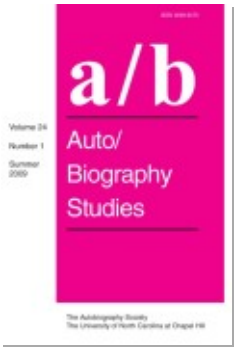
Filming the Ineffable: Biopics of the British Royal Family

Giselle Bastin



a/b: Auto/Biography Studies, Volume 24, Number 1, Summer 2009, pp. 34-52 (Article)

Published by The Autobiography Society

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By Giselle Bastin

The genre of the biopic is defined as encompassing films that "depict the life of a historical person, past or present" and in which the central character's "real name is used" (Custen 5–6). It is a genre whose traits "shift anew with each generation" (6) and the royal biopic, as a sub-section of this genre, is no different. One of the most consistent tropes of the royal biopic since its earliest manifestation in *The Private Life of Henry VIII* in 1933 has been the study of "the tension between the public duty and private life of the monarch" (10), with a special focus on periods of "instability for the monarchy" (315). The royal biopic perpetuates a range of framing devices common to the genre as a whole, such as emphasis on verisimilitude in costuming and setting, and on the productions' "truth value" (60). There are several biopics that present the lives of the British Royal Family as "the real thing," yet surprisingly, until comparatively recently it was deemed improper to present a living sovereign on stage or in film in dramatic form at all. This belief is tied to the notion that the Monarch is somehow sacred—un-filmable, even.

There has not always been a dearth of cinematic queens. As George Custen points out, "female biopic subjects in the thirties were often queens, corresponding to the star status of the actresses who played them" (102). The resistance to filming the real Elizabeth Windsor, however, forms part of a long tradition that saw the British Royals working to negotiate their place in the popular imagination on their own terms. Most felt strongly, for example, that the existence of the royal system depended on its unknowability, its mystique—and anything that threatened this almost sacred cordon sanitaire surrounding the Royals' private lives was to be resisted at all costs. The advent of the media in the twentieth century nonetheless gave rise to a new relationship between the Royal Family and the public and ushered in a period of re-negotiation on the part of the family who framed and projected the Windsor public image. As Bernd Weisbrod suggests, "[t]he monarchy has always been what it was believed to be, but the monarchy as a media event is of rather recent origin" (238). Royal biopics, from the television "nasties" of the early 1980s and the 1990s through to the cinema-release motion picture *The Queen*

(2005), reflect this change of status—that the British monarchy had become a "media event." This paper argues that, just as definitions of the biopic shift according to the period in which they are made, so the royal biopic has shifted to reveal changing attitudes to the meaning of "royalty" overall. The commonplace re-enactments of the private lives of the Royals within the frames of conventional romance and soap opera that can be witnessed in the Charles and Diana biopics have transformed; in Stephen Frears's *The Queen* these simple re-enactments have become a self-reflexive exploration and recognition of the ineffable qualities of "royalty" and "majesty." Frears's film is one of the few examples of royal biopic to acknowledge that it operates within a dialogic framework when trying to capture that most elusive of all lives—the sovereign "self" (Smith and Watson 3).

Writers about cinema have long debated whether or not film can properly capture characters' "inner lives" (Simonet 51), and theorists about biopics have considered how well-filmed biography can properly capture real lives in any depth at all (Murphy). When people's lives are adapted to the screen, they are subject to the same appraisals and complaints that beset any form of film adaptation in the sense that the viewer can feel let down and betrayed by the film's lack of similarity to its source "text." Robert Stam has said about this process that "[w]ords such as *infidelity* and *betrayal* . . . translate our feeling, when we have loved [a source text], that an adaptation has not been worthy of that love" (54). Using Christian Metz's application of Lacanian theory to film, Stam suggests further that audiences read novels, or interpret famous peoples' lives, through their own "introjected desires, hopes, and utopias," and as they read and view these source "texts" they "fashion [their] own imaginary mise-en-scène . . . on the private stages of their minds." Moreover, "[w]hen we are confronted with someone else's phantasy . . . we feel the loss of our own phantasmatic relation" to the source text, with "the result that the adaptation itself becomes a kind of 'bad object'" (54–55). In Britain and other Commonwealth countries, people's responses to royalty vary greatly, yet what remains as a point of connection between Royal watchers is that each has his or her own private responses to the meaning of royalty. As director of the most recent and well-known of the royal biopics, Stephen Frears is aware of the paradox embedded in attempting to capture the intangible quality of the monarch-subject relationship: "If you're British you know a *lot* about the royal family and [yet] you know *nothing*" (Frears, Interview). People *feel* as if they know the members of the Royal Family, even when it is unlikely they have ever met them. Frears is unusual in that he has recognized that the relationship between Monarch and subject is a complex one because it concerns "the national unconscious" (Whittle). This point

