The heart of a heartless political world: screening Victoria

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When British politicians complain that television dramatists have failed to produce a native equivalent of *The West Wing* – that is, a series about politics that presents its practitioners as noble and effective – they forget one vital detail.¹ President Jed Bartlet, the central protagonist in the NBC series, which in the United States ran from 1999 to 2006, is a head of state, and like all other occupants of the White House – real or imagined – embodied his country in ways that no other elected representative could. Perhaps for that reason Hollywood has produced few ‘bad’ fictional Presidents, for to criticise the head of state is like attacking the United States itself.² Certainly, in the hands of his creator Aaron Sorkin, Bartlet personified the heroic promise of the United States constitution.³

Despite the supposed ‘presidentialisation’ of the role of British prime minister, those residing at Number 10 are still merely heads of government, closely tied to a political party, which usually holds a majority of seats in the House of Commons.⁴ Therefore, those who want British politicians depicted in the same noble manner as Bartlet are not comparing like with like. Britain’s screen politicians – variously incompetent, corrupt, evil or a combination of the three – are prime ministers (notably Jim Hacker in the 1980–88 BBC satire *Yes, Minister/Prime Minister* or Francis Urquhart in the 1990 BBC political thriller *House of Cards*), ministers (such as Hugh Abbot and Nicola Murray in the 2005–12 BBC comedy series *The Thick of It*) or MPs (infamously Alan B’Stard in the even broader 1987–92 ITV comedy *The New Statesman*). The country’s head of state – its hereditary monarch – rarely makes a showing in Britain’s contemporary political dramas.

One reason for the monarchy’s absence is that, compared to the American presidency, many consider its formal function to be barely ‘political’. Indeed,

according to one of Britain's leading constitutional experts, Vernon Bogdanor, the main virtue of the monarchy is that it stands above party politics, which is, he argued in 2000, 'of inestimable value in an age when politics has come to invade almost every aspect of our national life, choking all too many activities in its unnatural embrace'.⁵ Certainly most surveys of British politics deal with the monarchy very succinctly: one 700-page tome covers the subject in little more than a page, while another almost as thick gives it even less space.⁶ For most students of British politics the monarchy is a minor detail, whose modest right to be consulted, to encourage and to warn is strictly bounded by conventions established as long ago as 1867, when Walter Bagehot first made that claim in *The English Constitution*.

As there is little point discussing the monarchy if virtually all power lies with those whom Britons elect to the Commons, political experts consequently focus on apparently more important issues, such as why so few participate in Westminster elections or think so little of those for whom they do vote. Indeed, it might be thought that, in the first decades of the twenty-first century, the monarchy is the one part of British public life that needs no fixing. If MPs are forced to admit they have lost the people's 'trust', the monarchy is popular, certainly more so than members of the Commons. A 2012 survey discovered for example that a plurality of those who expressed an opinion thought the Queen was more concerned about problems facing ordinary Britons than were senior politicians and government ministers.⁷

The monarchy's favoured status is largely due to most recent incumbents refraining from being openly involved in controversial political issues, although behind the scenes they have assiduously tried to protect their own interests.⁸ As a result most Britons associate the institution with, as Bagehot put it, only the 'dignified' aspect of the constitution. The official website of the British monarchy is happy to reinforce that impression by claiming that:

Although the British Sovereign no longer has a political or executive role, he or she continues to play an important part in the life of the nation.

As Head of State, The Monarch undertakes constitutional and representational duties which have developed over one thousand years of history. In addition to these State duties, The Monarch has a less formal role as 'Head of Nation'. The Sovereign acts as a focus for national identity, unity and pride; gives a sense of stability and continuity; officially recognises success and excellence; and supports the ideal of voluntary service.⁹

Yet, the monarch's 'representational duties' as 'Head of Nation' have subtle political consequences, inflecting how people perceive their country and their own place within it. Situating a hereditary monarch at the centre of regular national ceremonials helps to propagate a particular way of thinking about history, politics and the people's subordinate position within a quasi-paternalistic rather than fully democratic order.¹⁰ To illustrate that point Tom Nairn quotes Charles de Gaulle's 1961 address in which he told Elizabeth II that she was 'the person in which your people perceive their own nationhood'. As a critic of monarchy, Nairn believes the 'enchanted glass' it holds up to Britons is socially regressive and politically reactionary; but, he has to concede, it is a beguiling, comforting – and highly popular – national fantasy.¹¹ In promoting such a vision of the nation, the monarch's ceremonial role is an example of what Joseph Nye referred to as 'soft power', that is 'the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment'.¹² In this instance it mobilises popular feeling towards a conservative conception of national history by placing the monarchy at its centre. This is no accidental outcome. As David Cannadine suggests, the elite's desire to temper the radical consequences of democracy was a crucial reason for their invention of so many royal rituals since the later nineteenth century.¹³

