From political power to the power of the image: contemporary 'British' cinema and the nation's monarchs

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INTRODUCTION: THE HERITAGE OF MONARCHY AND THE ROYALS ON FILM

From Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V* Shakespeare adaptation in 1989 to the story of the final years of the former Princess of Wales, in *Diana* in 2013, at least twenty-six English-language feature films dealt in some way with the British monarchy.¹ All of these films (the dates and directors of which will be indicated below) retell more or less familiar stories about past and present kings and queens, princes and princesses. This is just one indication that the institution of monarchy remains one of the most enduring aspects of the British national heritage: these stories and characters, their iconic settings and their splendid *mise-en-scène* still play a vital role in the historical and contemporary experience and projection of British national identity and ideas of nationhood.

These stories and characters are also of course endlessly recycled in the present period in other media as well as through the heritage industry. The monarchy, its history and its present manifestation, is clearly highly marketable, whether in terms of tourism, the trade in royal memorabilia or artefacts, or images of the monarchy – in paintings, prints, films, books, magazines, television programmes, on the Internet and so on. The public image of the monarchy is not consistent across the period being explored here, however, and it is worth noting that there was a waning of support for the contemporary royal family in the 1990s, not least because of how it was perceived to have treated Diana. Support waxed again in the 2000s, bolstered by the ceremonial surrounding the death of the Queen Mother and the Golden Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II in 2002, the marriage of Prince William and Kate Middleton in 2011 and the Queen's Diamond Jubilee in 2012.

At least sixteen different monarchs appeared in 'British' films of the 1990s and 2000s, charting the history of the nation from the decline of the Roman era to the present-day, from the legendary King Arthur in the film of the same name to the present Queen Elizabeth II in *The Queen*. Kings and queens from various periods appear in films as diverse as *Braveheart* and *Hyde Park on Hudson*, *Robin Hood: Men in Tights* and *Mrs. Brown, Elizabeth* and *W./E.*, *The Madness of King George* and *The Young Victoria*, *To Kill a King* and *The King's Speech*. While all of these films engage with history, they are also creative products designed to work as profitable entertainment commodities. They are to that extent part of the imaginative construct that is heritage. As such, historical accuracy is not the interest here, but rather the way that films from the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries present the British monarchy to contemporary global audiences, the way they imagine the monarchy, and in so doing forge a particular sense of British national identity.

Heritage is not politically neutral – heritage artefacts, events and representations always carry with them particular ideas about how we might view the past, and how the past might be used in the present. One of the most vital features of Britain's royal heritage is the sense of longevity and tradition; to mobilise it is in part to establish a sense of continuity between past and present, to insert the national present into a national tradition. Paradoxically, if the royal films at one level align their celluloid monarchs with the ideologies of tradition and continuity, at another they play a vital role in modernising the contemporary image of the British monarchy. Thus they tell relatively familiar stories in new ways, variously drawing on the conventions of romantic drama, action adventure and family drama, and on the conventions of both historical drama and contemporary drama.²

They weave together images from historical paintings and contemporary star images, stories from history books and iconography borrowed from other films. They present a seductive and alluring *mise-en-scène* of enormous wealth, luxury and privilege that is very much the product of inheritance and historical legacy. But they also tell stories that are shot through with present-day concerns, anxieties and reference points. Thus in the films set in the late eighteenth century and later, the spectacle of heritage is countered by scenes from modern, domestic, middle-class family life. The blurring of past and present almost by definition colours the way in which these royal films work – as historical dramas, they take us back to an earlier period, and sometimes to a pre-industrial space, and rely heavily on a sense of tradition and

convention. But as films, they are part of the modern industrialised culture of consumption.

How then do these various films function in contemporary culture? To tackle this question it is necessary to situate these films firstly as products of the entertainment business, created for particular markets, drawing on varying generic models, and consumed by a range of different audiences. In this context, the fact that the films feature monarchs is almost incidental. At the same time, these films do represent those monarchs as characters in particular types of drama, and a second set of questions then concerns the nature of the portrayal of the British monarchy for contemporary audiences. In particular, depictions of monarchs from different historical periods demonstrate changes in the nature of royal power and authority. These changes can be seen in the differing degrees of narrative agency afforded to different monarchs, and in the representation of the monarch as national figurehead, the spectacle of pomp and ceremony, the depiction of the royal body and the image of the royal family.

A third set of questions concern the extent to which these films not only represent the historical monarchy but also help maintain the institution of the monarchy by making it seem relevant and attractive to contemporary audiences. Given that these films play to international audiences, it is also important to ask about the role that the filmic heritage of monarchy plays in the construction of British national identity in a globalised world. These three approaches are closely interrelated: if we are to understand the part these films might play in maintaining and modernising the monarchy, we need to look at how these films work as films, the cinematic function they perform and the types of entertainment and engagement they offer.³

'BRITISH' FILMS ABOUT THE ROYALS, 1989–2013

This analysis will concentrate on the circumstances under which and the ways in which several of the English-language, UK/US fiction films of the 1990s and 2000s have engaged with the royals. Most of these films were transnational productions, often dependent on American involvement, in terms of the circumstances of their financing, their production and distribution and the creative team behind them. Some of them are classified as UK productions, some as US productions and some as UK/US productions. The national is therefore *not* a key concept for all involved parties – hence the inverted commas around the word 'British' in my title.

29 The mythologised pre-modern monarch: Henry V (Kenneth Branagh) in the Shakespeare adaptation directed by Branagh in 1989.

Films released between 1989 and 2013 about the British monarchy can be assigned to three historical periods: the pre-modern monarchy; the early modern monarchy of the Tudors and the Stuarts; and the late modern monarchy from the Hanoverians to the Windsors.

