

# Representing Royalty



# Representing Royalty:

*British Monarchs in  
Contemporary Cinema,  
1994-2010*

By

Julia Kinzler

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This book is dedicated to everyone who kept faith with me.



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# INTRODUCTION

## REPRESENTING BRITISH ROYALTY

The crown translates a woman to a Queen—  
endless gold, circling itself, an O like a well,  
fathomless, for the years to drown in—history's bride,  
anointed, blessed, for a crowning. One head alone  
can know its weight, on throne, in pageantry,  
and feel it still, in private space, when it's lifted:  
not a hollow thing, but a measuring; no halo,  
treasure, but a valuing; decades and duty. Time-gifted,  
the crown is old light, journeying from skulls of kings  
to living Queen.

Its jewels glow, virtues; loyalty's ruby,  
blood-deep; sapphire's ice resilience; emerald evergreen;  
the shy pearl, humility. *My whole life, whether it be long  
or short, devoted to your service.* Not lightly worn.  
(Duffy 2013, 18; emphasis in original)

Written in celebration of the sixtieth anniversary of Elizabeth II's coronation, "The Crown" (2013)<sup>1</sup> by poet laureate Carol Ann Duffy offers a rich inventory of concepts and semantic fields related to the current British monarch<sup>2</sup> that are closely linked to royal representations on screen. At its centre it features the most prominent of royal regalia: the crown made of gold and precious jewels that is attributed the power to "translate[...] a woman to a Queen" and is supposed to symbolise majesty (l. 1). The motif of the crown evokes images of royal ceremony and pageantry, important elements of the films' mise-en-scène and their presentation of history. The poem refers to the queen as "history's bride" and introduces a specific concept of (female) royalty that values loyalty, resilience, stability and humility. The implication is that Elizabeth II

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<sup>1</sup> The poem was specially written for the sixtieth anniversary of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. It was read in St George's Chapel, beside the Coronation Chair, during the service held at Westminster Abbey on 4 June 2013 (cf. Hall 2013, 18).

<sup>2</sup> Monarchy as the concept of the rule of one (Aristotle, transl. Lord 1984, 158).

embodies this concept, which is expressed in her famous vow of devotion from 1947, quoted at the end of the poem (l. 3; cf. l. 11-13). Apart from this particular notion, the objects of research in this study present and negotiate different concepts of monarchy such as female rule and monarchy as (royal) family. Although the speaker denies an association of crown and halo (“no halo, treasure, but a valuing” (l. 7-8)), the reference in the poem is nevertheless evocative of the monarch’s sacralised position, particularly since the speaker describes the queen as “anointed” and “blessed” (l. 7-8). The cultural technique of sacralisation is a fundamental aspect of the mystification of a monarch (and therefore of his or her legitimation). It has a centuries-old tradition, and today’s cinematic representations still draw on the technique to elevate their protagonists (cf. Erkens 2002, 11).<sup>3</sup> The topos of the burden of power, famously articulated in Shakespeare’s *Henry IV, Part 2* (1986) “[u]neasy lies the head that wears a crown” (3.1.31) and quoted in Stephen Frears’ *The Queen* (2006), can be considered as the predominant ideological concept in Duffy’s poem (“Not lightly worn” l. 14): the speaker refers to the loneliness of power (“One head alone can know its weight” l. 4-5;) and the notion that it entails duty, “measuring” and “valuing” rather than luxury (“treasure”) and splendour (l. 7-8). This is supported by the underlying dichotomous thought structure of public and private that distinguishes between royal public space “on throne, in pageantry” and “private space”—one of the key characteristics of royal cinematic representations (l. 5-6).<sup>4</sup>

Apart from gender and space, time and history are also central themes of the poem in particular and of royal representations in general. The circular form of the crown is supposed to symbolise the enduring nature of the monarchy and thus presents a specific (royal) concept of history (“endless gold, circling itself, an O like a well, fathomless, for the years to drown in” (l. 2-3)). In the poem’s understanding of history, the crown and the monarchy have persisted through time (“time-gifted” l. 8) and it evokes the notion of royalty as dynasty, thus providing legitimation for the current monarch (“journeying from skulls of kings to living Queen” (l. 9-

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<sup>3</sup> Sacralising something or someone involves lending them the quality of the sacred while simultaneously obscuring any part of human activity in this process (cf. Landwerd and Eschenbach 2000, 23). Erkens describes the phenomenon of sacral legitimation of rule as epoch-spanning and global (cf. 2002, 21). He emphasises that it even continues to have an effect in today’s society, although in various modes (ibid.). The sacralisation of royal power based on Christian beliefs can be understood as a specific form of this general phenomenon (cf. Erkens 2002, 21).