PERIOD DRAMA POLITICS

The ways in which monarchs have been dramatised on the screen matter because, like the real rituals in which they take a leading part – and which such dramas spend much time restaging – fictional representations tell us something about what Britons think about their politics. Those working in a variety of academic disciplines certainly believe that the imagination plays an inescapable role in shaping perceptions of the real. Margaret Somers writes that all claims to knowledge 'are transmitted *via* some kind of cultural schema; they are culturally embedded – that is, mediated through symbolic systems and practices, such as metaphors, ritualized codes, stories, analogies, or homologies'.¹⁴ Murray Edelman argues that the role of the imagined is especially important in politics, if only because so few people have direct experience of it, beyond voting. Thus, Edelman claims, 'art is the fountainhead from which political discourse, belief about politics, and consequent actions ultimately spring'.¹⁵ Thanks to a number of studies we know the kind of effect screen dramas have on audiences' political dispositions, the most relevant of which discovered that, after

watching episodes of *The West Wing*, American viewers were better disposed towards Presidents Clinton and Bush.¹⁶ Some even claim that idealised fictional Presidents, like Jed Bartlet, have made a notable contribution to what they call the 'cult of the Presidency'.¹⁷ To be sure, Jeff Smith contends that 'The stories that Americans tell and have told about presidents' have played a critical part in forming how they think about their elected heads of state.¹⁸

As noted above, Britain's monarchs mostly appear in historical narratives, often described as period or costume dramas, one of the most popular of fictional genres.¹⁹ Some cultural theorists believe dramas about the past exert an overwhelming influence over audiences. Michel Foucault went so far as to say that French films depicting the Resistance could 'reprogramme ... popular memory'.²⁰ If Foucault provided no evidence, one survey suggests that even one of the most fallacious of Hollywood's historical dramas – *Braveheart* (1995) – shaped how audiences regarded the distant past, even after they had read reliable academic accounts.²¹ This is also true of those who actually participated in events depicted on the big screen. Less than twenty years after its end, many American veterans of the Vietnam War were unable to distinguish their own recollection of the conflict from Hollywood's version.²²

Having reshaped the past, Foucault argues, historical films then 'impose on people a framework in which to interpret the present', or as Pierre Sorlin puts it, to 'reorganise' it.²³ Writing about film versions of British history, James Chapman suggests, however, that such movies are also shaped by their context, tending to endorse narratives that accord with popular views of history. Reinforcing that generalisation, on the basis of five decades' experience starring in countless historical plays and movies, the British actor George Arliss, who won an Oscar for playing Disraeli in 1929, wrote: 'Cinema, and even theatre, audiences have a very superficial idea of most historical characters – when they have any idea at all.' History, so far as this renowned thespian was concerned, was an adornment for a good story; but he still believed it vital that dramas adopted audiences' 'preconceived ideas' of the past, no matter how limited they were.²⁴ Working with the grain of popular opinion, commercial cinema has generally reinforced, as Chapman puts it, 'narratives of national greatness'.²⁵ Reflecting the central role monarchs enjoy in most renditions of the British national story, they are far more popular big screen subjects than their prime ministers – Winston Churchill apart (see Table 1).²⁶

Queen Victoria was Britain's second longest-reigning monarch, and the one most represented: just over 100 films and television programmes. As the author

Table 1 *Top ten screen (film and television) depictions of Britain's heads of state and government*

Heads of state		Heads of government	
Victoria	106	Churchill	137
Elizabeth I	85	Wellington	47
Elizabeth II	82	Thatcher	41
Henry VIII	79	Lloyd George	36
Charles II	55	Blair	31
Richard I	46	Disraeli	26
Cromwell	40	Gladstone	25
Richard III	40	Pitt the Younger	17
George III	36	Chamberlain	16
Edward VII	34	Eden	16

Source: Data from Internet Movie Database, www.imdb.com/.

of *A State of Play*, an exploration of fictional representations of British politics since the late nineteenth century, I will focus on this screen monarch, concentrating on eight film dramas in which she is the central protagonist or a significant figure.²⁷ Stretching from *Victoria the Great* (Herbert Wilcox, 1937) to *The Young Victoria* (Jean-Marc Vallée, 2009) by way of *Sixty Glorious Years* (Herbert Wilcox, 1938), *The Prime Minister* (Thorold Dickinson, 1941), *The Mudlark* (Jean Negulesco, 1950), *Mrs. Brown* (John Madden, 1997) and *Victoria and Albert* (John Erman, 2001), these dramas aimed to be popular entertainments, and many were. They also ostensibly aspired to historical authenticity, something that proved much more elusive.

Certainly, thanks to their props, costumes and locations, dramas about Victoria *looked* authentic. Other stratagems were also mobilised. Most baldly, and fallaciously, *Victoria the Great* begins with an intertitle declaring that the film was based on 'actual events and happenings' in the Queen's life; and that 'every incident is founded on historic fact and the political utterances by various statesmen are authentic'. The *Daily Mirror* critic pronounced *Sixty Glorious Years* so accurate, he argued it should be shown in schools throughout the Empire. Julian Fellowes, who wrote *The Young Victoria*, also asserted that everything in his script was 'based entirely on fact'. That was true, but only up to a point. A madman *did* fire a shot at Victoria. But Prince Albert *did not* – as Fellowes has it – take the bullet in the chest to prevent the Queen's assassination, thereby

finally convincing Victoria of his love for her.²⁸ Thanks to its staging, the scene none the less *looks* 'authentic'.