Films in the first category depict the real and legendary monarchs of medieval times and earlier, all of them heavily mythologised, most dealing with warrior kings and thus working with the conventions of the action-adventure film as it cross-breeds with the epic, the parody and the Shakespeare adaptation. While these films and monarchs will not figure large in what follows, it is worth noting the range of films that fall into this category, organised chronologically in terms of the historical period depicted in the films:

- *King Arthur* (Antoine Fuqua, 2004), dealing with the legendary King Arthur
- *Braveheart* (Mel Gibson, 1995), Edward I
- *Edward II* (Derek Jarman, 1991), Edward II
- *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (Kevin Reynolds, 1991), Richard I
- *Robin Hood: Men in Tights* (Mel Brooks, 1993), Richard I
- *Robin Hood* (Ridley Scott, 2010), Richard I, John
- *Henry V* (Kenneth Branagh, 1989), Henry V
- *Richard III* (Richard Loncraine, 1995), Richard III.

The films that fall into the second category depict the early modern monarchs, the more or less absolutist kings and queens of the Tudor and Stuart periods, from Henry VIII to Charles II, with Elizabeth I very much at the centre of attention. Instead of warriors, these kings and queens become elaborately ornamentalised rulers, who do pretty much as they please, in public and in private – although such behaviour costs Charles I his head in *To Kill a King*. The films and monarchs that fall into this category include:

- *The Other Boleyn Girl* (Justin Chadwick, 2008), dealing with Henry VIII
- *Elizabeth* (Shekhar Kapur, 1998), Elizabeth I
- *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (Shekhar Kapur, 2007), Elizabeth I
- *Shakespeare in Love* (John Madden, 1998), Elizabeth I
- *Anonymous* (Roland Emmerich, 2011), Elizabeth I
- *Orlando* (Sally Potter, 1992), Elizabeth I
- *To Kill a King* (Mike Barker, 2003), Charles I
- *Restoration* (Michael Hoffman, 1995), Charles II
- *Stage Beauty* (Richard Eyre, 2004), Charles II
- *The Libertine* (Laurence Dunmore, 2005), Charles II.

The third and final category includes those films that depict the constitutional monarchy of the late modern period, from ‘mad’ King George to the present Queen Elizabeth. These films are much more focused on the private sphere: romance, family and the life of the royal household. The public sphere of politics and events outside the royal household tends to function as a backdrop, only intruding on the drama in so far as it is the consequence of what happens in the private sphere. Films and monarchs that fall into this category, again ordered by the date of their setting, include:

- *The Madness of King George* (Nicholas Hytner, 1994), dealing with George III
- *The Young Victoria* (Jean-Marc Vallée, 2009), Victoria
- *Mrs. Brown* (John Madden, 1997), Victoria
- *W./E.* (Madonna, 2011), Edward VIII
- *The King’s Speech* (Tom Hooper, 2010), George V, Edward VIII and George VI
- *Hyde Park on Hudson* (Roger Michell, 2012), George VI
- *The Queen* (Stephen Frears, 2006), Elizabeth II
- *Diana* (Oliver Hirschbiegel, 2013), dealing with Diana, Princess of Wales, and with the fall-out from her close relationship to the monarchy.

30 The ornamentalised early modern monarch: Henry VIII (Eric Bana) with Anne Boleyn (Natalie Portman) in *The Other Boleyn Girl* (Justin Chadwick, 2008)

If the first category of films is closely related to one of the archetypal boy's genres, the action-adventure film, then this final category is much more closely related to what used to be called the woman's film; it is also much more closely related to the middlebrow quality film, the art-house film or, more likely, the crossover film that can straddle both the specialised art-house market and the multiplex mainstream. The films in the second category hover between the more masculinist and bigger-budget action-adventure film and the lower-budget, more female-orientated, romance-laden costume drama in its middlebrow quality-film guise.

MARKETING MONARCHY: ROYAL FILMS AND THE FILM BUSINESS⁴

None of these films would have been made if they hadn't at some level been understood as entertainment commodities, addressed to particular audiences. As already noted, their varying genre attributes mean they occupy very different places in the market, in terms of their target demographic. This is partly a

31 The domesticated late modern monarch: King George III (Nigel Hawthorne) and Queen Charlotte (Helen Mirren) in *The Madness of King George* (Nicholas Hytner, 1994).

question of genre and style, it is partly about production budgets and aspirations, it is partly about marketing and promotion and it is partly about modes of distribution and dissemination.

All eight of the films listed above as depicting the late modern British monarchy were modestly budgeted by Hollywood standards, but several proved very successful with audiences at the box-office and subsequently in all the ancillary markets of video, DVD, television, video-on-demand services and so on. Most of the films were pitched at the quality end of the market, and designed to make a mark with critics but also with middle-class and middle-aged audiences attached to particular notions of taste and particular types of cultural capital. However, they were also designed to appeal beyond that tightly defined segment. As such, they were conceived as crossover products that might move between small specialist or art-house cinemas and mainstream multiplexes – and most of them more or less made their mark in this way.

Indeed, *The Madness of King George* and *Mrs. Brown* became important touchstones for the industry and how it thinks about what it calls the boutique end of the business, or the specialised market, and how films made with that market in mind could become significant money-spinners and reputation enhancers. Profit and prestige were thus understood as working hand in hand. It's worth noting in this context that five of the late modern monarchy films listed above were Oscar winners, garnering awards for art direction, for costume design, for

acting and, in the case of *The King's Speech*, for best film. In other words, the focus was very much on the image, on visual presentation.