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed discussion of different historical concepts of the public/private and their intersection in the films included this study, see chapter one.

10)). By equating British history with the lives and times of its kings and queens both the poem and the films about British monarchs tend to obscure any problematic discontinuities and mask potential alternative versions of history (cf. Brunt 1992, 290).

This study aims to examine popular<sup>5</sup> cinematic representations<sup>6</sup> of British monarchs and will analyse seven feature films that focus on the

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<sup>5</sup> This study takes contemporary popular cinema as the source of its main texts. The selection is based on the assumption that popular films are far more complex than they tend to be given credit for. They often contain gaps, incoherencies, ruptures and tensions that “indicate collective anxieties and desires, as well as ideological conflict” (Rehling 2009, 9). Also, popular cinema is considered to be “a prime site in which identities are played out, produced, consumed, negotiated, and contested” (ibid.).

<sup>6</sup> Representation has been a “foundational concept in aesthetics [...] and semiotics” since ancient times (Mitchell 1995, 11). Since the eighteenth century, representation has also become “a crucial concept in political theory” (ibid.). For art historian W.J.T. Mitchell, “the relationship between aesthetic or semiotic representation [...] and political representation” is a central question that contemporary theories of representation need to address (1995, 11). In order to do so, he points to the common structure of both forms of representation that he describes as a “triangular relationship: representation is always of something or someone, by something or someone, to someone” (1995, 12). However, he acknowledges that “the business of representation is much more complex than this” because the “representational sign never seems to occur in isolation from a whole network of other signs” (1995, 13). For the analysis of royal representations “the relationship between the representational material and that which it represents” is particularly significant because, as Mitchell emphasises, “representation, even purely ‘aesthetic’ representation of fictional persons and events, can never be completely divorced from political and ideological questions” (1995, 14, 15). Following the social constructionist approach of Stuart Hall, film is considered as a cultural practice and a representational system and as such it “is concerned with the production and exchange of meanings” (1997, 2). Drawing on Hall’s theoretical edifice, representation does not only mean to “stand for or reference objects, people, and events in the so-called ‘real’ world” (1997, 28). For Hall, there is no “simple relationship of reflection, imitation or one-to-one correspondence” between representational systems such as language or film and the real world and he observes that the world “is not accurately or otherwise reflected in the mirror” of film (ibid.). According to Hall, film “does not work like a mirror” and he claims that “[m]eaning is produced [...] in and through various representational systems” (ibid.). It is “produced by the practice, the ‘work’, of representation” and “constructed through signifying—i.e. meaning-producing—practices” (ibid.). Consequently, for an analysis that takes a constructionist theoretical approach to representation the portrayal of monarchs is not merely about reflecting or imitating

lives of British monarchs and were made following the revival of the so-called royal biopic in the mid-1990s.<sup>7</sup> Epistemologically, the cultural semiotic study focuses on representation as symbolic practice and examines representational strategies and structures regarding figurations of personal authority and associated processes of identity formation in popular<sup>8</sup> cinema. The analytical concept rooted in British Cultural Studies<sup>9</sup> also addresses questions of historical context(s) and the interrelations between the texts<sup>10</sup>. The on-screen re-imaginings of British monarchs are presumed to shed light on historically specific discursive formations that are part of their political and ideological dimension (cf. Dencovski 2013, 195).

This qualitative-interpretative cultural analysis approaches the films as “symptoms of culture” (Garber 1998). Following Marjorie Garber, to consider the films as symbols would mean expecting the films to “proclaim ‘timeless, universal truths’” while a reading of the films as symptoms understands them as “embedded in particular historical preoccupations and conflicts, both in [their] own time and in ours” (1998, 8). Garber’s metonymic-associative method is deemed productive<sup>11</sup> because it “pursues

(historical) reality or historical fact. Rather they are involved in shaping and structuring, in short in *constructing*, them.

<sup>7</sup> Earlier publications on the representations of British monarchs on screen chose either a diachronic approach (Ford and Mitchell 2010) or focused on a specific historical period (Doran and Freeman 2009) that was often integrated into broader cultural analyses of the respective period or historical figure. By contrast, this study attempts to conduct a synchronic investigation that allows for a more in-depth analysis of its objects of study.

<sup>8</sup> Because, as Richards aptly observes, popular culture in particular is “the battleground for identity” (1997, xii).