of connection via the personal and collective national unconscious is that which is challenged when we see the lives of the Royals in dramatic form. As Frears has admitted: "The emotions surrounding the Queen are quite complicated. . . . She's a woman I've known in some sense for 60 years, so digging through all those feelings, which were more complicated than I expected them to be, was the difficult part" (Levy). When we see the lives of the Royal Family onscreen, we feel that our phantasmatic relation with them is threatened, in a sense, by the intervention of other people's interpretations of our own cherished Royal stories.

Furthermore, biopics about the British Royal Family are in a unique predicament compared not only to other biopics but also to other forms of adaptation because they focus on some of the most famous people in western culture—if not the world—and yet they convey stories about individuals whose raison d'être is to retain a sense of mystery and illusion. Royalty's function as the public symbol of constitutional monarchy in Britain means that the Family, and the Sovereign in particular, exists as the embodiment of that symbol, so much so that the Windsors' private selves remain secondary to their public selves. According to William M. Kuhn, the British monarchy's success over the past two centuries "derives . . . not only from *doing* things people have seemed to want but from *being* what people want, on the level of both their conscious desires and their unconscious assumptions" (272).

Biopics about the contemporary British Monarchy, then, are in a double-bind: they are saddled from the outset by the risk that they will become, firstly, the viewers' "bad object" because of their status as adaptations and because of the notion that the "essence" of the original text is somehow lost in the transposition from "life" to screen; secondly, because they are films that deal with individuals who are defined in the first place as possessing some kind of ineffable "essence"—an aura that sets them apart from ordinary mortals—they have an "aura," therefore, that is eroded twice over in the adaptation process.

To understand this sense of displacement that the Royal Subject undergoes in the adaptation process, it is first necessary to analyze how the notions of "majesty" and "mystery" inform people's understanding of how the Royals function overall. In his influential 1867 text, *The English Constitution,* the nineteenth-century economist and social commentator Walter Bagehot asserted that royalty's "mystery is its life" and stressed that "[w]e must not let in daylight upon magic" and risk diluting this mystery (76). Certainly, the contemporary republican writer Edgar Wilson hazards the view that "discussion about the meaning of monarchy lies outside the scope of rational

scrutiny" (92). Courtiers, officials, and many in the press pack attest to the Queen's magic status: the Queen, according to one British embassy official in Brazil, "is surrounded by an aura that is quite extraordinary," a notion supported by the Queen's sister, Princess Margaret: "I think [the Queen's] got an aura, a twentieth-century aura. I get enormously impressed when she walks into a room. It's a kind of magic" (Duncan 11, 126).

In order to assist the Monarchy in its efforts to preserve this sense of mystery, a chorus of writers over the past seven decades has urged the Royal Family to heed Bagehot's appeal about keeping the public gaze out of the palace's day-to-day life. One such writer, the staunch monarchist and historian Sir Charles Petrie, argued in 1961 that the present queen's uncle, the abdicator, Edward VIII, made "the fatal mistake of ignoring the eternal truth that if a monarchy is to be successful there must be some air of mystery about it. Not long after the First World War he received some advice from Sir Frederick Ponsonby on the subject which he would have done well to have taken to heart . . . 'The Monarchy must always retain an element of mystery. A Prince should not show himself too much. The Monarchy must remain on a pedestal.'" (167; see also Martin 105). Lord Altrincham suggests that members of the Royal Family "have to perform the seemingly impossible task of being at once ordinary and extraordinary" because they are the "living symbols of a majestic whole" (Grigg 6, 13). Indeed, a Mass-Observation survey from the mid-1960s noted a largish minority of the British people thought the Queen "especially chosen by God" (Harris 138), Winston Churchill believed wholeheartedly in the divine right of kings (Cannadine, *Shadow* 45), and they were, in the eyes of the BBC (until comparatively recently) "sacrosanct, beyond criticism and . . . [deemed] essential for national safety" (Martin 16). Enoch Powell felt that the Monarchy was "emotional, symbolical, totemistic[,] and mystical," and Henry Luce felt that "[t]he illogical, the arbitrary, and the sacred in the Monarchy all contribute to its mysticism" (Wilson 92). More recently, Vernon Bogdanor has noted that "Monarchy . . . is essentially an institution of the imagination, as Disraeli and Bagehot so well understood" (305).