Historical dramas seek to give audiences a view of the past with which they are already familiar, however inaccurate that may be. Perceptions are reshaped in so far as filmmakers reflect back – and thereby reinforce while reordering – beliefs they consider suitable for representation. In other words, there are grounds for believing that the screen dramas in which monarchs appear, in a similar way to national ceremonials, 'mobilise bias', by luring audiences in directions many were already predisposed to take, subsequently making them less likely to accept alternative points of view.²⁹ Screen dramas about Queen Victoria did not by themselves make monarchy well liked – the production of such works suggests monarchy was already that – but they certainly helped make it more popular than it would otherwise have been, while revealing the reasons why so many looked upon the institution with favour.

VARIOUS VICTORIAS

Many of Victoria's screen appearances consist of her being used to establish period authenticity, being the historical figure – at least as the elderly matron in black who is 'not amused' – which even the most historically ignorant audiences might recognise. Her earliest outings were reverential. Perhaps the only critical depiction was in *Ohm Krüger* (*Uncle Kruger*, Hans Steinhoff, Karl Anton, 1941), a Nazi account of the Anglo-Boer War, which shows the Queen as greedy and duplicitous. This was not a characterisation found in films produced within the anglophone world. Hollywood's *The Little Princess* (Walter Lang, 1939), for example, presents Victoria as a sweet old lady who intercedes on behalf of a distressed Shirley Temple trying to find her father, wounded in the defence of Mafeking. In the musical *Annie Get Your Gun* (George Sidney, 1950) she benignly grants royal prestige to Buffalo Bill's travelling Wild West show.

After the 1960s these cameos were more often made for comic effect. *Lèse-majesté* was certainly evident when Peter Sellers played Victoria in *The Great McGonagall* (Joseph McGrath, 1974), while *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes' Smarter Brother* (Gene Wilder, 1975) established its irreverent credentials by having the elderly Queen issue an expletive. These appearances, however, said little about Victoria or the monarchy but more about the stuffy Victorian ethos ridiculed by such permissive comedies. More recently Victoria has become – like a number of other historical heads of state such as Lincoln

in *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* (Timur Bekmambetov, 2012) and Roosevelt in *FDR: American Badass!* (Garrett Brawith, 2012) – a free-floating signifier, to be used in a variety of self-consciously anachronistic ways. The 2004 remake of *Around the World in 80 Days* (Frank Coraci, 2004) has Victoria intervene on behalf of Phileas Fogg against her power-mad Minister of Science to ensure the triumph of progress over tradition. In a 2006 episode of *Dr Who* the Queen becomes a gun-toting alien killer who later establishes Torchwood to protect Britain from future extra-terrestrial invasions.³⁰ Very unusually, the animated comedy *The Pirates! In an Adventure with Scientists!* (Peter Lord, 2012) casts the Queen as a sinister figure who together with other world crowned heads wants to eat animals on the verge of extinction.

For much of the interwar period, however, stage and screen depictions of Victoria were banned as a result of objections from George V. As Jude Cowan Montague indicates in this collection, however, before that prohibition could be enforced, *Sixty Years a Queen* (Will Barker, 1913) told the story of the Queen's life, in glowing terms and to great acclaim. Victoria also made a brief appearance in the 1916 film version of Louis Napoleon Parker's 1910 play *Disraeli*. In the final scene of Parker's play the Prime Minister attends a reception at which it is announced the Queen will honour those who helped him purchase shares in the Suez Canal. Victoria is, however, not depicted and the play ends with Disraeli leading her guests stage left, toward what Parker's directions describe as a 'great blaze of light'. The 1916 film, directed by Charles Calvert and Percy Nash, does not survive, but as Victoria is depicted it is likely it portrayed the Queen in the same way as its 1929 Hollywood remake, which concludes with the Prime Minister and colleagues processing respectfully towards a distant, silent and static figure sitting on a throne.

George V's death allowed Herbert Wilcox to produce the first talking – and royally sanctioned – Victoria.³¹ His *Victoria the Great* (1937) was one of the most popular films in the year of its release, with cinemagoers in proletarian Bolton declaring it their favourite movie.³² In response to such acclaim Wilcox rushed out *Sixty Glorious Years*, a kind of off-cut of his earlier film – which was again well liked, especially by working-class audiences.³³ Wilcox's two films covered the monarch's private and public life, but mostly focused on Victoria's happy relationship with her beloved consort Albert: the *Daily Mirror* welcomed *Victoria the Great* as 'a beautifully told royal romance'.³⁴ They did not, however, avoid politics, and associated Victoria with policies which audiences were presumed to support, having her embody the imperial consensus of the time. In contrast,

5 A poster for *Victoria the Great* (Herbert Wilcox, 1937).

films made after the outbreak of the Second World War – *The Prime Minister* (1941) and *The Mudlark* (1950) – presented the widowed Victoria as more concerned with her people's domestic welfare, an interest appropriate to the People's War and the postwar social democratic consensus that succeeded it.

More recent dramas pushed formal politics further into the background and concentrated even more on Victoria's emotional life. They certainly give audiences an unprecedentedly intimate view of the Queen – the mini-series *Victoria and Albert* (BBC1, 2001), for example, shows the Queen abed with her Consort and in the midst of the agony of childbirth: it is a long way from Parker's discrete 'great blaze of light'. Wilcox's films had highlighted the tensions inherent to the monarch being a public figure and a private individual. But these later movies emphasised much more strongly the extent to which Victoria was – as Princess Diana was popularly thought to be – a victim of tradition. *Mrs. Brown*

(1997) has Victoria trapped by protocol: only John Brown talking to her directly, like a woman, saves the Queen from her own morbidity. As *The Young Victoria* (2009) has it: 'Even a Palace can be a prison.'