<sup>9</sup> Here, Cultural Studies refers to the tradition of British Cultural Studies as distinct from Cultural Studies. The latter stands for the approach in the social sciences with its focus on empirical research as well as historical and epistemological perspectives. The term British Cultural Studies, meanwhile, describes the formation “adopted by English Studies because they focus on the *British* dimension of cultural phenomena” (Berg 2013, 14; emphasis in original). Their analytical emphasis is on questions of ideology, class, gender or ethnicity and other categories of cultural difference (cf. Berg 2013, 14).

<sup>10</sup> Underlying this is a broad concept of text that extends beyond the domain of written expression and includes any set of signs that is involved in the cultural construction of meaning.

<sup>11</sup> As a theoretical basis of the symptom and specifically the symptom of culture, Garber proposes turning to Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1913) (cf. 1998, 9). She explains the potential of this approach: “in this mode of analysis we find an emphasis on intuitive connections, connecting seemingly unconnected, often

associations and contiguities rather than identities and essences; ideas to not ‘stand for’ or ‘symbolize’ something in culture but rather evoke, imply, glance at fields of connotation” (1998, 11); symptoms refer to the desire for stable and universal meaning but at the same time they always retain their culturally specific characteristics (cf. Krug 2013, 197).

For the examination, analytical concepts from cultural studies such as markers of (cultural) difference and specific cultural patterns are considered particularly insightful. Cultural differences, for example gender<sup>12</sup>, class, nation<sup>13</sup> and age can help to draw attention to and expose social conflicts,

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wildly disparate things. Beneath the surface of conscious, rational thought lies not only the intuitive, but the counterintuitive. Precisely because it does not presuppose causes, intentions, and motivations, such a reading practice allows for a multiplicity of associations and linkages” (Garber 1998, 9). She suggests reading culture “as if it were a dream, a network of representations that encodes wishes and fears, projections and identifications, all of whose elements are overdetermined and contingent” (ibid.).

<sup>12</sup> As one of the most powerful categories of difference, gender is specifically relevant to the analysis of royal (biographical) representations. Gender is considered as a historically and culturally variable sex-gender-continuum and is based on the idea that concepts of femininity and masculinity are not derived from biological differences but are social and cultural constructs (cf. Feldmann and Schülting 2002, 143). In the analysis of royal cinematic representations, gender intersects with other hierarchical markers of difference such as class and age, and contributes to the (cultural) production of meaning. Biographical narratives are often intertwined with models and norms of gender identity. Since the biographical mode re-narrates construction processes of subjects, it indicates the productive conditions of gender. Norms of behaviour and cultural expectations, existing models and prohibitions have an extensive impact on the development of the subject. Biographical narratives provide a rich inventory for the analysis of gender in and as discourse that takes place on at least two levels: on the level of the actual life (of the historical person) as far as it is accessible and on the level of the narrated life through the re-inscription of biographical traces in the biographical text (cf. Dhúill 2009, 200).

<sup>13</sup> For film scholar and heritage cinema expert Andrew Higson “cinema is one of the means by which national communities are maintained” because it creates “particular types of stories that narrate the nation imaginatively, narratives that are capable of generating a sense of national belonging among their audiences” (2011, 1). National cinemas tend to “turn to the past at different moments in their histories in search of their own foundational myths” (Vidal 2012, 3). As early as 2002, however, film scholar and heritage cinema expert Claire Monk observed that a number of academics had started to move away from “the discursive framework which conceives of British period films as always centrally engaged in projecting ‘the nation’ or ‘the national past’” (2002, 186). Far from denying the link between British cinema, the question of national identity and its political significance, she

contradictions and distortions where agents of social and cultural processes struggle for control over material resources and the social, political and symbolic forms of power, which include the creation of individual and collective identities (cf. Kramer 2005, 185). Cultural patterns such as mythic narratives and genre structures (heritage cinema, biography) are also useful. In the past, royal cinematic representations in general, and the selected objects of study in particular have predominantly been analysed in the context of specific generic categories such as heritage films and biopics. However, a generic focus tends to be restrictive.