Over the centuries this institution of the imagination has enjoyed varying degrees of public exposure and curiosity, culminating in modern times with the 1950's period of awe which has been labeled by Ben Pimlott as the age of "British Shintoism" (102). Such awe was coupled with a reverential protection of the private doings of the Royal Family that ensured that very little was really known about how the Family lived its day to day life. The secrecy surrounding the Royal Family was in marked contrast to royal existence prior

to the nineteenth century when the Monarchy used to "eat, ablute, consummate its marriages, seduce its mistresses, even give birth to its progeny more or less in public view" (Pimlott 91). The institutionally supported insistence on a royal cordon sanitaire of privacy is, then, comparatively recent. It was in the period of Victoria's reign (1837–1901) that a clear line between public and private Royal Personage was drawn, as the grieving queen retreated behind palace walls and concocted strict rules of engagement with the outside world. While Victoria was expansionist in terms of empire, she remained staunchly isolationist in the arrangement of her private life, and it is an irony that the slow seeping in of daylight on the everyday lives of the Royals in its modern context began, according to one historian, with Queen Victoria's allowing photographs of her family to be sold: "The relationship between the royal family (itself a Victorian invention) and the public was changed for ever by Victoria's decision in 1860 to allow photographs of herself and Albert to go on sale for the first time. A line had been crossed, and the issue of where privacy ends and publicity begins would increasingly bedevil her descendants" (Woolf 110).

Others argue that it was Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, who opened Pandora's box with the commissioning of such books about the family—"us four"—as *Our Princesses and Their Dogs* (1936). It has also been suggested that it was the publishing of auto/biographies such as Marion Crawford's reminiscences of her life as the governess of the young Princess Elizabeth and her sister, Princess Margaret Rose (*The Little Princesses* in 1949) that introduced a new level of permissiveness when it came to the revelation about the Royals' private world. (Crawford's act of exposing the domestic details of her royal charges in book form introduced into royal lexicon the phrase "doing a Crawfie," meaning that such acts are tantamount to treachery and condemned as a result [Pimlott 97].)

When deciding which single event is to blame for the opening of the floodgates on royal exposure, however, the finger of blame is usually pointed squarely at Richard Cawston's BBC-funded film, *Royal Family*, in 1969. Richard Tomlinson points out that Cawston "consciously blurred the distinction between the public functions and private lives of members of the Royal family. Thus daylight began to intrude upon magic" (qtd. in Rosen 41). The Queen commissioned this film to celebrate Prince Charles's investiture as Prince of Wales and it is, in many ways, a choice that was in keeping with how the Windsor-Saxe-Coburg-Gotha dynasty had stage-managed their public ceremonies since the reign of Edward VII. During the reign of George V (1910–1936) the Monarchy strengthened "its hold on the popular imagination" (McKibbin 7) with radio broadcasts made

by the King and, after 1918, increased news footage and newspaper circulation about the doings of royal tours and appearances. Yet the Palace retained a tacit understanding with newspaper proprietors that unsavory private details about the Royals would be suppressed. The long-standing agreement with the press was that "there was no objection to the publication of private details, provided they were the right ones" (Pimlott 91). And one of the wrong ways to publicize the family's private details was in dramatic form. British journalist Mark Lawson observes that "any depiction at all was considered lese-majesty" ("Royal"). Such an idea held up until the mid-1960s with The Lord Chamberlain's system of licensing plays "which precluded, on grounds of public taste, acting that was deemed too overtly sexual, and the portrayal on the stage of any twentieth[-]century Sovereign" (Pimlott 100). This view prevailed until the advent of television and a change in public opinion about freedoms of the press saw a weakening of the sanction. The apotheosis of royal adulation and reverence that surrounded Queen Elizabeth at the time of her Coronation in 1953 coincided with increased media scrutiny of the Royal family's activities.

By the 1980s the daylight had well and truly flooded in, and in words containing the terrible portent of what awaited her in her adult life, the young Princess Elizabeth remarked in her diary at the time of her father's Coronation that her family had had to sit for photographs "in front of those awful lights" (Pimlott 94). The same queen who had at first resisted being filmed during her own coronation found herself the star of her own documentary *A Queen is Crowned* (1953) and at the gates of a new era, one marked by mass exposure and with increased levels of dialogic participation with the media on the part of the younger Royals.

