the 35 reviews. They mock *Downton Abbey* by pointing out the less honorable elements, like wearing a war uniform for show or self-deception, or imagining a new situation, like the lord mopping a floor. The admiration is reversed to contempt or glee. It's the kind of reversal we know from satire and parody. The reversals of the situations in the series, by mocking characters we are supposed to like and admire, is a simple discursive strategy. The two other I will focus on, concern the ideological function the series performs.

In the comment by 'Mouth Box', we have an example of another discursive strategy in the criticisms: what I will call contemporalization. Parallels are drawn to our own, contemporary society. The agenda is to compare in order to criticize. This is clear in statements like these: *Downton Abbey* is treating "the class warfare that existed in the U.K. then and now" ('Neil Doyle' from USA'; 11. December 2011); "in the post-modern world we get the Edwardians re-invented by

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a modern snob as perky progressive aristocrats" ('Guy from UK'; 16 October 2011); "the Edwardian class structures are softened a bit for modern audiences" ('lhhung_himself from United States'; 21 January 2012); "It deals with social class issues, womens issues that we actually deal with today" ('Masha Dowell from Los Angeles, CA'; 2 May 2012).

The already mentioned swan metaphor paints an image of a beautifully gliding swan above the surface, and the heavy throttle below the surface, unseen by the admirers. The reviewer 'jchodyka-712-409893 from Canada' (4 October 2013) wants to undermine this aesthetic surface of the show – the display of grandeur that is admired by most fans, and point to the ugly hardships on the underside:

> I had a few conversations with fans of the series and they all pointed to beauty of interiors, elegance of costumes, splendid manners, life of ease and comfort, and superiority of aristocratic classes... What those people ignore is the fact that behind all of this charm there was poverty forcing people to work in service due to lack of other options, awful conditions of work: low pay, no free time, extremely hard work, poor accommodation, child labour etc... It only means one thing: history goes in circles. [...] Beauty can't ever be justified by almost slave work of poor. And I thought that it was established long time ago but apparently not and there is still some nostalgia for class society and underpaid servants.

The claim here is that most people ignore the oppressive structure in the class system seen in the series. The harsh social conditions that the lifestyle of the rich relies on are neglected because the world of the rich is so beautiful, posh and impressive. Do we still admire the rich and glamourous, even if they are oppressors? In that case aesthetics and ethics are in conflict, and people are fooled into admiring the aristocrats. For 'jchodyka-712-409893' the contemporalization also includes criticism of social hardship today, like poor accommodation and child labour (cf. hall boys at Downton), and the fact that misery can generate nostalgia in the TV audience.

The third discursive strategy is defiant abstraction. The severest critics tend to focus on social class, vulnerability, work, freedom and other general concepts. The word "class" is central in many of those reviews that dislike and contest the series. The discursive strategy is a kind of abstraction where hardly any character names are mentioned, but macro level concepts like "class", "system", "power", "poverty" and "privilege". The series' characters are in several of the reviews not seen as individuals, but as representatives of a class, a system, etc.

How the characters act in Julian Fellowes' series are based on *individual choices, not primarily on social obligations and limitations within their class*. This is, in my opinion, the "pet idea" of the series, to use Lukács's term. *Downton Abbey* is conservative-liberal in the sense that a person's life is mostly defined by his or her personal choices and private morals. The characters in the series are first and foremost unique persons who make their own choices and face the consequences of their individual agency. So the individuals are very much responsible for all their actions, even if they may have had a harsh upbringing like the homosexual servant Thomas. The film researcher Gill Jamieson connects the series to the way conservative and liberal politicians in the Cameron government stressed "personal responsibility" (in Stoddart 2018: 210 and 218). In her analysis, the series carries "a liberal conservative ideology" (2018: 211) with evident political implications: "*Downton Abbey* privileges charitable giving as the preferred course of action from the more fortunate to the less fortunate." (2018: 212)

The harshest criticism in the 35 reviews oppose this individualism by focusing on historical, social and class related dependency, restrictions and determinism. In these reviews the characters in the series are not seen as free to create their own lives, regardless of the more or less moral choices they take. The series for these reviewers is not about a person's moral character, but historical, collective and structural causes that constrict individual lives[9]. It is more about conflict and fight in a historical perspective than just an instance of a family's challenges and problems. This defiant abstraction is an alternative perspective, in a counter discourse to the series.

One of the reviewers admits that Fellowes is rather balanced in his depiction of class society. The person, calling himself 'grendelkhan from Xanadu' (22 October 2012), formulates critically and with distaste that *Downton Abbey* is about "a system designed solely to benefit the privileged", but s/he must admit that "Fellowes is a cagey writer. Just when I want to take him to task for romanticizing an oppressive system of privilege, he goes and has characters do just that."