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emphasises the role of the films' international audience (cf. 2002, 186). However, this study does not aim to engage in the academic discourse on national cinema(s) or British cinema—even though the films used in this study are involved in processes of national/royal historiography. Therefore, questions of the nation and national identity are included in this analysis but are not considered as a focal point. Outlined above is one line of argument which perceives of cinema as “one of the means of narrating nations, telling stories that enable audiences to imagine the nature of particular nations” (Higson 2011, 1). In recent years, the critics of the academic debate on the question of national and British cinema in particular seem to widely agree on the notion that the cinema culture of the recent past has been characterised by developments of globalisation which led to an acceleration of transnational tendencies. As a result, at present, “the communities imagined by cinematic means tend [...] to be local or transnational, rather than national” (Hjort and MacKenzie 2005, 7). The objects of this study represent and engage in British national history, or more precisely in British royal history. Hence, it can be presumed that they perpetuate myths of the nation. Consequently, they can be read as intriguing examples of the complexity of the question of national cinema—since, on the one hand, they address certain discourses which exert a nationalising effect (i.e. the subject matter of British royal history) and, on the other, their production, distribution, reception and certain narrative structures are characterised by transnational dimensions (for example, myths of success, the Manichean battle between good and bad, the protagonist as hero). In the context of this study, it is deemed necessary to draw attention to the particularities of biographical films in relation to national film because, according to film scholar Belén Vidal, these films simultaneously feed “fantasies of national identity to the international film scene” and tend to blur “the contours of national cinemas through transnational encounters and appropriations” and thus elude “traditional critical distinctions between popular and art cinema” (2014, 2). Regarding the connection of monarchy and national identity which is more or less ubiquitous in historical research, historian Andrzej Olechnowicz warns against assuming it to be “self-evident, unproblematic and ‘eternal’” because it “infringe[s] the usual historical insistence upon attention to context; it also concedes, unexamined, what is perhaps the central monarchist claim—that in some metaphorical or even real sense the monarchy is the nation” (2007, 34). Olechnowicz does not reject the concept in general but highlights that “the equation is complex and certainly not complete” (ibid.).



Therefore, this study will attempt to adopt a broader approach that generates new and productive perspectives. As a result, the films will be referred to and approached as royal cinematic representations rather than royal biopics which would imply a focus on generic aspects.

Earlier studies on the representations of (British) monarchs emphasised the momentum of contemporary issues, particularly the lives and problems of the reigning Windsor family and their alleged consequences for the reputation of the British Crown (cf. McKechnie 2002, 219).<sup>14</sup> This study is not so much concerned with contemporary issues regarding the (political) institution of monarchy as it is with the knowledge of the past that is generated by the films. This knowledge is considered as “tied to the ideology of the given moment in which they are produced, an ideology that is an amalgam of meanings related to issues of power, community, and continuity” (Landy 1995, 54). The representations are studied as part of the cultural imaginary and the analytical focus is directed towards different emphases and processes of selection and semantisation that can subsequently canonise specific narratives. The discrepancies between biographical accounts or historical data and the respective cinematic representation are approached as “revealing of ideological processes underlying the screen presentation” of hegemonic historical figures (Vidal 2014, 184). An analysis of royal representations always intersects with the specific versions of history presented. Consequently, questions of how and through which modes of presentation the past or rather the particular versions of history are (re)presented are of central significance. In this regard, *representing* royalty also includes a temporal dimension: the representations are involved in the complex dynamics of cultural memory<sup>15</sup> because the films about the lives of British kings and queens

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<sup>14</sup> McKechnie argues that the royal biopics of the 1990s are concerned with moments of instability for the monarchy (cf. 2002, 219f.). However, James Chapman observes that the institution was never seriously threatened, despite a general sense of crisis during that period (cf. 2005, 315). A similar assessment is expressed by Olechnowicz, who retrospectively argues that “the monarchy’s relative unpopularity in the 1990s did not create a powerful anti-monarchist movement, but only sporadic, scurrilous spasms of anger” (2007, 43).

<sup>15</sup> The term cultural memory was first introduced by Jan Assmann in his seminal work *Das Kulturelle Gedächtnis* (1997). He defines cultural memory in accordance with Maurice Halbwachs’ studies on collective memory as the part of collective memory which is responsible for storing and transmitting cultural meaning. Cultural memory, according to Jan Assmann, offers “a collective concept for all knowledge that directs behaviour and experience in the interactive framework of a society and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation” (1995, 126). One of its key characteristics is its

convey *specific* versions of the (national) past and thus help to establish or continue mythic<sup>16</sup> narratives that can be considered as exemplary manifestations of cultural memory (cf. Korte et al. 2005, 13).<sup>17</sup> Drawing on the theoretical model of cultural memory by Jan and Aleida Assmann, the differentiation between functional memory and storage memory proves particularly insightful in the context of this study. Aleida Assmann explains the two modes as follows:

storage memory contains what is unusable, obsolete, or dated; it has no vital ties to the present and no bearing on identity formation. We may also say that it holds in store a repertoire of missed opportunities, alternative options, and unused material. Functional memory, on the other hand, consist of vital recollections that emerge from a process of selection, connection, and meaningful configuration; [...]. In functional memory, unstructured, unconnected fragments are invested with perspective and relevance; they enter into connections, configurations, compositions of *meaning*—a quality that is totally absent from storage memory. (2011, 127; emphasis in original)