Diana and Charles Biopics

In 1955 Malcolm Muggeridge warned that the playing of the Royals to the media gallery and the increased exposure of all things "royal" in the press risked the family's being subjected to ridicule. What he referred to as the "Royal Soap Opera" (Martin 130) was to see its fullest realization in the Charles and Diana biopics of the early 1980s and 1990s. These films capitalized on the soap opera motif that was being propagated throughout the era in the daily press about the marriage of the Prince and Princess of Wales. The Charles and Diana biopics seem in many ways a natural extension of the idea that the modern British Monarchy, as a constitutional monarchy, is able to reign but not rule; as such it has been characterized by historian David Cannadine as a "matriarchy," one dominated by "charismatic

women" and therefore a "feminized version of an essentially male institution" ("Biography" 303). Deprived, as Cannadine says, "of those historic male functions of god and governor and general" the modern monarchy has been characterized by its "stress on family, domesticity, maternity[,] and glamour" (303). Such a change of historical emphasis means that stories about monarchy lend themselves to the demands of the genre of the biopic because of this genre's traditional preference for what Belén Vidal calls "illustration and reconstruction, and [a] tendency to reinstate mythic structures of bourgeois realism" (75). The Charles and Diana biopics rely heavily on the discourses embedded in bourgeois domesticity and re-tell the Waleses' story through the conventional frame of a romance tale.

The first Charles and Diana biopics were aired on American television in 1981 on September 17 (*Charles and Diana: A Royal Love Story* [dir. James Goldstone]) and September 20 (*The Royal Romance of Charles and Diana* [dir. Peter Levin]). As their titles suggest, both films recount the courtship, engagement, and wedding of Charles and Diana. In Goldstone's film Diana is played by Caroline Bliss, Charles by David Robb, and Elizabeth II and Prince Philip are played by Margaret Tyzack and Christopher Lee respectively. In Levin's biopic, Catherine Oxenberg plays Lady Diana Spencer (in fact, Oxenberg turns up again in the 1992 film *Charles and Diana: Unhappily Ever After*), Christopher Baines does a turn as Prince Charles, Dana Wynter plays the Queen and Stewart Grainger fills in as Prince Philip. When these films were made, next to nothing was known of the young woman, Lady Diana Spencer, who would go on to become one of the most famous and photographed women in the world. In 1981 the biopics had little to go on as to her characterization because she had uttered barely a word in public and had given only one interview at the time of her engagement (an interview in which Prince Charles had responded to the interviewer's question, "You must be very much in love?" with "yes . . . whatever 'in love' means," a phrase which reappears as the title of the 2005 biopic *Charles and Camilla: Whatever Love Means*). These films were released in the United States on the "absolute understanding—on which some of the actors were said to have insisted—that these dramas would never be screened in the UK" (Lawson, "One"). Whether this was out of deference for the Crown or out of concern for their careers is uncertain; nevertheless, the start of the "Age of Diana" shifted the ground on what was allowable in filmed versions of the Royals' lives.

After a brief lull in the mid-1980s when no biopics about the Waleses were made, there appeared a proliferation of royal biopics in the early 1990s, due possibly to the increased volume of biographies about the Royal Family, and about Diana and Charles in particular,

that appeared at this time. The 1992 film *Charles and Diana: Unhappily Ever After* and 1993's *Diana: Her True Story* both draw their material directly from revelations made in the "ghosted" (auto)biography by Andrew Morton, *Diana: Her True Story,* and from sundry other biographies from the same period. Another biopic, David Greene's film *Princess in Love* (1996) is based on Anna Pasternak's fictional account of the same name and describes Diana's affair with Major James Hewitt, while Steven Hilliard Stern's *The Women of Windsor* (1992) makes use of a number of publications about both the Princess of Wales and the Duchess of York ("Fergie"). According to Lawson, the path for the royal biopic was cleared by the Royals' own collusion with biographers and media figures: "[I]t was fact that freed the way for fiction," he remarks, for when "Diana and Charles flapped their marital dirty linen at Martin Bashir and Jonathan Dimbleby respectively, the Royals, behaving like politicians, were regarded as inviting the political risk of dramatization" ("One"). Prince Charles's admission of adultery to his biographer Jonathan Dimbleby in *The Prince of Wales: A Biography* (1994) encouraged Princess Diana to follow suit with her admission of adultery to the BBC's Martin Bashir in the famous *Panorama* interview of 1995. Yet, despite adhering closely to the narratives produced in biographical texts from the period, the royal biopics have nonetheless been accused of being somehow worse than their literary equivalents. As Lawson suggests, biographies in general attract less opposition because "[t]he traditional defence of biography over the biopic is that prose can be clearer about the distinction between fact and fiction—using distancing verbs [such as] 'seems', 'may', 'claimed'" ("Royal"). By contrast, biopics have to nail their colors to the mast, so to speak.