AN AMERICANISED MONARCH

There has always been a market for British period dramas in the United States. Indeed, Anglophilia was a defining aspect of American national identity and for much of the twentieth century the high-school curriculum stipulated that students be taught British history as a precursor to their own.³⁵ As a consequence, historical dramas with upper-class settings such as television's original *Upstairs, Downstairs* (London Weekend, 1971–75, revived by the BBC, 2010–12) and *Downton Abbey* (ITV, 2010–) have had significant American followings.

The huge rise of this potential market across the Atlantic meant that, for financially obvious reasons, British filmmakers shaped their content to make it amenable to American as well as British audiences. *Victoria the Great* (1937), which did very well in the United States, for example, emphasised how keenly Victoria and Albert sought to prevent war with the Union during the Civil War. Lincoln is even shown praising their intervention in a scene *The Times* critic declared 'evidently designed to appeal to American sentiment'.³⁶ By the late 1930s Hollywood studios wishing to exploit this transatlantic interest had also started to produce films with British subjects in Britain. *The Prime Minister* might have had a native cast and crew, but the script was written for Warner Brothers in California, albeit by British writers.³⁷

The Mudlark had even stronger transatlantic origins. Based on a 1949 novel by American writer Theodore Bonnet, the film was financed by Twentieth Century Fox, whose executives insisted the American actor Irene Dunne play Victoria. The casting of Dunne irritated some British critics, who expressed disdain for the film's 'Anglo-American view of Queen Victoria'.³⁸ In the *Daily Express* Leonard Mosley claimed its transatlantic provenance meant the movie was 'as deferential and embarrassing as the doffed cap of a new gamekeeper to an old squire'.³⁹ Despite that, the film was chosen for the Royal Film Performance of 1951. In truth *The Mudlark* was no more obsequious than other drama about Victoria: Mosley's reaction had more to do with sensitivities provoked by Britain's postwar imperial decline and Washington's international dominance. Indeed, in 1975 the *Observer* deemed Dunne's 'bland' Queen to be 'the definitive Victoria'.⁴⁰

Later productions were also ‘Americanised’ to varying degrees. *Mrs. Brown* was produced on a low budget for BBC Scotland, but when Harvey Weinstein of Miramax saw it he bought the US distribution rights. *Victoria and Albert*, like most BBC period dramas, was jointly financed with a US partner. Finally, while Sarah Ferguson (who claimed the movie was all her idea) was credited as a co-producer and the future Baronesses of West Stafford (and *Downton Abbey*) wrote the script, *The Young Victoria* was wholly financed by Hollywood.⁴¹ To some extent therefore, and certainly latterly, it was American interest in Victoria that helped give the Queen such a prominent screen presence.

VICTORIA AND POLITICS: THE EARLY FILMS

Victoria the Great and *Sixty Glorious Years* focused on Victoria and Albert, presenting them, according to one critic, as ‘a lonely, often bewildered man and woman in unique partnership – doing their best, going resolutely and often painfully on’.⁴² Both films depicted Victoria as preoccupied with her subjects’ prosperity and security, presenting the Queen, the *Manchester Guardian* believed, as ‘an actively beneficent constitutional force’.⁴³

It is certainly true that in these films Victoria has a strongly implied political agency. Thus, in *Sixty Glorious Years* England is said to be on the verge of revolution when Victoria becomes Queen and her accession inaugurates a period of stability. Precisely what contribution Victoria made to this transformation is never established. Similarly, reviewing her reign in 1877, a caption refers to the Queen’s ‘innate sense of ruling’, which leads to Disraeli declaring to Victoria:

[F]or many years now, with untiring energy, with the widest sympathy and with an indomitable sense of duty you have applied yourself to government with greater ardour and greater industry than any of your predecessors. ... You have watched England grow. ... You have seen the worst horrors of poverty disappear ... [and] under your own kindness has been born a greater kindness between rich and poor.

The implication is clear: Victoria has had a beneficent effect on these outcomes. Closer inspection (something of course denied the cinema audience), however, reveals that the verbs betray her lack of agency – she ‘watched’, she ‘saw’ – and even the origin of the alleged greater ‘kindness’ between the classes is obscure.

Victoria is, moreover, the films’ central figure: politicians have little more than a variety of walk-on parts. One critic even claimed that in *Victoria the Great*

prime ministers ‘succeed one another like patient dogs’ and complained of their ‘ludicrous inadequacy’ as portraits in *Sixty Glorious Years*. As a consequence Gladstone was reduced to ‘the man who left Gordon to his fate’ and Disraeli boiled down to ‘the man who bought the Suez Canal’.⁴⁴ Such brevity none the less meant that Wilcox’s movies outlined in striking terms the normative role expected of Victoria’s prime ministers: to facilitate their monarch’s wishes, wishes dictated purely by her love for her people.