9 We are close to a "blame game" and recognize a right-left dichotomy: Who is responsible for the misery we face – the individual or the society? The persons who act, or the system who defines who we are and how we can act?

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Some persons in the series explicitly pinpoint the unfairness of the system, and the audience is free to feel that they are right in their judgement. But in the end "opponents" like Tom Branson and Thomas Barrow "come around" to be happy with their possibilities *within* the system.[10]. In the series it comes down to *personal choices*. "The overall mood of the series is thus one of celebration where at least regular characters seem to know their place and accept it" (Baena and Byker 2015: 267).

A clear intent to reveal the "abstract" forces behind the persons' lives is evident in the review by 'tieman64 from UK' (1. January 2013), who has written a long, almost academic essay on the class relations and exploitation, including the ideological manipulation of presenting the aristocrats as "sage and caring":

> "Downton Abbey's" written by Julian Fellowes, a Tory peer, Baron, monarchist and husband-to-royalty, so right away you know it has a clear agenda. Restorative nostalgia to the max [...] In "Downton Abbey", the class system exists for the benefits of those at the bottom, and proves as bothersome to those unfortunate few at the top as it does those lower down the social hierarchy. [...] They [i.e. the aristocrats] are benign despots, all-powerful, their authority final, but more sage and caring than any elected politician could ever be. The rich, in other words, are socially responsible father figures. They are invested in their households, in their communities, and provide a far reaching social benefit; without the rich to mercifully protect them, the poor would be forced out into the cold to fend for themselves. Indeed, Fellowes frequently has his rich folk sacrifice their bodies, their status and their wealth for the servant class (joining war efforts, taking on limping servants etc). The message – rife with false binaries – isn't only that servants should be content with their roles, but that one, regardless of class, cannot and should not avoid servitude. Even the rich are servants to their fellowman.

The reviewer is pinpointing "the rich man's burden" as it is carried by Lord Robert and the other aristocrats. Between the rich and the poor there are bonds of loyalty that – according to the aristocrats – take care of social needs better than any elected politician or official institution could. As Byrne formulates it: "This show states that everyone has their place in the world, and is strongly didactic about the need for obedience and loyalty [...] hierarchies give security, loyalty is rewarded, and the patriarch knows best" (2015: 9-10). There are personal bonds that condone the system's unfairness. The individuals on each side of the big class divide serve each other, so in a way economic and political justice is insignificant. The important thing is to be good-hearted. The class divide is, according to 'tieman64', presented as "natural", and therefore not in need of change. Then 'tieman64' goes on to scrutinize the situation for oppressed groups to which some heritage films give sympathy, claiming that in *Downton Abbey* they are exposed as villains (which is open to debate). The reviewer claims that conditions were far harsher for the real servants in actual history – a damaging critique if this is the case because of the series' and the heritage dramas' aura of historical correctness. As 'tieman64' writes:

> Significantly, the series' villains are all either homosexuals, socialists or members of the servant class. In the second series, villains become figures of new wealth; modern capitalists who don't respect the supposedly loving, symbiotic relationships of late aristocracy. As the series focuses on an individual household rather than systems, the nobility and selflessness of Fellowes' aristocrats justify the system in which they spin. It's a very classically conservative notion of history (in actuality, servants couldn't look at, let alone speak to their masters), a proudly hierarchical world in which all social conflicts and tensions are resolved without any restructuring of class relations. Stratification is posited as being natural, optimal and only the deviant or repellent are incapable of adapting or finding accommodation within it. [...] This is a benign, liberal aristocracy, for an age of "caring" capitalists.

The reviewer ends the essay by asking why the series is so popular:

> But why would a series which glorifies the class system, posits class hierarchies as inherently benevolent and idealises master/servant bonds, be suddenly so very popular? Why would a series about

10 The footman Thomas "is not a popular character, but this is due to his personality" according to Boyd (2016: 256). So his problems may come from a character flaw – or the reasons for his unsympathetic personality may go deeper.

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> inherited privilege, ineluctable servitude, be popular in an era of Occupy, Austerity, Bank Bailouts and massive corporate tax dodging? Perhaps because "Downton" presents a Utopian version of the past for the purposes of painting, and thereby bolstering, a contemporary system capable of weathering any upheaval or shock. Or perhaps it's simply a severe form of Stockholm Syndrome.

The claim is that the series bolsters confidence in the class society we live in today. Organizations like Occupy and United Front Against Austerity have an agenda of democratic justice, but the rich and powerful are (of course) still fighting for their privileges and a series like *Downton Abbey* is a kind of weapon. The reviewer's indignation is clear. S/he is interested in "how and why this power is structured, created and propagated in the first place" as written elsewhere in the review, i.e. in an analysis of power structure.