Stam says of the adaptation process generally that when translating words into images directors have to "fill in their paradigmatic indeterminances" and make decisions about what the characters should look like, how they should act, what they should say and how they should say it, thus removing the audience's scope to imagine such details for itself (55). When director of *The Queen*, Stephen Frears, made his casting decisions about who should play Queen Elizabeth II or British Prime Minister Tony Blair, for example, he had to make a range of complex decisions regarding appearances, behavioral characteristics, and setting. By contrast, when he uses actual television footage of Diana he is able to feed back into the audience's own representations of the princess. As Sukhdev Sandhu says, the "real" Diana appears in Frears's film "in a series of pixilated screen grabs" and "becomes, as perhaps she always was, a spectral princess, a set of shifting media images whose meaning lay in the eyes of the beholder." When actors are enlisted to "play the king" (as they are in Shakespeare's

Hamlet, for example) these pixilated images merge into continuous sequences with action, movement, and imagined plot, removing for the viewer any space with which to create a mise-en-scène of his or her own devising. For many viewers of the Charles and Diana biopics, then, it is inevitable that the Diana figure is reduced to a basic set of signifiers (wigs, well-known outfits, derivative dialogue snatched from rare interviews, door-stop comments, friends' observations and recollections, and hearsay), all of which serve to solidify the pixilated princess and somehow "fail the fantasy." Taken together, the Charles and Diana (and Fergie and Diana, and Fergie and Andrew, and Charles and Camilla) biopics are rated by viewers as low-quality television, yet what they offer, despite their inability to fulfill for many viewers a proper sense of identification and nostalgic yearning for the "real," is the vicarious thrill of having "so-bad-it's-good moments" (sibisi73).

Re-enactments of the Royals' lives in these biopics are achieved by visual references to geographical spaces and material props that denote "royalness." When it comes to finding appropriate settings for these royal dramas, for instance, nearly any English stately home will do. Characters recite lines approximating "royal dialogue" in suitably grand, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century manors that stand in for the real homes of Buckingham Palace, Balmoral, Highgrove, and Diana's pre-marriage flat in Coleherne Court. Diana's clothes are invariably modeled on outfits that she was known to have worn and the princess's wardrobe changes in each film to mark the passing of time, to mark stages in the breakdown of her marriage, and to signify her own journey towards "self-awareness" and "freedom." The actors who play the Prince of Wales, from Roger Rees (*Charles and Diana: Unhappily Ever After)* through to Laurence Fox (*Whatever Love Means*) and Christopher Bowen (*Princess in Love*) compete to varying degrees to play the prince as a hard-hearted, selfish—sometimes even cruel—man who is unable to understand the inner beauty and charisma of the woman he has married. Diana is played as quiet and shy (*Charles and Diana: A Royal Love Story*; *The Royal Romance of Charles and Diana; Charles and Diana: Unhappily Ever After*), perky and misunderstood (*Diana: Her True* Story), fey and obsessive (*Princess in Love*), unbearably stiff and wooden (*The Women of Windsor*), and shy and wispy to the point where one imagines she could almost disappear (*Whatever Love Means*).

Moreover, as if to prove that the task of capturing the "real" Diana is just too hard, the makers of the biopics all fail in varying degrees to get the famous "Diana hairdo" right. Diana's famous blonde hairstyle is recreated unsuccessfully in a series of stiff, ill-fitting blonde wigs perched atop actor after actor in the early royal biopics. The failure

to authentically recreate such a seemingly trivial signifier of "Diananess" points to the difficulties that the royal biopics encounter when offering actors as stand-ins for the actual royal figures or as accurate representations of the "good objects" of the audience's royal fantasies. In short, these fictional characters—symbolized by the failure of the hair—are reminders of the absence of the "real thing." These biopics attempt to show us the authentic private person behind the public representation but instead paradoxically enact what Patricia Mellencamp calls "the impossibility of knowing" (156). When Royal-watching in the newspapers, popular magazines, and television documentaries, we become "intimate with the public persona, the familiar tics, habits, and performed behaviour, yet can never know the 'real' person. A third person, neither private nor public, is what we get" (156). When we come to watch biopics about these same people, we are hoping for a glimpse of the "real" person behind the public façade; what we get instead are yet more façades, ones made obvious by the filmmakers' inability to, in a sense, "get the hair right."