Most notably, *Victoria the Great* suggests that in repealing the Corn Laws, which kept the price of grain artificially high, Conservative Prime Minister Robert Peel was merely doing his monarch’s work. This is because repeal is instigated immediately after Victoria is shown becoming aware of the people’s suffering – through reading *Oliver Twist*. At the precise moment she first appreciates the unfortunate position of her subjects the royal couple are disturbed by a demonstration outside Buckingham Palace, the placards for which establish that the Corn Laws are the main reason for the mob’s misery. The film then cuts to a scene in which Albert praises Peel for demonstrating ‘true loyalty’ to his monarch by putting her people’s interests before those of his own party, many of whose members benefited from the high price of corn.⁴⁵

Not all political leaders were presented in such terms. Gladstone, as *The Times* reviewer noted, was ‘unkindly treated’ in *Sixty Glorious Years*, which had the great Liberal as, in the words of the *Manchester Guardian* critic, a ‘shifty, dilatory politician’, castigated by a righteous Victoria for failing to pay heed to her demand that troops be immediately sent to save the besieged Gordon.⁴⁶ If Gladstone was merely late in acting on his monarch’s wishes, Lord Palmerston is shown actively opposing them in *Victoria the Great*. The royal couple are unhappy with Palmerston’s reckless, warlike attitude towards the United States. Only Albert’s intervention saves the day. In *Sixty Glorious Years* Palmerston is again shown promoting conflict, this time with Russia, conflict the royal pair believe unnecessary. In this instance the Foreign Secretary prevails – but the wisdom of their counsel is confirmed when the Crimean War proves to be a pointless waste of life. This senseless sacrifice provokes the Queen to tears when she visits wounded soldiers, showing even her most sceptical subjects that she truly cares for them.

All these early films focus on Victoria’s relationship with Disraeli as critical to the fate of the country. Reflecting his ‘special place in the Imperial portrait gallery’, Disraeli was a figure the interwar cinema portrayed in numerous positive ways.⁴⁷ *Victoria the Great* unusually shows him opposing the repeal

of the Corn Laws. But the film explains this away when an avuncular Peel notes his 'youth': he was in fact forty-two at the time, but the movie makes him look much younger. In any case, at its climax Disraeli makes Victoria Empress of India. Furthermore in *Sixty Glorious Years* Disraeli and monarch are in complete agreement over Suez. His youthful indiscretion apart, therefore, audiences are meant to think well of the mature Disraeli, but only because he has seen the error of his ways and is articulating the monarch's imperialist agenda.

The Prime Minister even suggests monarch and Prime Minister formed part of a unique political marriage. It has Disraeli watch Lord Melbourne inform the young Victoria that she has become Queen and hear her vow to bring peace and prosperity to all her people, which inspires him to enter politics and 'work for England'. On the death of Disraeli's wife, Victoria dissuades the despairing widower from resigning and encourages him to stand up to Russia and Germany. Indeed she is complicit in Disraeli's secret – and highly unconstitutional – side-stepping of his appeasing Cabinet to ensure Britain emerges out of the 1876 Balkan crisis at peace – but also with honour. Putting a seal on this relationship the film concludes with both on the balcony of Buckingham Palace, waving to crowds singing the national anthem in joy at his diplomatic success, one which – again – saves the Empire.

Victoria's relationship with Disraeli was made to fit the different postwar 'consensus', one built around greater concern for the people's social and economic welfare.⁴⁸ Thus, 1950 saw in *The Mudlark* the emergence of a Disraeli who talked only of reforms to improve the condition of Victoria's 'poorest and weakest' subjects. Disraeli, however, needs the Queen to show her support for his programme by resuming her public duties. While Victoria is enthusiastic for reform she is still mourning Albert and afraid of how her people will receive her. When a poor orphan breaks into Windsor Castle he convinces her that the people still love her – in his case like a mother. The film ends with the Queen casting off her widow's weeds and enabling Disraeli's ambitious – if exceptionally hazy – legislation to sail through the Commons.

VICTORIA AND POLITICS: THE LATER FILMS

Even while Wilcox's films praise Victoria's 'innate sense of ruling' they show politics intruding, painfully, into her private life. Both depict Albert's mortification

at the hands of disrespectful MPs when he attends a Commons debate on the repeal of the Corn Laws so he may become informed about the issue and help his wife be a better Queen. The MPs none the less demand he leaves the gallery, humiliating Albert and upsetting Victoria in the process. Indeed, it is even suggested that Palmerston's desire for war with the United States ultimately kills Albert, forcing him to expend his failing energies drafting a telegram to Lincoln that will help avoid war. Otherwise politics – as articulated through Victoria's relationship with Disraeli – is presented in predominantly positive terms in all the early Victoria films. This perspective is sustained on the small screen in the four-part biographical serial *Disraeli* (ITV, 1975) and the 'Dizzy' episode in the historical drama series *Number 10* (ITV, 1982), both of which reproduce the familiar picture of two figures enjoying a genuine rapport and sharing the same desire for imperial expansion and domestic reform.