This particular discourse of quality shapes the way that such films function in the market-place, but crucially it also shapes the way the late modern monarchy is represented and understood – in terms of 'good' taste and a particular class-bound cultural sensibility. *The Young Victoria* is slightly different, in that it is one of those costume dramas that was deliberately designed to attract a younger audience – although it wasn't actually very successful at the box-office for a film of its budget size. *W./E.* and *Diana*, both dealing with characters who were seen as deviant in relation to the monarchy, and both rather different from the other royal films in this list, fared even worse.

Several of the films about earlier monarchs, both medieval and early modern, are also pitched at the quality end of the market. Some of them were distinctly auteur-led, art-house films, like Derek Jarman's *Edward II* and Sally Potter's *Orlando*. Some were crossover films that hovered between the art-house and the mainstream, such as the two *Elizabeth* films, which, like *The Young Victoria*, were designed to reach wider audiences, male as well as female, and the young as well as the middle-aged. *Elizabeth* in particular was very successful in reaching out to those wider audiences. *Braveheart*, directed by and starring Mel Gibson, the various versions of Robin Hood and the Jerry Bruckheimer production of *King Arthur*, all action-adventure films, were intended for quite different audiences, and in most cases employed much larger budgets designed to achieve success in the multiplex mainstream market.

As a storehouse of relatively familiar stories and characters that can be exploited by the global creative industries, the British monarchy is a world-wide brand. The films which depict it are designed to appeal to both domestic and international audiences, and especially to engage with the US fascination with the British royal family and the 'old country' more generally. Note in this context the ambivalence of *The Madness of King George* in relation to America. On the one hand, at the level of the narrative, it details in passing America's historical break with the British monarchy in the late eighteenth century. As a production with US investment, however, it plays on a more recent American re-engagement with the spectacle of tradition, the allure of the British monarchy and a culturally sanctified Anglophilia, thereby renewing and reaffirming the tie with Britain at a different level.

Hyde Park on Hudson (2012), which involves King George VI and his wife Queen Elizabeth's visit to Franklin D. Roosevelt's estate in Hyde Park, New York, in

1939, again emphasises the distance between the USA and the British monarchy at this point in history. There is almost no ceremonial spectacle; indeed, the formality of the monarchy is more the subject of ridicule. But the King is portrayed as a sympathetic, flawed character who is drawn out of his shell by Roosevelt's down-to-earth Americanness. The effect is to diminish the mystique of the royals, which is in many ways typical of the way the British monarchy has been modernised through the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It is perhaps not insignificant, however, that the film did not fare particularly well at the American box-office, especially by comparison with *The Madness of King George*, or indeed with *The King's Speech*, which portrayed King George VI as a much more engaging, emotionally rounded but still deeply flawed character.

THE QUESTION OF GENRE

In terms of how these various royal films function as products of the entertainment industry, designed for particular markets, the question of genre and style is clearly significant. Yet the monarchy film is not in itself a generic category that the industry uses, and it's not particularly important in promotional discourses and practices – even if the royal connection may be important to some audiences. More significant is the way that these films draw on more established genres such as the action-adventure film and the quality costume drama in order to address different market segments, and in the case of certain films, notably *Elizabeth*, the way they are able to mix those genres and bring those segments together around the same viewing experience.

Many of the royal films – and especially those about early and late modern monarchs – are period dramas in which lavish costumes play a vital role. As such, this genre underlines the link between the role of dress and the formation of the public image of monarchy. The spectacle of costume is one means of establishing the pomp and splendour of the monarchy on film. In the case of the Tudors, the extravagance of costume enables the royals not simply to inhabit but to dominate absolutely the theatre of power. Note the way in which Henry VIII's costume in *The Other Boleyn Girl* dramatically enhances his stature, for instance, and the way Elizabeth I uses costume in the final scene of *Elizabeth* to become an almost divine national figurehead. For the more modern monarchs, on the other hand, costume is one of the ways of maintaining the semblance of power, but it is now the soft power of the public image rather than genuinely political or military power.⁵ This process of costuming the monarch

to achieve the semblance of power is particularly evident in *The Madness of King George*, especially in its opening and closing scenes.

Costume is in this sense just one aspect of the fetishisation of material culture in the quality heritage film, with its display of loosely period-appropriate objects, decor, architecture and man-made landscapes. This particular way of developing the *mise-en-scène* of so many of the royal films is designed to establish both an experience of realism and historicity, and a sense of spectacle. But of course there are many other period films that play with costumes and the spectacular *mise-en-scène* of pastness but don't feature monarchs.

Several of the costume dramas that do feature monarchs also draw on the generic conventions of the biopic, the romantic drama or the family saga – and again the fact that they are about monarchs is almost incidental. Depicting a part or the whole of the life of a monarch is just one way of telling the sort of engaging, character-centred stories that the quality film audience seek out. Films such as *Mrs. Brown* or *The Young Victoria* may present scenes from the life of Queen Victoria, but for some audiences they will simply be well-made, character-driven dramas. Other royal films function as dramas about characters facing extraordinary crises in their personal lives: Elizabeth in the film of the same name, for instance, or George III in *The Madness of King George*, or Bertie, George VI, in *The King's Speech*.