The audience's desire to enact their own cherished royal fantasies via the screen is further complicated by the Charles and Diana biopics' stripping away of any hint that the Windsors are the stable and happy family of the collective dream of post-war Britain. The belief that the first family of the land is a representation of the happy, unified family that represents a metonymical symbol that is "Britain" has been a potent and oft-cited explanation as to why Britain and the Commonwealth needs a Royal Family at all. The public's supplementation of the Royal Family as "all families" was remarked upon in 1936 by the psychoanalyst Ernest Jones, who, in describing people's reactions to the death of George V, touched on a key ingredient in the public's adulation for the Royal Family: a ruler "may capture the imagination by presenting to us, as it were on a screen, a magnified and idealized picture of the most homely and familiar attributes. It is here that the child's glorified phantasies of himself and his family find ample satisfaction . . . In the august stateliness and ceremonial pomp their secret day-dreams are at last gratified" (qtd. in McKibbin 13–14). The Charles and Diana biopics become "bad objects" because they fail to gratify the "secret day-dreams" of what the royal personas are supposed to be like. Given the highly subjective nature of this process of identification with both the Royals and with "royalty," viewers are given ample scope when watching these biopics to feel let down because the films cannot provide a substitution for the "real." And even with, or perhaps because of, the poor production standards that allow viewers the distancing mechanism of knowing that what they see is mere "re-enactment," these films thwart epistemophilic satisfaction because of their status as "copy." Moreover, the royal biopics'

adherence to the conventions of romance in their re-enactment of a marriage that did, indeed, fail indicate too clearly, too starkly that the bourgeois dream of a marriage for love was as much a construct for these aristocratic—*royal*—characters as it was and is for the rest of us. Yet by purporting to offer the "romance of the century" while staging its inevitable failure, these royal biopics fail the audiences' fantasies of a happy ending with each repeated viewing. Charles and Diana come across on screen as terribly human and flawed, their private tragedy merges completely with their public personas, and yet in offering this story within a framework of a romance, real life intervenes by failing to offer the appropriate ending to the tale: the marriage dissolves, Diana grows paler and thinner, no prince waits to rescue her. The biopics allow no room for the audience's private fantasies about a Royal Family that is unified and cohesive and, above all, representative of the national "family." The Charles and Diana films, in particular, remove any hint of magic and mystery from the royal persona and institution. Far from being ineffable, the Royal Dynasty in these films is alarmingly knowable and as much prone as any other mortal family to the proverbial "bad hair day."

Stephen Frears's *The Queen*

The most recent of the royal biopics, *The Queen* marks a significant departure from earlier royal biopics that focus predominantly on the intimate relationships of the Queen's children. Instead, it takes as its focus a behind-the-scenes look at the life of the Sovereign in the days immediately following the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, a week when the Queen was forced "to return to the capital [sic] and to bow to public sentiment and the flag" (Weisbrod 238). Although the failed marriage of Charles and Diana and Diana's subsequent formal estrangement from the House of Windsor provides the backbone of events in this film, it is the Sovereign's relationship with her Prime Minister (Tony Blair, played by Michael Sheen) and her renegotiation of her role as titular head of State that forms the core of the film's storyline. Where the Charles and Diana biopics portray the Royals' marital woes and affairs of the heart without pausing to consider the constitutional ramifications of the breakdown of the Waleses' marriage, Frears's film continues to offer "soap opera" about the private Royals but with the added kudos of considering their actions in terms of their national role. *The Queen* is predominantly concerned with how affairs of state act as the starting point for an exploration of the Monarch as both private individual and public symbol.

The Queen was released in 2005 and stars Helen Mirren as Queen Elizabeth II, James Cromwell as Prince Philip, and Alex Jennings as

Prince Charles. Its screenplay was written by Peter Morgan and it was funded with a combination of money from film and television companies. Critics have noted more than once that the film's point of difference from earlier biopics about the Windsors is that it marks the first time that "Elizabeth, and the role she inhabits, has been portrayed seriously" (Whittle). Furthermore, given the legacy of Lord Chamberlain's decree of the mid-twentieth century that no living monarch should be portrayed on screen or stage, Frears's film stands out as the first full-length cinematic representation of a living monarch ever made (Lawson "One"). In the Charles and Diana biopics, as in *The Queen's Sister* (2005), the Queen, covered still by the protective legacy of the Lord Chamberlain's decree, is tellingly either glimpsed fleetingly or sometimes not at all. Any views or thoughts that might have been hers are given to other characters to say. The appearance of Frears's film marked the official end of this embargo and is "above all a measure of the remarkable extent to which the monarch has lost any special protection in British visual culture" (Lawson "One"). *The Queen* represents a "startling advance towards treating Britain's titular rulers just like any other public figures" ("Royal").