This example of counter discourse is focused on principles and general concepts ("class", "the privileged" etc.) and draws lines between the series and our own time ("Occupy, Austerity, Bank Bailouts" etc.). The series is lifted *up* above or even *out* of its concrete historical setting. It's taken as a sign for something far larger than characters in a historical drama striving to come to ends with their own lives. Marxist thinking seems obvious in a statement like "The point isn't only that there were no clean transition from feudalism to aristocracy to capitalism as such, but that power proves capable of propagating itself." Or maybe the views of 'tieman64' can be said to combine Marx and Nietzsche, claiming that the power finds its ways through history to suppress and oppress for the benefit of the strong and resourceful. This is hardly a view which Fellowes would condone when it concerns his TV show, but its realism gives insight into mechanisms he does not see or does not want to see. As 'dragokin' (27 May 2013) states, in accordance with the world view of the producers of *Downton Abbey*, "the revolutions of the twentieth century appear as unnecessary whim of lower social strata". *Downton Abbey* does not give us a vision of history that supports democracy and equal rights for everyone. But the blind zones are not invisible to everyone.

As 'nybill53 from New York, United States' (24 January 2013) states about Fellows and the other creators of the series: they try to "inject 21st century political correctness and thought into early 20th century upper class society. [...] The show is a fanciful creation of what the author wishes the period he was writing about was like. It is too bad he felt the need to inject so much of his own political/cultural ideology into the show through the dialog and actions of the characters." Or in the scathing comment by 'steven-222 from Berkeley, CA, USA' (14 June 2011): "Superbly made, if you want to enjoy reactionary family-values propaganda from that old Tory, Julian Fellowes."

All the 35 reviewers I have focused on in this study see – to some degree – "through" *Downton Abbey*'s desirable image of the past to the social and economic injustice. In the series the mechanisms of power, money, social dependency etc. are hidden behind the sympathetic characters. The elegance in the series functions as an allure to overlook the repression and exploitation that the upper classes were (and are) responsible for. Most of the 35 reviewers are partly respectful, but largely confrontational in what may seem as, in several cases, a politically leftist perspective. Some of them not only expose what to them seem to be "anachronistic values", but notice how a rather idyllic image of the past class society is being projected into our own time. There is a repressive continuity with the past, but this matter is hardly addressed by Fellowes/ITV. The reviewers tend to agree with Higson and others who claim that films like this "function to maintain the values and interests of the most privileged social strata" (Higson 2003: 46).

7. **CONCLUSION**

Hardly any of the respondents tell their readers whether they politically are oriented left or right. We could speculate that persons who are politically left-oriented would be more provoked by the series (and the politics and ideology of Fellowes) than right-oriented persons, and that leftist viewers therefore would feel a stronger urge to "dissect" the series, exposing its "hidden agenda", like some of the reviewers do. If you fundamentally disagree with something, it will generate opposition. But even though some reviewers can imagine to "see through" the manipulation of a series like *Downton Abbey*, the series is both *opaque and visible* in different ways for different (re)viewers.

The past as seen in films and series like *Downton Abbey* should not be left in its past-ness. Visual historicism has relevance for how we think and feel today about several issues, with political implications. Every image of history is a construction, and the audience should be aware of the potential for visual and ideological seduction in *Downton Abbey* and other "historically correct" heritage dramas. The lavishness

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in visual display can easily spill over to how we evaluate morals and values of the aristocracy. Accepting *Downton Abbey* without reservation is to be seduced to accept a nostalgic vision of class society, a system of class power and privilege that should be met with critical consciousness and resistance. As the reviewer 'Mena Reno' asserts (29 July 2015): "The manipulative power of a lavish and popular TV production such as Downton Abbey should not be underestimated."

The striking swan metaphor springs from nature and could suspiciously be said to signal a natural order. The gracious luxury among the nobles is driven forward by unseen, hard work – if it didn't, it could not exist. In my opinion, Percival and Jessica Fellowes' swan metaphor should critically be paralleled with a metaphor based on the series' logo. In the logo we see the grand estate mirrored in a shiny surface. This mirror image of the building signifies the upstairs and downstairs theme, but it is actually showing upstairs twice. The series has all in all the point of view of the upper classes – where the main interest is the estate's grandeur and splendor. The upper class mirror their own glory, and are unable to see the realities in what is going on underneath them. The series gives not a mirror of society, but a mirror of glory for the wealthy few. The hard labour by their servants is relatively invisible and insignificant in the series. The focus in *Downton Abbey* is on the "good, old" respect and loyalty upwards and downwards, and this "harmonic" cooperation between the classes is presented as an ideal, even though it hides deep social and political injustices. All viewers of the series should be aware of this, as they will be for instance by reading the reviews on IMDb.

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TV SHOW

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