Thus, the versions of history depicted in the royal representations have been subjected to processes of selection and semantisation because of the selectivity of the functional memory. The question about which parts of the storage memory are activated at what time (historical change) proves to be particularly revealing of ideological processes. In the context of this study, one task of functional memory comes to the fore—namely, legitimisation. According to Aleida Assmann, “power needs origins” and

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capacity to “preserve[...] the store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity” (1995, 130).

<sup>16</sup> The variety of theoretical approaches taken by different disciplines to the concept of myth testifies to the academic awareness of the problem concerning its definition. Any definition of myth depends on the epistemological interest of the respective analysis. Thus, the concept of myth as an analytical concept performs a primarily heuristic function. In the context of this study, the theoretical considerations of Roland Barthes in his *Mythologies* (1974) provide an especially important starting point because of the emphasis on ideology-critical aspects. For Barthes, myth is a secondary semiotic system and possesses a naturalising effect that renders viewpoints fixed, natural and universal through strategies of decontextualisation and dehistoricisation. Myths tend to reduce the complexity of their narratives and suggest continuity in the collective and cultural memory (cf. Böhm-Schnitker 2013, 193).

<sup>17</sup> It is important to note that film as a system of symbolisation and mediation feeds sediments of experience to construct processes of cultural meaning that reach far beyond an actual horizon of experience (cf. Korte et. al. 2005, 7).

it “desires to legitimize itself retrospectively and to immortalize itself prospectively” (2011, 128). Thus, royal cinematic representations can be considered as conveying detailed historical knowledge in the form of genealogy (cf. Assmann 2011, 128).

Royal representations on screen are always re-presentations of already existing representations or texts. One prominent example is their iconography that (traditionally) tends to quote various historical modes of representation, most importantly (royal) portraiture and landscape painting (cf. Schaff 2004, 126). In particular, the portraits<sup>18</sup> of British monarchs authenticate the presented version of history and provide historicising moments of reference (cf. Barck 2008, 126). What is more, from a cultural semiotics perspective, references to other films or media (painting, television, radio, etc.) add a further functional component to the production and constitution of the film’s meaning, particularly the citation of royal representational patterns (cf. Gräf et. al. 2011, 231).

The interdisciplinary approach<sup>19</sup> of this cultural studies film analysis combines a wide range of concepts and theories from the humanities, which will facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Cultural semiotics provides the methodological foundation for interpreting the films’ processes and structures of signification while taking socio-cultural aspects into account. In particular, markers of difference such as gender, age and class are of central significance as a result of their powerful ability to generate meaning. The heavily quantitative-interpretative approach integrates analytical techniques (film semiotics and character analysis) and addresses questions from media and film studies (film genres, media history and stardom). For the analysis of the iconographic influence of royal portraiture and painting in general, the study draws on research from art history as well as history. The discussion of the ideological processes underlying the specific versions of the past owes much to insights from (cultural) historical research. A juxtaposition of available historical data and research with the filmic (historical) narratives proves to be particularly revealing of processes of selection and (re-)semantisation. Sociological approaches from the field of disability studies and cultural sociology support the analysis and enhance its transdisciplinary nature.

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<sup>18</sup> It can be argued that the royal representations perform a similar function to the National Portrait Gallery, which was founded in 1856 and represents national history through (royal) portraits. At the centre of the National Portrait Gallery’s “account of the nation” is the genealogy of the royal family—“providing a (nearly continuous) history to England/Britain as a political entity” (Perry 2006, 42).

<sup>19</sup> For a critical discussion of the opportunities and risks of interdisciplinary research in cultural studies, see Ansgar and Vera Nünning 2003, 4-5.