In 1997 *Mrs. Brown* – produced in the era of 'Tory sleaze' and of political 'spin' – breaks that mould.⁴⁹ It transforms Victoria's relationship with the Conservative Prime Minister; and critics rightly saw Anthony Sher's Disraeli – in contrast to the idealistic John Gielgud in *The Prime Minister* or the benevolent Alec Guinness in *The Mudlark* – as 'beady-eyed, silken-tongued', 'cunning and supercilious'.⁵⁰ With no mention of Suez, or legislation to improve the condition of the people, the film instead shows Disraeli cynically appreciating the political value of associating himself with monarchical tradition. But, given the secluded Victoria's unpopularity, he is unprincipled enough to wonder 'do we need her?', determining to 'see which way the wind blows'. It is only when his government comes under pressure from the Liberals that Disraeli finally decides that 'it's time to wheel her out' and travels to Balmoral to persuade Victoria to end her isolation. His motives are, however, purely selfish and he seeks to emotionally manipulate Victoria for his own ends.

Mrs. Brown therefore marks a significant shift in representations of Victoria's relationship with her prime ministers. The 2001 made-for-TV film *Victoria and Albert* and the 2009 feature *The Young Victoria* continue this process by focusing on the early part of the Queen's life, evoking parallels with the fate of Princess Diana, who died the week *Mrs. Brown* was released. Victoria is consequently shown, as Graham King, the executive responsible for *The Young Victoria*, put it, as a 'feisty, passionate young woman ... an amazing, dynamic, romantic personality'.⁵¹ She is, moreover, like Diana was supposed to be, surrounded by older men – kings, prime ministers, advisers – who want to control her life, and that of the callow Albert.

6 A poster for *The Young Victoria* (Jean-Marc Vallée, 2009).

If the older Victoria's relationship with Disraeli is recast in *Mrs. Brown* these two dramas transform the young Victoria's relationship with Lord Melbourne. An avuncular figure in earlier films, as well as the series *Edward the Seventh* (ITV, 1975), which all show him guiding the inexperienced Queen in the ways of ruling before making way for Albert, *Victoria and Albert* suggests he exploited Victoria's dependence on his experience so he could remain Prime Minister. *Young Victoria* even presents Melbourne as discouraging the Queen's desire to improve her people's lot. Thus, while she refers to 'the suffering that needs my help', he says 'we must reform when we can', a formula designed to leave things as they are. When Victoria and Albert marry it is a partnership intent on reform. As Albert asks, 'There are people who are lost, and whose business is it to see to their welfare?' Not the politicians, it seems.

These later dramas are, however, no more specific than were the early ones in regard to Victoria's agency. Thus, at the end of *The Young Victoria* a caption has it that: 'Among their accomplishments, Victoria and Albert championed reforms in education, welfare and industry.' To what purpose and to which effects, the audience is never told.

CONCLUSION

Filmmakers have crafted their respective 'Queen Victorias' to match what they presumed audiences wanted to see so that they could, to be crude, make money. That meant they gave them what they presented as insights into Victoria's private life: the 1938 *Sixty Glorious Years* announced that it was 'an intimate diary of Queen Victoria and her beloved Consort'. This not only satisfied many people's desire to gain a glimpse into the lifestyle of one of British history's rich and famous. It also gave them what the Hollywood producer Darryl F. Zanuck called a 'rooting interest'.⁵² It was hard for most to identify with 'Her Majesty Victoria, by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland Queen, Defender of the Faith, Empress of India', to give Victoria her full title. But many undoubtedly saw echoes of their own lives in her devotion to Albert and love for their children. As its star, Emily Blunt, said of *The Young Victoria*, it was 'a very intimate portrait of a girl, rather than a Queen', continuing:

I don't know what it's like to be the Queen of England. Hardly anyone does. But, at the end of the day, there's a human side to everyone. She was a young girl who was in love for the first time, in a job where she felt completely intimidated and over her head, and a lot of people can relate to that. A lot of people remember what it's like to be in love for the first time.⁵³

This of course eviscerated the many differences – of wealth, status and class – that separated the real monarch from her actual people, and associated the monarchy with a marital fidelity to which not every modern British monarch has adhered.⁵⁴ Ideological and historical distortions of the reality of monarchy they undoubtedly were but, dramatically and commercially, the films tended to work.

In regard to the politics of the monarchy these films demonstrate a remarkable continuity. Since 1937 Victoria has been shown exhibiting a maternal pre-occupation with her people's welfare. How she manifested this concern has always been left vague: it is never clear what she does with those red boxes she is shown opening and closing. Even so her beneficent impact on her people's lives is, according to these movies, not to be doubted. This continuity contrasts with how they present Victoria's ministers. In the early dramas a politician's worth was measured by the extent to which they followed the Queen's wish to safeguard her people's interests. Disraeli's uniquely positive depictions were due to his purported identification with that aim. In more recent films, however, the political class has undergone a transformation, one that better accords with the

prejudices of the times in which they were produced. They are consequently shown to be interested only in maintaining their own hold on power.

Victoria remains the same caring, selfless figure, one all the more admirable as the statesmen around her are diminished. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the people's only hope of salvation is shown to ultimately lie in her hands. For if their politicians cannot be trusted the people lack the agency necessary to act on their own behalf. Ordinary Britons – apart from servants attending to Victoria in her various palaces – are either absent or seen in long shot, reduced to faceless, cheering crowds. If this is a democracy, it is one in which the people are infantilised.

