

Abstract

The aim of the thesis is to explore the notion of class in Britain and its contemporary perception. It tries to explain the phenomenon of class obsession. The thesis consists of two parts. The first, theoretical one describes the British conception of class in general and explains its key aspects, using historical survey. Further it concentrates on the crucial role of the media and popular culture. They perpetuate popular obsession with the class system and support the perception of class as something glamorous. Chapter three presents the class as a 'spectacle' and explains how the popular culture works. The audience is fascinated by visual portrayal of the 'higher life' and therefore often looks up to the upper class as its role models or when in need of amusement.

The second part of the work provides a reflection of the British class system in contemporary TV series *Downton Abbey*. One of the key propositions of this work is that despite the generally negative characteristics of any class system, it is the very class distinction combined with conservative traditions to which the popularity of these British TV series can be attributed. On the example of the above-mentioned series, the ongoing fascination with traditional representations of class (especially the upper class) is demonstrated and the possible reasons for the obsession further explored. 'Heritage industry' and subsequently also 'heritage cinema' create the illusion of an idyllic country with rural aspects and fulfill the audience's fantasies about such life. They also encapsulate certain moments in time and thus remind us of the 'glorious' past of Britain. 'Stately houses' are important in both contemporary heritage industry and in the films and TV series. It is explained what role such houses played in both Victorian and Edwardian era and why they are therefore so often used in this genre today.

'Class' is presented from many different viewpoints in order to explore its variability. It can be perceived as a means for displaying one's social status, defense mechanism or as a part of ritual that is supposed to sooth people. As a subject of popular obsession, class can be also mocked and the 'rural fantasy' turned into parody. For all the attempts at forming a 'classless society', Britain is still a country where class matters. The thesis therefore portrays Britain as 'class division-free society' since it shows it would be premature to talk about a 'classless society'.