Thus, if for some viewers all these films are indeed films about the monarchy, for other viewers and for industry stakeholders, the royals are simply characters in a drama, elements of the *mise-en-scène*. Perhaps this is the most important role these films play in modernising the monarchy, in updating the royal heritage. They situate the royals as narrative protagonists in stories about romance, they dress them up in costumes that appeal to a particular idea of spectacle, they insert them into a particular *mise-en-scène* of the national past and they sell those stories to global audiences. By situating the royals within relatively conventional genres of popular and middlebrow culture, the various types of films that feature the monarchy treat them both as banal, taken for granted, an undeniable part of contemporary culture and as a special brand of celebrity, a particular type of cultural icon, a cipher for national identity and even nationhood in a global world. By exploiting a fascination with the British royal families, and almost regardless of whether they represent the royals in a sympathetic manner, such films play a role in maintaining the monarchy as a contemporary cultural presence and help shape the way contemporary audiences perceive the monarchy.

If from one perspective, the films under discussion are simply genre pieces in which British royal personages happen to appear, the presence of those royals clearly does have an impact on how the monarchy is viewed by late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century audiences. The following sections of this chapter therefore examine in more detail the different ways in which these films imagine the royal heritage and depict the monarch as national figurehead. In particular, they examine how power and authority are exercised through the royal body, through spectacular representation and through the insertion of the monarch within an image of the royal family.

All of the royal films in their different ways negotiate the idea of the monarch as national figurehead. That status may be well established, as in the supreme self-confidence and larger-than-life stature of Henry VIII in *The Other Boleyn Girl*, or in Charles II's equally assured embodiment of the powerful monarch in *Restoration*. In other films, that status of national figurehead may still be in the process of being established, as in *Elizabeth*, where the ascent to absolute power of the eponymous queen is imaginatively reconstructed; or in *The King's Speech*, where George VI must overcome his stammer to win the affection of his people. Or the status of the monarch as national figurehead may be thrown into crisis and need to be re-established, as it is in *To Kill a King*, in which Charles I is beheaded during the English Civil War; or in *The Queen*, where Elizabeth II loses the support of her people over the way she responds to the death of Diana, the People's Princess.

The authority of the national figurehead is represented in various ways and takes various forms. Firstly, it can be represented in terms of naked power – the power that the monarch wields, the power to make things happen, to issue demands that are acted upon, to use physical force. A second means by which national and even global authority and respect is achieved in these films is through the strategic creation of an awe-inspiring image by surrounding the monarch with pomp and ceremony, adorning the royal body and inserting it into a *mise-en-scène* of majesty. A third means by which the authority of the national figurehead is represented on film is through the idea of the royal family as a metaphor for the national family and a model for the nation. The idea of the British royal family as a key national icon is relatively new, suggesting that if representations of royalty at one level function to establish a sense of tradition and continuity, they are also at the same time about change.

One of the central issues in the filmic representation of monarchy, then, is the representation of power, something that all of these films tackle in one way or another. The films about medieval and early modern monarchs show them as able to wield more or less absolute power and establish themselves as national figureheads by force. These medieval warrior kings and queens and the often ruthlessly powerful Tudor and Stuart monarchies gradually give way to the increasingly constitutional monarchies of the late modern period. In the films that depict this period, the celluloid monarchs are really only able to wield power within the much more heavily circumscribed space of the private sphere, within their own family or the royal household. Unable to secure their status as national figurehead by force, they must do so by other means.

At one extreme, then, are those monarchs who rule, those who govern, those who have executive authority unbound by the laws of the land, by a constitution or by convention, those who have the ability to override politicians, officials and advisers and make their own decisions that affect the well-being of the nation. Both Henry VIII in *The Other Boleyn Girl* and Elizabeth in the two eponymously named films at times exercise this version of power in the public sphere of the court, while in *Henry V* it is exercised on the battlefield. At the other extreme, in the words of the constitutional historian Vernon Bogdanor, is the 'sovereign who reigns but does not rule'.⁶ This is precisely the fate of the late modern monarchs on film: they are ceremonial monarchs who merely reign, whose actions *are* limited by constitution and convention, whose political power is severely circumscribed. These are monarchs, then, who accede executive power to the elected politicians, the prime minister and the government. Obligated by constitutional law to stand above politics, their power is thereby restricted to the private sphere and they are only able to make decisions that affect the members of their families and royal households, rather than the nation as a whole.

In *The Madness of King George*, the elected politicians are constantly seeking to curtail George III's attempts to intervene in political affairs. In *The Young Victoria*, they negotiate with the young queen about how she is able to behave in relation to political affairs. By the time of *The King's Speech*, the focus is almost resolutely on George VI's private life, and his efforts to control his stammer; his interventions in the public sphere are primarily intended to voice the will of the Prime Minister and his cabinet, without question.

This shift away from monarchs who both wield immense political power and appear as spectacularly majestic figureheads is at the same time a shift to the representation of the late modern monarchy as possessing very little political

power and influence but still playing a crucial symbolic or ideological role as national figurehead. This symbolic power – this power of the image – is vital to the maintenance of the institution of monarchy. As historian David Cannadine has argued, ‘as the real power of the monarchy waned, the way was open for it to become the centre of grand ceremonial once more’.⁷ As he and others demonstrate, much of the monarchical ritual of the period since the late nineteenth century is invented or at least renovated tradition, designed precisely to bolster the monarchy through ceremonial activities, bodily adornment and public appearances, including appearances mediated by cinema, radio and television.⁸ Both the actual forms of ceremonial and their representation in films construct links with the absolute power of earlier monarchs by playing on the heritage of royalty, creating a strong sense of tradition and continuity. This can be seen in particular in the military-style uniforms worn by George III in *The Madness of King George*, Prince Albert in *The Young Victoria* and George VI in *The King’s Speech*, which implicitly link them to the power of the warrior monarchs of earlier times.