*Representing Royalty* as a project in British cultural studies is characterised by its socio/ideological-critical perspective and its combination of textual and contextual approaches that enable an in-depth understanding of the cinematic royal representations. Since film or cinema is considered as a social practice, it is necessary to take extensive cultural contexts into account. To contextualise the texts and their interaction with other institutions, media or practices one must introduce a cultural environment to the analysis that, crucially, determines the respective meaning. The objective here is to generate a clearly delineated and meaningful context from the seemingly endless array of intra- and extra-textual contexts that brings all relevant references into focus (cf. Nünning und Neumann 2008, 381). Intermedial processes of transfer and multi-historic contextualisations are of particular interest in the context of films about the lives of British monarchs. The seven feature films have been selected on the grounds of their contemporariness and their biographical narrative. Despite their different historical subjects, all seven share certain formal qualities and key concepts.

To address the research questions stated above, chapter one lays the terminological and conceptual foundation of this study. In the past, films about British monarchs have often been subject to generic discussions which also provide a methodological starting point. The different labels draw attention to various conceptual questions: historical film addresses questions of authenticity and the relationship between past and present. Because of their depiction of events in British national (royal) history, the films in this study have often been linked to heritage cinema, which focuses on visuals and aesthetics, and tends to adopt a nostalgic approach to history. The generic label royal biopic foregrounds the biographical mode of the narrative. Hence, theories and methodologies from the study of biography or life writing will be discussed in relation to the films in this study. The media-theoretical concept of intra- and intermediality provides the analytical framework for a discussion of the various references to other forms of representations such as television, painting, music and radio. Another concept that is crucial to this cultural-semiotic analysis of the meaning created by royal cinematic representations is the star image. It will be argued that casting a specific actor or actress also significantly contributes to the figure's complex of meaning. Films about monarchs, i.e. sovereign rulers, throw into relief questions of power. In order to address the complexity of power relations in the films, Michel Foucault's philosophical and discourse-analytic approach will provide a theoretical basis. From a film-theoretical perspective, this analysis can be categorised as a character analysis. Based on a cultural-semiotic premise combined

with structuralist techniques of analysis, the royal protagonists will be considered as clusters of numerous attributes.

The analyses of all seven feature films are designed to follow roughly the same two-part structure. They explore the character of the monarch followed and then follow this with a broader discussion of the films' version of (royal and national) history based on close, contextual and intermedial readings. The order of the chapters is determined by the reign of the different monarchs. In contrast to earlier approaches to royal cinematic representations, the chapters here follow a historical framework rather than the release dates of the respective films. This is because the present study seeks to avoid constructing linear narratives of development which could be implicitly or explicitly suggested. For this purpose, the period from which the films discussed below were selected was deliberately kept short.

Chapter two examines two of the most recent cinematic portraits of Elizabeth I by director Shekhar Kapur. The discussion of *Elizabeth* (1998) and *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (2007) will show that the films can be described as multi-layered texts and that they combine narrative structures from different historical periods. The paradoxical position of Elizabeth I as queen regnant has inspired artists and historians who share an interest in the Virgin queen's gender and her ambiguities. In this tradition, the first part of the chapter discusses the royal representations of Elizabeth I in terms of gender relations, (female) sexuality and (royal) femininities. The second part of the chapter reads both films as renarrations of the Elizabeth myth and adopts an ideology-critical perspective on their respective versions of history in order to identify dominant representational mechanisms that contribute to the films' apotheosis of Gloriana. Chapter three approaches the representation of George III in *The Madness of King George* (1994) from a disability-studies perspective. This allows for a critical and precise analysis of the complex power relations and the discursive production of the king's condition. Despite the film's focus on the condition of the king, it aims to continue the monarch's restoration that was started by mid-twentieth century historians, and reiterates various popular myths and assumptions about George III. Chapter four discusses the royal romance of Queen Victoria and her consort Prince Albert in *The Young Victoria* (2009). The first part of the chapter argues that the film's romance structures mask the queen's loss of power in both her relationship with her husband and on a political level. *The Young Victoria* presents the viewer with what could be described as a royal portrait gallery, discussed in the second part of the chapter, since it is full of references to (Victorian) royal portraiture. The film thus participates in the mythologisation of