In these films, Victoria's ministers are all men, at least one detail that reflects historical reality. If that is a necessary constant, there is an intriguing shift in how they render their gender politics. In Wilcox's dramas, Albert's male rationality tames Victoria's female emotionalism and he eventually enjoys predominance in the relationship. Indeed, the *Daily Express* critic claimed of *Victoria the Great*, that 'Albert really is the film'.⁵⁵ After her Consort's death it is very much as Albert's Victoria that the Queen continues her reign. This remained the narrative as late as the 1975 television series *Edward the Seventh* (ATV). In the later films, and reflecting changed assumptions about relations between the sexes, the Queen is, however, cannier and more of an equal in what is presented as – in the case of *The Young Victoria* – 'a very modern marriage'.⁵⁶ This progressive couple is nonetheless now ranged against untrustworthy, self-interested men who want to tell them what to do, just as modern-day politicians are popularly imagined.

Screenwriters like to present Victoria and her successors as the heart of a heartless political world, the only figures within the constitution wanting to put the people's interests first – unlike the politicians, those whom the people elected to do that job. In the case of films about Victoria discussed here, all of which were written by men, they addressed what were presumed to be the preferences of a largely female audience. Period dramas have historically been disproportionately popular with women: surveys of those watching various 1970s BBC series set in the past and a recent study of audiences for historically themed movies suggest as much.⁵⁷ It was certainly assumed that the films discussed here had a special feminine appeal: as one popular critic claimed, *Victoria the Great* was so fine, 'no woman – or her escort – dare admit she has not seen it'.⁵⁸ That the three most represented British screen monarchs are women – and the next two are men whose lives are popularly associated with affairs of the

heart as much as of state – suggests a certain bias (see Table 1). In promoting the position of female royal protagonists, presented as seeking private happiness but often thwarted in their endeavours by powerful male political figures, these film histories evoke, and so reinforce, a female distance from contemporary electoral politics, while at the same time offering very rare representations of a powerful British woman. For even after all adult women gained the vote in 1928, the British parliament remained a male domain: it wasn't until 1997 that women formed more than 10 per cent of the House of Commons.⁵⁹ The continued predominance of men at Westminster is one reason given for women's continued low participation in, ignorance about and antagonism to formal politics.⁶⁰

It is, to say the least of it, ironic that the monarchy, that part of the constitution immune to popular sovereignty, is at the start of the twenty-first century represented in the terms outlined in this chapter. To those with an interest in the health of Britain's democracy such tales, which entertainingly encourage audiences to disparage representative democracy and admire the hereditary principle, might be thought worrying, for they have profoundly anti-democratic implications. In these fantastic narratives Victoria is the only figure who truly wishes to put British people's interests first. Perhaps it is time for students of British politics investigating the current 'crisis of politics' to start asking why that is.

NOTES

- 1 See, for example, Hazel Blears, 'Reinvigorating communities: the role of active citizenship in building a better neighbourhood', Lecture, 25 November 2008, Smith Institute, London, p. 6.
- 2 See Jeff Smith, *The Presidents We Imagine* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009).
- 3 See, for example, Trevor Parry-Giles and Shawn J. Parry-Giles, *The Prime-Time Presidency. The West Wing and U.S. Nationalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006).
- 4 On the concept of 'presidentialisation', see Richard Heffernan and Paul Webb, 'The British Prime Minister', in Thomas Poguntke and Paul Webb (eds), *The Presidentialization of Politics: A Comparative Study of Modern Democracies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- 5 Vernon Bogdanor, 'The *Guardian* has got it wrong', *Guardian* (6 December 2000), www.theguardian.com/uk/dec/06/monarchy.comment8.
- 6 Ian Budge, Ivor Crew, David McKay and Ken Newton, *The New British Politics* (Harlow: Longman, 2001), pp. 188–90, and Dennis Kavanagh, David Richards, Martin Smith and Andrew Geddes, *British Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

- 7 Bonnie Gardiner, 'The monarchy vs government', *YouGov UK* (15 June 2012) <http://yougov.co.uk/news/2012/06/15/monarchy-vs-government/>.
- 8 See, for example, Antony Taylor, 'Down with the Crown'. *British Anti-Monarchism and Debates about Royalty since 1790* (London: Reaktion, 1999), p. 212.
- 9 *Official Website of the British Monarchy*, www.royal.gov.uk/monarchuk/howthemonarchyworks/howthemonarchyworks.aspx.
- 10 On the politics of ceremonials in general see Eric Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: inventing traditions', in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); and Steven Lukes, 'Political ritual and social integration', in *Essays in Social Theory* (London: Macmillan, 1977).
- 11 Tom Nairn, *The Enchanted Glass. Britain and its Monarchy* (London: Radius/Hutchinson, 1988), pp. 9–10.
- 12 Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power. The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004), pp. 5–11.
- 13 David Cannadine, 'The context, performance and meaning of ritual: the British monarchy and the "invention of tradition", c. 1820–1977', in Hobsbawm and Ranger (eds), *Tradition*.
- 14 Margaret R. Somers, 'The privatization of citizenship', in Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt (eds), *Beyond the Cultural Turn* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 125.
- 15 Murray Edelman, *From Art to Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 2–7.
- 16 R. L. Holbert, O. Pillion, D. A. Tschida, G. G. Armfield, K. Kinder, K. Cherry and A. Daulton, 'The West Wing as endorsement of the American presidency: expanding the domain of priming in political communication', *Journal of Communication* 53:3 (2003). For a survey of this evidence as a whole, see Steven Fielding, 'New Labour, "sleaze" and television drama', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 16:2 (2014).
- 17 Gene Healy, *The Cult of the Presidency* (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, 2008), pp. 76–7, 276–8.
- 18 Smith, *Presidents We Imagine*, p. 9.
- 19 See Marcia Landy, *British Genres. Cinema and Society, 1930–1960* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 53–86.
- 20 Michel Foucault, 'Film and popular memory', *Radical Philosophy* 11 (Summer 1975), p. 28.
- 21 Andrew Butler, Franklin M. Zaromb, Keith B. Lyle and Henry L. Roediger III, 'Using popular films to enhance class room learning', *Psychological Science* 20:9 (2009).
- 22 Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 6, 20.
- 23 Foucault, 'Film and popular memory', p. 28; Pierre Sorlin, *The Film in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 80.
- 24 George Arliss, *My Ten Years in the Studios* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1940), pp. 155, 204, 223, 275.