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE VERSIONS OF THE ROYAL BODY

All of these royal films construct a relationship between the public and the private spheres. Regardless of the period they are depicting, they represent kings and queens in terms of power, influence and authority. But that power is played out differently in the public and the private spheres according to the period being depicted. In going behind closed doors and situating the monarchs in the private sphere, these films also create romantic entanglements and personal crises for their monarchs, thereby conferring another set of traits that produce them as the emotionally rounded but flawed characters of film drama.

Much of the drama of the late modern films plays out a tension between private life and public duty, a tension between domesticity, romance and family life on the one hand and the obligations of public appearances and ceremonial occasions on the other. That tension is less evident in the early modern films. First, the private is hardly domesticated in these films; rather, it is constructed almost entirely in terms of romantic and/or sexual liaisons, which themselves spill over into the public sphere. And those liaisons are frequently developed in terms of selfish irresponsibility rather than familial responsibility. Secondly, in the public sphere, there is a blurring between responsible public duty and what again might be seen as an irresponsible, absolutist wielding of power. In the

private sphere, in both the early and the late modern films, the royal body is wracked by the full range of human emotions and feelings, it manifests disabilities, it becomes ill, it dies. In the public sphere, in the form of ceremonial occasions, the body is adorned in rich costumes, it is ornamentalised, something to be gazed at, as the spectacular embodiment of majestic difference.

In the early modern films, notably in *Elizabeth*, *The Other Boleyn Girl* and *Restoration*, the private body of the monarch is often eroticised and engaged in sexual activity. This is much less likely to be the case in the late modern films. From the late eighteenth century of *The Madness of King George* onwards, the royals are situated in a safe familial and increasingly domestic space where they have comfortable life partners rather than lovers. The shift is never complete, however. Thus in *The Madness of King George*, the royal couple are presented as charmingly sweet when they are on their own together, but when the King's 'madness' takes over, he makes crude sexual advances towards other women. As his illness abates, however, this deviance is once more contained by his de-eroticised royal self. A few decades later, Queen Victoria is depicted at either end of her reign in romantic mode. In *The Young Victoria*, her youthful body is to some extent eroticised. The older version of the Queen in *Mrs. Brown* enjoys a sentimental, even romantic relationship with the commoner John Brown, but her body is not eroticised in any way. The twentieth-century royals of *The King's Speech*, *Hyde Park on Hudson* and *The Queen* are also carefully de-eroticised, but again there are exceptions in the bodies of deviant royals – Edward VIII/the Duke of Windsor in *The King's Speech* and *W./E.* and Diana, Princess of Wales, in *Diana*. Indeed, in all of these cases, we might argue that the actually or potentially eroticised royal body is presented as a deviant body, whose deviance spills over into the public sphere, causing some sort of constitutional crisis which must then be resolved.

The late modern films in various ways work to contain those deviant bodies and demonstrate the averting of crisis in the public sphere. The 'perfect' conclusion in this respect is the reappearance of the properly contained body in public. In such moments, it is possible to restore the symbolic power of the monarchy. The image of the royal family at the end of *The Madness of King George* is one such example, inserting the King back in his rightful place at the heart of the family and of the nation; another is the appearance of the royal family on the balcony at Buckingham Palace at the end of *The King's Speech*, after George VI has managed to contain his stammer for his first wartime radio speech; another is the long-awaited public walkabout by Elizabeth II to see the flowers left by

the mourners of Diana, Princess of Wales, in *The Queen*. In such moments of royal public presence, a vital bond is created between the body of the monarch, the royal family and the national family. What are negotiated in these stories are the power of popularity, and the symbolic status of the monarch as national figurehead.

There is also an implicit renegotiation of the medieval concept of 'the king's two bodies', the 'body politic' and the 'body natural'.⁹ The body natural is the monarch's earthly body, the human body, the vulnerable body. The body politic transcends the merely earthly body and is a spiritual state which affords the monarch the divine right to rule and symbolises majesty. The body politic also precisely embodies and therefore represents the nation as a whole, the community of the realm. In the films of the 1990s and 2000s, the body natural has become the unruly body of the private sphere, while the body politic has become the ceremonial body of the public sphere. It is still an extraordinary body, a body set apart, a body whose divinity is now the divinity of celebrity, but it is now in constant tension with the body natural, rather than effortlessly transcendent. It is the ceremonial body that appears in public, in court, on the balcony, with the deviancy of sexual activity, illness or speech disorder temporarily under control. It is a body whose rectitude allows the monarch once again to assume the status of national figurehead, to represent the community of the realm.

THE THEATRE OF POWER: THE *MISE-EN-SCÈNE* OF MAJESTY

When the early modern theatre of power is represented in films of the 1990s and 2000s such as *Elizabeth*, *The Other Boleyn Girl* and *Restoration*, the monarchy is often shown as cruel, tyrannical, ruthlessly wielding absolutist power. At the same time, it is represented as majestic, as magnificent in its spectacle. The theatre of power itself is re-created in the staging of courts, costumes and colonnades, of political manoeuvring and crowd control, of royal posture and expansive camerawork. In filmic terms, this is the *mise-en-scène* of majesty. If the despotism of the monarchy is shocking in its untrammelled power, the spectacular presentation of the monarchy and its court is still sufficiently awe-inspiring to win the admiration of the onlookers – in this case, the films' audiences.

We also see the private lives of the monarchs, their personal foibles, their sexual activity, even on occasion their vulnerability – in *The Other Boleyn Girl*, we witness Henry VIII's reaction when his sexual advances are resisted by Anne

Boleyn; in *Elizabeth*, we witness the young queen's anxiety as she prepares for a crucial speech. Seeing the monarchs in private like this humanises them and turns them into flawed characters in a drama that is at times beyond their control, characters who can win not just the awe-struck admiration but the affection of their audiences. It is an attractive and beguiling mythology of tradition, power and humanity.