Queen Victoria and disseminates the notion of monarchy as a magnificent pageant. *Mrs. Brown* (1997) continues with another (Victorian) royal romance—that of Queen Victoria and her Scottish ghillie John Brown—and is examined in chapter five. The queen’s self-created empire of grief opens up a small window of opportunity for the (melodramatic) romance plot involving the Scotsman John Brown. This allows for an eroticised widowed Victoria and her (female) desire. The portrayal of the Widow of Windsor introduces yet another concept of femininity to the discussion of royal cinematic representations. In the second part of the chapter, the representation of the widowed Victoria is discussed in the context of her Scottish Highland surroundings. The film’s postcolonial subtext offers a cross-cultural narrative about complex processes of internal colonisation through cultural appropriation. The representation of the Scottish Highland culture and landscape draws on patterns from the picturesque due to the film’s nostalgic yearning for a pre-Victorian past or idyll. It thus self-reflexively comments on its own idealisation. Chapter six examines the representation of Elizabeth II’s father George VI in *The King’s Speech* (2010). The film imagines a stammering George VI as a speechless—and in Lacanian terms therefore powerless—king at the centre of the narrative’s male domestic drama about diverging concepts of masculinity and fatherhood. The second part of the chapter argues that *The King’s Speech*, which is set during the interwar years and the beginning of World War II, presents a royal perspective on this specific historical period in order to glorify George VI and to evoke nostalgia for Britain’s finest hour. The remediation of contemporary media technologies from the 1930s provides additional authentication and creates the myth of the popularity of the royal wartime broadcasts (cf. Bolter and Grusin 2000). Chapter seven deals with the only film to focus on the current British monarch, Queen Elizabeth II. Stephen Frears’ *The Queen* (2006) reinforces the efforts of royal public relations to create a new image for Elizabeth II as a royal grandmother. For this purpose, Frears draws on techniques from celebrity culture, which are often associated with the late Princess Diana, and creates an image of the queen as a family person. The second part of the chapter focuses on the film’s remediation of contemporary media discourses at the time of Princess Diana’s death in a car crash in August 1997. *The Queen* reproduces the myth of mourning and thus consolidates this specific version of the past in cultural memory. The conclusion revisits key concepts of representing royalty which were identified in the preceding analyses. In the light of a continuing proliferation of royal representations, the conclusion to this critical study takes the form of an outlook, and highlights several promising examples.

## CHAPTER ONE

# ACADEMIC DISCOURSES ON CINEMATIC REPRESENTATIONS OF ROYALTY

### **Genre Classifications: Historical Film, Heritage Cinema and the Royal Biopic**

In the past, studies of films about British monarchs were strongly influenced by discussions of the film's genre.<sup>20</sup> A broad variety of classifications exist, including the labels of historical film, costume film, heritage film and (royal/celebrity) biopic. Although this study does not aim to provide an analysis of genre, discussing and positioning it in relation to these prominent concepts is necessary and constructive because the categories have dominated academic discourse on these films and can provide a starting point for the extensive examination that this study will present.

### **Historical Film and Heritage Cinema**

Films about British monarchs have often been discussed in the context of the historical film genre. *Elizabeth*, for example, has been perceived as a marker of "significant change or direction for the British historical film in the 1990s" (Chapman 2005, 299). In the mid-1990s, historical films became less and less bound by the discourse of historical authenticity that

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<sup>20</sup> The underlying historical-hermeneutic concept of genre is based on the assumption that genres are produced by external elements such as contexts of production and comprehension, audience expectations and other historical circumstances, rather than considering genre primarily as a textual attribute (cf. Mittell 2001, 5). Genre can be located within complex relationships between texts, culture and (film) industries, audiences and a broad historical context. Jason Mittell describes these as discursive clusters (with historically variable horizons of experience) (cf. 2001, 7). He concludes that genres "are not neutral categories but are situated within larger systems of power and thus come 'fully loaded' with political implications" (Mittell 2001, 19).

had steered evaluations and analyses of these films in the past. Pamela Church Gibson describes a “shifting attitude towards the past that came to characterise the films of the 1990s which [...] entailed a move away from the fetishisation of authenticity and desire for painstaking re-creation which had characterized” historical cinema in previous decades (2002, 139). The discourse of authenticity was replaced by “a post-modern irreverence towards canonical narratives” (Pidduck 2001, 131).<sup>21</sup> Regarding historical biographical films, Christian Klein and Lukas Werner postulate an even more differentiated approach in terms of authenticity, and emphasise the multi-dimensional nature of authenticity. They identify a historical-referential level and an aesthetic level. Films about the past primarily aim at aesthetic authenticity, which implies the idea of referential authenticity (cf. 2009, 161). Aesthetic authenticity<sup>22</sup> is achieved most notably through the *mise-en-scène*, that is, the convincing reconstruction of the appearance of a historical period or what could be described as the authenticity effect,<sup>23</sup> rather than by painstakingly reproducing historical details. In the wake of post-structural concepts of history, e.g., Hayden White’s *Methahistory* (1973), and insights from mnemonic research, Pam Cook emphasises that the boundaries between objective history and subjective memory are no longer clear-cut (cf. 2005, 3). In order to avoid reproducing hierarchical or binary structures, she suggests a continuum of