- 25 James Chapman, *Past and Present. National Identity and the British Historical Film* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2005), pp. 7–8.
- 26 Taylor, 'Down with the Crown', p. 13.
- 27 Steven Fielding, *A State of Play. British Politics on the Screen, Stage and Page, from Anthony Trollope to 'The Thick of It'* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).
- 28 *Daily Telegraph Magazine* (31 January 2009).
- 29 For the concept of the 'mobilisation of bias', see Steven Lukes, *Power. A Radical View* (London: Palgrave, 2005), pp. 1–13.
- 30 'Queen Victoria's Torchwood', *The Doctor Who Site*, www.thedoctorwhosite.co.uk/torchwood/themes/Queen-victoria-torchwood/.
- 31 Herbert Wilcox, *Twenty-Five Thousand Sunsets* (London: The Bodley Head, 1967), p. 111.
- 32 Jeffery Richards and Dorothy Sheridan (eds), *Mass-Observation at the Movies* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), p. 39.
- 33 John Sedgwick, 'Cinema-going preferences in Britain in the 1930s', in Jeffery Richards (ed.), *The Unknown 1930s. An Alternative History of the British Cinema, 1929–1939* (London: I.B.Tauris, 1998), pp. 30 and 34; J. Poole, 'British cinema attendance in wartime: audience preference at the Majestic, Macclesfield, 1939–1946', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 7:1 (1987), pp. 18 and 21–2.
- 34 *Daily Mirror* (17 September 1937).
- 35 Elisa Tamarkin, *Anglophilia: Deference, Devotion, and Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp. 87–177; Andrew Campbell, *Unlikely Allies. Britain, America and the Victorian Origins of the Special Relationship* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2007), p. 240.
- 36 *The Times* (17 October 1937).
- 37 Jeffery Richards, *Thorold Dickinson. The Man and His Films* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), p. 88. More generally, see H. Mark Glancy, *When Hollywood Loved Britain: The Hollywood British Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999).
- 38 *The Times* (31 October 1950).
- 39 *Daily Express* (31 October 1950).
- 40 *Observer* (13 April 1975).
- 41 *Daily Telegraph Magazine* (31 January 2009).
- 42 *Observer* (19 September 1937).
- 43 *Manchester Guardian* (20 October 1938).
- 44 *New Statesman* (25 August 1937 and 2 October 1938).
- 45 This might also have been a subtle endorsement of Ramsay MacDonald, who, in the face of economic difficulties, broke with the Labour Party to form a National Government in 1931, a coalition some contemporaries believed George V had engineered: see Herbert Morrison, *Government and Parliament. A Survey from the Inside* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 77–80.
- 46 *The Times* (17 September 1937); *Manchester Guardian* (20 October 1938).
- 47 Jeffery Richards, *Visions of Yesterday* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 142. For more on Disraeli, see Steven Fielding, 'British politics and cinema's historical dramas, 1929–38', *Historical Journal* 56:2 (2013).

- 48 For the most influential view of the postwar ‘consensus’, see Paul Addison, *The Road to 1945* (London: Quartet, 1977).
- 49 For more on that context, see Fielding, ‘New Labour’.
- 50 *Guardian* (5 September 1997); *Daily Telegraph* (5 September 1997).
- 51 *The Times* (22 March 2007).
- 52 George F. Custen, *Bio/Pics. How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), p. 18.
- 53 Sara Wayland, ‘Emily Blunt interview, *The Young Victoria*’, *Collider* (16 December 2009), <http://collider.com/emily-blunt-interview-the-young-victoria/>.
- 54 Taylor, ‘*Down with the Crown*’, p. 225.
- 55 *Daily Express* (17 September 1937).
- 56 *Daily Mail Weekend Magazine* (28 February 2009).
- 57 BBC Written Archives, Reading, Audience Research Reports for *Nicholas Nickelby*, VR/77/246, *The Onedin Line*, VR/77/477 and *Marie Curie*, VR/77/505; Claire Monks, *Heritage Film Audiences* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), ch. 3.
- 58 *Daily Mirror* (17 September 1937).
- 59 Library of the House of Commons, London, SN/SG/1250, ‘Women in Parliament and Government’, January 2012.
- 60 Cathy Newman, ‘“British women know less about politics than men” – but why?’, *Telegraph* (3 July 2013), www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-politics/10154822/British-women-know-less-about-politics-than-men-but-why.html.

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