In the films about the late modern period, there is still a theatre of monarchy, a theatre of ceremonial spectacle, a projection of public splendour, grandeur and majesty in the display of palaces and grand houses, luxurious interiors and formal costumes. The late modern monarchs may be presented as having very little power and influence outside their families and their households, and as the pawns of the politicians, but they are still spectacular creatures who command awe. This late modern *mise-en-scène* of majesty is thus a means of securing the monarch's status as national figurehead, and it is here that the monarchy is most clearly cloaked in the trappings of heritage and inserted into a long tradition that secures a sense of continuity with the past.

The Madness of King George playfully represents the ways in which this spectacle is constructed precisely as a theatrical display of symbolic power in the late modern period. The extraordinary final scenes of *Elizabeth* equally demonstrate the extent to which the *mise-en-scène* of majesty is a theatrical construction in the early modern period as well, but in this case there is a clear link to political authority and agency that is absent from *The Madness of King George*. The late modern theatre of power is then a performance without political substance, although it still has a symbolic charge in its very performativity.

In films set in the mid-Victorian period and later, however, the scenes of ceremonial spectacle are downplayed, replaced by a sense of the middle-class normality of the royal families and their homes. In *The King's Speech*, we enter the private spaces and see the off-duty clothes of George V and his sons, the future Edward VIII and George VI; in *The Queen*, we enter the paradoxically mundane Balmoral of Elizabeth, Philip and Charles; in *Hyde Park on Hudson*, the royal couple are away from home and the world of British ceremonial and become just another posh, repressed British couple in formal wear. If most of these films project a certain degree of royal spectacle, there is also a strong element of banal ordinariness, stretching from the scenes in the royal bedchamber in *The Madness of King George*, via Victoria's visit to the Grants' cottage in *Mrs. Brown*, to the bickering royal couple in their bedrooms in *Hyde Park ...* and *The Queen's* Prince Philip calling Elizabeth 'Cabbage' as they get into bed in Balmoral. This

may still be an exceedingly class-bound idea of ordinariness, but its mundane qualities are still very striking.

How does this banality of the private sphere relate to the question of power? The later modern monarchs are presented on film as still *attempting* to wield the power of unquestioned authority, of privilege, of inheritance, even of divine right, rather than abide by the conventions of good manners, civil relationships and reasonable behaviour. There is then still a despotic aspect to the late modern cinematic monarchs, but their tyranny is now contained primarily within their own families, with their spouses and their offspring, and within their personal households, with servants, advisers and the like. Victoria shouts at her staff and her sons and daughters and their spouses in *Mrs. Brown*; George V and his son Edward tyrannise Edward's brother Bertie, the future George VI, about his stammer in *The King's Speech*; Elizabeth puts Philip firmly in his place in *The Queen*.

This despotic behaviour rarely ventures in to the public sphere. Public political power and influence is thus much less in evidence in these late modern films; indeed, as already noted, several of the films, including *The Madness of King George*, *The Young Victoria*, *Mrs. Brown* and *The Queen*, chart the efforts of their screen monarchs to come to terms with the waning of political power and influence, while still hanging on to the crown. They may *try* to pull rank in their relations with the elected and/or professional politicians, and attempt to influence events and social relations outside their own family and household. But they rarely succeed, with the politicians shown in delicate, diplomatic negotiation, seeking to resist monarchical influence and to shape the monarch's will to their own political design – and what is perceived as the will of the people, in terms of popularity and assent.

Although this behaviour, this struggle to wield power and authority, takes place primarily in the private sphere, it does have ramifications in the public sphere, and can even trigger constitutional crisis. Hence the so-called Bedchamber Crisis in *The Young Victoria*; the abdication of Edward VIII in *The King's Speech*; and the loss of respect for the monarchy when the Windsors fail to recognise the strength of popular feeling around the death of Diana in *The Queen*. In such circumstances, the monarchs are invariably required to modify their behaviour – which generally means they must make appropriate public appearances, they must perform authority correctly, they must adopt the rectitude of ceremonial splendour or empathise with the plight of the national family. The monarchs of *The Young Victoria*, *Mrs. Brown* and *The King's Speech* are also shown struggling to maintain their popularity, to look and sound the

part, to stand above the political fray. This is very much writer Alan Bennett's central theme in *The Madness of King George*, and it is very much the fate of the post-political monarchy, the decorative, ceremonial monarchy, if it is to maintain its status and authority as national figurehead.

The problem to be resolved in *The Queen* is precisely this relationship between the private and the public. How can Elizabeth re-engage with her people, with society? How can she regain her popularity? And what sort of public image should she project, what sort of ceremonial response is appropriate for the Queen in relation to Diana's death? To put it another way, how much of the private should be brought into the public sphere? How much should the Queen emote in public (as in the walkabout outside the palace)?

THE PRIVATE SPHERE, THE ROYAL FAMILY AND THE
FEMINISATION OF THE MONARCHY

By playing out so much of their drama in the private sphere, these films also contribute to the perceived feminisation of the monarchy. Various historians have argued that, over the last two centuries, the monarchy has become feminised in terms of those who have sat on the throne for most years, but also in terms of the domestication of the institution, the way it has become bound to the idea of the royal *family*, its association with philanthropy and welfare, and the erosion of real political power.¹⁰

There has certainly been a preponderance of cinematic interest in female monarchs during the 1990s and 2000s, with two films about Elizabeth I and three others in which she appears; two about Victoria; and one about Elizabeth II. Even Elizabeth I's ruthless culling of her enemies and her militarism is offset by the feminine, romantic role she adopts for much of the two Shekhar Kapur-directed versions of her life, *Elizabeth* and *Elizabeth: The Golden Age*.