Unlike the younger Royals, Queen Elizabeth II has never given an interview or participated directly in any stories written about her in the press. While there have been innumerable biographies written about her—the best known being Robert Lacey's *Royal: Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II* (2002) and the recent *A Year with the Queen* by Robert Hardman (2007)—the Queen has played no part in their construction, and although she was instrumental in organizing the film *Royal Family* and later the documentaries about her life (*Elizabeth R* [1992] and *A Year with the Queen* [2007]), she has shown little or no interest in using film as a medium for exposing her private persona. In this regard Elizabeth II is markedly different from the rest of her family. Her youngest son Prince Edward, for example, drew considerable criticism when his film and documentary company, Ardent Productions, took secret footage of Edward's nephew, Prince William, as the young prince went about his campus life at St Andrews University. By contrast, Queen Elizabeth II poses an interesting challenge to any filmmaker who is willing to take her on as a subject. Moreover, despite having grown up in the public gaze and exposed to intense media scrutiny all her life, the Queen as a private citizen remains a largely unknown figure.

So little is known about the current sovereign's life behind her public façade that one reviewer has quipped "that constructing a convincing portrait of the world she inhabits would seem to be a harder task than recreating Middle Earth" (Whittle), yet the makers of *The Queen* set about making her as believable as possible, with

Mirren acknowledging how crucial it was to get "certain things right, the hair, the hands, the stance, the walk, the voice" (Levy). The film's screenwriter, Peter Morgan, stresses in print and DVD interviews the "forensic" approach to detail that went into "getting it right" (Whittle). Despite this, however, Frears and his team are equally keen to stress the impossibility of making their portrayal of the Queen completely accurate; instead they settle for making the mise-en-scène merely "believable": "[Frears: 'Many of the details in the film are] *completely* wrong, but you sort of believe [them], don't you?' [Morgan:] 'Mm. We *want* to believe it. . . . Is that possibly a moral for the whole thing?'" (*Queen*, Special). Frears and Morgan understand implicitly that the success of their biopic will depend, in part, on getting the Queen "right." However, the film suggests also that Frears and Morgan are aware of the impossibility of such an aim because of the illusory quality of the idea of the Sovereign in the first place. The irony that they are indeed *making* "The Queen," that they are deconstructing the notion of royal ineffability, is not lost on either producer or director of this film.

Moreover, this ineffable presence that is the Queen is unlike any other public figure because she—unlike presidents and prime ministers elsewhere—has been a presence for the entirety of most of her subjects' lives; she occupies a place in the phantasmic realm of the publics' imagination. Frears has said: "Making a movie about the Queen is almost like making a movie about your mother—and in England, The Queen really does serve as a kind of symbolic, emotional mother of the country" (Levy). Satisfying himself that the search for the real Queen is a search for the lost mother opens up for Frears the possibility of making his adaptation of the monarch's life a "good object" that can, at best, only stand in for the real thing. As such, Frears's production opens up a discursive space around the figure of the Sovereign, signaling early its intention to deconstruct how narratives about royalty are made.

Frears's film opens with the image of the Queen sitting for a formal portrait—a self-reflexive gesture designed, the director says, to "show the Queen as we *expect* to see her" (*Queen*, Special) as opposed to how she "really is" behind the scenes. In different places in the film, Mirren looks directly into the camera and resembles the "painterly tableau and the portrait" that, along with other signifiers of "authenticity," has been identified as "staple trope in biopics" (Vidal 70). It was not unusual in earlier biopics, for example, for the camera to focus on oil portraits of the historical figures being portrayed in the films—portraits, Custen observes, painted by studio artists to resemble the actors who are portraying the historical figures under focus (53). Frears's use of a double-framing device allows an exploration

of "themes of gazing, posing and framing" (Vidal 70) and emphasizes the constructed nature of the image of royalty we are being presented, and which we, importantly, are helping to construct as desiring subjects (it is a fitting irony, too, that in this act of being gazed at, we in the audience of *The Queen* are situated as the Sovereign's subjects). As Vidal says of the device of the cinematic figure who "gazes back" directly at us, the audience is presented with a "conflation of the positions of subject and object" and positions the Sovereign as both "subject and object of desire" (71, 87); however, the Queen's gazing in the looking-glass as she puts on her pearls shortly before her first public appearance since the death of Diana suggests an awareness of her own discursivity and instability as a fixed object of our gaze. This depiction of the "Sovereign self" (Smith and Watson *passim*) is only possible through a procession of mirrors longer than the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles—an ever-diminishing, self-reflexive corridor of images that turns back, ultimately, on itself. The Queen's "tableau moments" disclose "the imaginary theatre of fantasy that underlies the realist representation" of other re-enactments in the film of the week proceeding Diana's death in Paris, and go some way toward disrupting the realism of this biopic overall (Vidal 90). Frears's use of mirroring devices offers us, via Mirren's steady stare straight to camera, the "inside/outsideness of the feminine gaze [which] produces the moment of double consciousness . . . of being within and outside of history, performing as both reenactment and rewriting" (87).