The image of the royal family is also central to filmic representations of the late modern monarchs, and to some extent bolsters the idea of the royal family as a metaphor for the national family and a model for the nation. The image first comes to the fore in *The Madness of King George*, but is particularly evident in the films about twentieth-century monarchs, where the *mise-en-scène* of majesty is played down and the iconography of the royal family played up. In *The King's Speech*, for instance, the paternalistic head of the royal family is by extension also the benevolent head of the national family, his people. But that

paternalistic head, George VI, is constructed very much as a vulnerable character who depends enormously on the support of his wife, but also his two young daughters, whose approval he seeks after his climactic radio speech at the end of the film. To this end, the figure of the King is feminised and domesticated, genially paternalistic rather than oppressively patriarchal.

Given the important role of the royal wives in *The Madness of King George* and *The King's Speech*, and given the way that Victoria holds sway over her very grown-up family in *Mrs. Brown*, as does Elizabeth II in *The Queen*, the late modern royal family is as much female-led as it is patriarchal. This is reinforced by the fact that the narrative space of these films is primarily the private sphere of the family. That space and those families are also represented in terms of a particular idea of ordinariness; indeed, the model of the family on display is akin to a respectable middle-class ideal of family life that hardly seems distant from at least the core target audience for the film. Through such representations of ordinariness and domesticity, the idea of the monarchy as extraordinary and powerful is once again diminished.

This sense of relatively powerless ordinariness is further secured by the fact that most of the films from the 1990s and 2000s about the late modern monarchy represent the royal family as dysfunctional. In public, George III tries to ensure his family appears as ideal in *The Madness of King George*, but in private, we witness its conflicts and failings, whether in the form of his sons challenging his authority or his own illness and its effects on those around him. In *The King's Speech*, it is suggested that Bertie's stammer derives from the bullying oppressiveness of his father and his elder brother. Even George VI's own family, which may be presented in the same film as the ideal national model, bequeaths the Diana problems that are depicted in *The Queen* and *Diana* as the product of yet more familial dysfunctionality.

In the early modern films, the private sphere is a site for royal sexual activity on the one hand and for plotting the monarch's next move in the public sphere on the other. These may often be closely related, as in *The Other Boleyn Girl*, where Henry VIII's desire to bed Anne Boleyn becomes the motivation for his schism with the Catholic church. In the late modern films, however, as the monarchy loses any real political power, it retreats into a private sphere that is now represented less as a site for sexual activity and political scheming and more as the domestic space of the family. This de-politicisation and domestication of the monarchy is to some extent matched in the films by the performance of monarchical benevolence and an engagement with philanthropic and humanitarian causes.

In *The Madness of King George*, George III gleefully embraces the moniker 'Farmer George', which he sees as indicative of his concern for the welfare of the nation. In *The Young Victoria*, Victoria and her husband Albert push various philanthropic causes. George VI is seen as attending to the welfare of the nation in relation to impending war in both *The King's Speech* and *Hyde Park on Hudson*. Diana's espousal of humanitarian missions in *Diana* and the way that both that film and *The Queen* cite her nomination as the 'queen of hearts' and the 'people's princess' again link the monarchy in a broad sense to philanthropy. On the other hand, these two films can also be read as using these same tropes to advance an implicit critique of the monarchy for its distance from the concerns of ordinary people and its failure to engage with the emotional life of the nation – and thereby, it might be argued, its failure to engage sufficiently with a feminine sensibility.

Some of the representations of early modern monarchs also embrace the idea of a benevolent monarchy – in the figure of Elizabeth I in the two eponymously named films, for instance; or in Charles II's interest in science, technology, medicine and innovation in *Restoration*. But in such cases, this benevolence is always tempered by what today seem like wilful abuses of power – at times violently wilful. Such monarchs have not yet become the domesticated figureheads of the late modern films – but even those monarchs occasionally abuse their power within the private sphere. Indeed, if any of these monarchs appears to represent a benevolent, welfare monarchy, even a democratic monarchy, there is still a huge gap between their lifestyles and those of most of their subjects. The late modern films may undermine the sense of difference and exclusivity that surrounds the monarchy by representing the royal family as in some ways 'ordinary', but they also present the monarchy as retaining an element of extraordinariness which demands admiration, respect, even reverence. The representation of social relations in these films is still marked by a huge sense of difference, and the spectacle of enormous wealth and privilege in particular – the *mise-en-scène* of majesty – speaks to an intensely hierarchical, class-based social structure, with the wealth and exclusivity of the royal family situating it at the top of that hierarchy.

CONCLUSION: PROJECTING THE BRITISH ROYAL HERITAGE FOR CONTEMPORARY GLOBAL CULTURE

These various films from the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are at one level conventional entertainment commodities. But they are also

indicative of the way in which the British royal family, the world's most prominent national monarchy, has become a global cultural commodity, a brand that embraces particular types of stories and images, and a particular sense of British identity that can be marketed to audiences around the world. They make a clear distinction between the politically and narratively powerful monarchs of the pre-modern and early modern periods, and the politically powerless constitutional monarchs of the late modern period. These representations help to modernise and democratise the image of monarchy. On the one hand, there is the ordinariness and humanity of the royal family; on the other hand, this is offset by the extraordinary cinematic spectacle of monarchical ritual, ceremonial occasions, palatial settings and majestic costumes.

Cinema thus plays a part in the reinvention and renewal of pomp and pageantry around the monarchy, situating the monarchy firmly within the society of the spectacle, reinforcing its public image, its visual presence. The full regalia of monarchy, the *mise-en-scène* of majesty, may not represent political power but it still has an important ideological function, maintaining the symbolic authority of the British monarchy and the status of the monarch as national figure-head in a globalised world.

The divorce of political power from the soft power of the image is vital, but the remaining symbolic charge of this public image is equally vital. The cinema of monarchy is one of the ways in which the lustrous majesty of monarchy is maintained, but also refurbished for a democratic era in which kings and queens become more like ordinary people. At the same time, these films collectively situate the monarchy in relation to a rich and often spectacular version of national heritage, presenting the monarchy as a distinctive and attractive symbol of nationhood and tradition that is somehow timeless and stands above politics and private interests. The relative success of the various films enables the reproduction of this heritage and normalises the monarchy as a more or less awe-inspiring feature of contemporary global culture. In this way, a spectacle of wealth, privilege and exclusivity is made to seem attractive to audiences around the world.

This spectacle renders the royals as extraordinary, set apart from ordinary people, aloof and detached. That sense of extraordinariness is to some extent reinforced by the casting of carefully chosen film stars – Emily Blunt, Judi Dench, Colin Firth, Helen Mirren – and brilliant character actors – Nigel Hawthorne, Sam West – all of whom create charismatic and engaging royal characters. This is in effect the merging of two cults of celebrity. But the films

about the late modern constitutional monarchs also present them to some extent as ordinary, familiar and familial, mundane, like us. The earlier monarchs are also to some extent humanised by their representation as the flawed characters of drama whose vulnerabilities we witness when we see them in private. But there are still important differences between the way they are represented and the way more recent monarchs are represented. The medieval and early modern celluloid monarchs generally enjoy both political power and narrative agency. Where they have the capacity to make things happen, however, things happen to or around the monarchs in the late modern period, and it is really only in their private lives that they are able to act, to demonstrate agency, to emote.

The endings of the films about the late modern monarchs tend to see these characters finally triumph over adversity, and reach a position in which they feel comfortable with their duties and responsibilities and at ease with their bodies, their desires and their emotions. Thus George III is able to seem himself again and to present that self publicly to his people at the end of *The Madness of King George*, appropriately costumed, and at the heart of the royal family; George VI is able to overcome his stutter enough to make a crucial speech – and then present himself publicly to his people, again surrounded by the royal family; and it is precisely in appearing in public outside Buckingham Palace that Elizabeth II in *The Queen* is able re-establish her class certainty and her symbolic authority.

Each of those films also plays an important part in the presentation of the late modern monarchy as domestic, ordinary and feminine, the monarch's authority represented as much by their status as head of the royal family, and by extension the national family, as by the spectacle of majestic imagery. The soft, persuasive power of these images of family headship and royal splendour lies in their ability to win popular approval for the institution of monarchy. Through the stories it tells, the way it tells them and especially the way it visualises the monarchy, the cinema of the 1990s and 2000s presents the post-political royals as in the end unthreatening and benevolent, but also as charismatic and narratively significant. They may not be politically significant figures, they may not be able to command an army or command the nation, but they are certainly able to command attention as socially and culturally significant figures. That significance is in part an assertion of national distinctiveness in an increasingly globalised world. Cinema may have played a part in refurbishing this image of the post-political British monarchy but, like it or not, its reign is not over yet.

NOTES

- 1 Historically the English monarchy governed England and Wales prior to the 1707 Act of Union with Scotland. Thereafter it is referred to as the British monarchy.
- 2 On the relationship between heritage and cinema, see Andrew Higson, *English Heritage, English Cinema: Costume Drama since 1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); on the relationship between film genres, the film industry and the representation of the past, see Andrew Higson, *Film England: Culturally English Filmmaking since the 1990s* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2011).
- 3 In developing the arguments below, the following were particularly useful: Andrzej Olechnowicz (ed.), *The Monarchy and the British Nation, 1780 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); David Cannadine, 'The context, performance and meaning of ritual: the British monarchy and the "invention of tradition", c. 1820–1977', in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Kara McKechnie, 'Taking liberties with the monarch: the royal bio-pic in the 1990s', in Claire Monk and Amy Sargeant (eds), *British Historical Cinema: The History, Heritage and Costume Film* (London: Routledge, 2002); and Jeffrey Richards, 'The monarchy and film 1900–2006', in Olechnowicz (ed.), *The Monarchy and the British Nation*.
- 4 This section draws on arguments developed in Higson, *English Heritage*, and Higson, *Film England*; box-office details are from *Box Office Mojo*, www.boxofficemojo.com/.
- 5 See Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004).
- 6 Vernon Bogdanor, 'The monarchy and the constitution', *Parliamentary Affairs* 49 (1996), p. 407.
- 7 Cannadine, 'Context, performance and meaning', p. 121; see also Andrzej Olechnowicz, 'Historians and the modern British monarchy', in Olechnowicz (ed.), *The Monarchy and the British Nation*, pp. 25–7; and David Chaney, 'A symbolic mirror of ourselves: civic ritual in mass society', *Media, Culture and Society* 5 (1983).
- 8 See Olechnowicz, 'Historians and the modern British monarchy', pp. 31–3; and Richards, 'The monarchy and film'.
- 9 See Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957).
- 10 See Clarissa Campbell Orr, 'The feminization of the monarchy 1780–1910: royal masculinity and female empowerment', in Olechnowicz (ed.), *The Monarchy and the British Nation*, and Olechnowicz, 'Historians and the modern British monarchy', pp. 27–31.

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