Andy Harries, the producer of *The Queen*, was so struck by the public's overwhelming outpouring of grief over Diana's death and by the crowd's expression of outrage at the Windsors' seemingly unfeeling response that he wanted to explore in fictional form why the "public [seem] to hunger [for] something indefinable from their figureheads" (Levy). Frears's movie, knowing that it cannot solve the riddle of how to film the "indefinable" or "ineffable," takes instead as its subject the desire and hunger of the audience for this unachievable state of being.

With Diana "the crowd witnessed a sentimental sacralisation of a royal persona which fed primarily on her youthfulness and femininity, her charm and looks, the 'body of the Queen'" (Weisbrod 239). Diana and Charles (by association) offer the biopic producers subjects whose corporeal presence and experience can be shaped to fit the demands of conventional drama and soap opera. With the death of the princess, filmmakers turned their attention to finding a new subject. Diana's premature death cleared the way for the monarch to again take centre stage; this reassertion of the Queen's "sovereignty" is embodied in one of the promotional posters used for *The Queen* that depicts a half-obscured image of the real Diana—recognizable immediately by

the key signifiers of pearl choker and famous smile—and a full-length picture of Helen Mirren as the Queen standing in front of the Diana image. Mirren gazes directly into the camera as if to assert not only her authority as Sovereign, but to reflect also the film's intention to stare down anyone who might dare suggest that the film's intention is to be anything but a self-aware deconstruction of the biopic genre. Frears's biopic and its direct use of Diana's larger-than-life image suggests, on the one hand, the Queen's repositioning of herself according to the legacy of Diana, and, on the other hand, this particular biopic's intention to re-align itself as "good object" in relation to earlier biopics about the Royals.

In one sense, the Charles and Diana biopics replicate the effect the Waleses' collusion in releasing the details of their own private lives had on the media as a whole in that the filmmakers feel free to commit lese-majesty with their royal storylines and portrayals of the doomed couple. This phenomenon is evident also in Channel 4's biopic about the late Princess Margaret where, as one biographer laments, the princess is "portrayed in any way that suited the film-makers" (Heald 308). Certainly, the Waleses' collusion with the media gave the filmmakers tacit approval to do whatever they wished with the story. In the first films (both from 1982) it was Diana's "innocence" that provided the films' main tropes; in the later biopics, it is Diana's "fate as wronged woman" that provides the central focus (Wesibrod 238). However, the later Charles and Diana films, including the recent *Last Days of a Princess* (2007), are mired in re-enactments of Diana's "tabloid life of jet-set glamour and her bitter fight with Charles" and present relentless "post-Mortons" about the failure of the wedding of the century. These biopics emphasized royalty's mortality and, like the individuals themselves, "undermined the credentials of the monarchy in the public eye" (238). The theatre of film became a natural home for a Royal Family that had fallen "victim of [their] own theatrical [selves]," and their battle for publicity and a public stage for their personal woes then played to "the expectations of a mass audience which was heavily engaged in royal imaginings" (238). With the death of Diana—the dramatic stage exit of the Windsors' greatest "soap star"—and the ensuing disenchantment of the public with the tabloid/paparazzi depictions of the Royals, the ground was ripe for a new, up-market fictional portrayal of the Royal Family.

If the Charles and Diana biopics were the filmic equivalent of the tabloid coverage of the Waleses' marriage, then Frears's *The Queen* is the film with broadsheet intentions and financial backing. *The Queen* gives us, admittedly, another portrayal of life behind the scenes at Balmoral, yet from its promotional material through to its creative mise-en-scène, it offers instead an analysis of the role of film in the

perpetuation and construction of royal imaginings. In this sense, it is a distinctly post-Diana royal biopic, one that portrays a family not just negotiating the landscape of personal dilemma and marriage breakdown, but one that is in the process of renegotiating its royal "persona" in the glare of a late-twentieth-century media spotlight. Above all, far from letting daylight in upon magic, Frears's royal biopic shows us that the process of the light refracting between Sovereign and audience in fact creates and sustains the notion of the magic in the first place. Biopics like *The Queen* illuminate how the act of royal imagining is, above all, a dialogic process, one in which adaptations of the Royals' lives contribute to the schema of these royal imaginings whilst providing a vehicle through which the Royals themselves are adapting to life under "those awful lights."

Flinders University

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