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<sup>21</sup> The films produced since the 1990s have also been described as postmodern historical films because of their treatment of history, which film scholar Robert Rosenstone summarises as follows: they “tell the past self-reflexively, [...] from a multiplicity of viewpoints [...]; [a]pproach the past with humor, parody, [...] and other irreverent attitudes; intermix contradictory elements: past and present, drama and documentary, and even indulge in creative anachronism; accept, even glory in, their own selectivity, partialism, partisanship and rhetorical character; refuse to focus or sum up the meaning of the past events, but rather make sense of them in partial and open-ended, rather than totalized, manner [...]; never forget that the present is the site of all past representation and knowing.” (1996, 206)

<sup>22</sup> Yet the construction of period authenticity through elements such as costume or decor is not unambiguous: Pam Cook points out that these “symbolic carriers of period detail [...] are notoriously slippery and anachronistic”, since they are “intertextual sign systems with their own logic which constantly threatens to disrupt the concerns of narrative and dialogue” (1996, 67). Cook refers to costume historian Anne Hollander who has suggested “a tension in historical films between surface verisimilitude” and a “more playful use of historically inaccurate detail which can transit contemporary information about beauty and fashion” (qtd. in Cook 1996, 67).

<sup>23</sup> Korte et al. describe this effect as *Wahrhaftigkeit* (“veracity”, my translation) that becomes a tangible experience (2005, 17).



history, memory and nostalgia, where authenticity no longer limits creative processes (cf. Cook 2005, 4).

At the time of writing, there is no dispute about the notion that the relationship between the past represented in the films and the present in which they are produced is rather complex. James Chapman claims that historical films “are as much about the present in which they are made as they are about the past in which they are set” (2005, 319). Pam Cook goes even further and argues that “modern-day reconstructions tell us more about our relationship to the past, about the connections between past and present” (1996, 2) because “contemporary concerns are superimposed on earlier historical periods in the process of reconstruction” (2005, 11). Marcia Landy points out that the films “are not history in the same sense that one would regard traditional historiography, but they do generate a [certain] knowledge of the past” (1991, 54).<sup>24</sup> For Landy, films about a historical *sujet* have a metahistorical quality, since they “reveal how historical meaning is constructed, even to the extent of exposing their strategies for producing knowledge about the past and its relation to the present” (ibid.). For Cook, this opens up the possibility of conceptualising the filmic past as “a site for a complex imaginative encounter, combining fantasy, emotion and critical judgement” (2005, 11). In her seminal study, *British Genres: Cinema and Society (1930-1960)* (1991), Landy recommends a specific approach in order to understand the meaning of historical films:

The historical films are not more of a reflection of reality than melodramas and comedies. The key to their meaning lies, rather, in the particular ways in which the films deploy history for ends that are largely inaccessible to direct verification of their links to social events. The crux, therefore is, not to seek correspondence with factual events but more generally to explore how the films conform to or disrupt popular discourses. (1991, 55)

Ultimately, Landy seems to suggest a reading that—like the one used in this study—critically examines the films’ ideological subtext.

Another genre that has often been associated with films about British monarchs, and particularly with the films from the 1990s, is that of heritage film.<sup>25</sup> This is because of various formal and aesthetic characteristics,

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<sup>24</sup> Despite their focus on public figures and their relation to society, the films “also provide an insight into more immediate and private concerns touching the lives of individuals, the nature of everyday existence, and the relationship between the public and private spheres in ways often inaccessible to traditional historical writing” (Landy 1991, 54).

<sup>25</sup> The influential and often pejorative category of heritage cinema in 1980s Britain was coined by Charles Barr to describe the patriotic British films of the 1940s. It

such as references to royal portraiture and a *mise-en-scène* of country houses with lavish interiors similar to those found in National Trust or English Heritage properties (cf. Higson 2003, 39-40).<sup>26</sup> An early critical position on heritage cinema argues that these films operated “aesthetically and ideologically—via their construction of the ‘national past’ as English, southern, bourgeois or upper-class, and ‘essentially pastoral’” (Higson 1993, 110). Despite the valuable insights these studies have provided, with Kara McKechnie leading the way in terms of the monarchy film, approaching the topic from the perspective of a genre (such as heritage cinema) would limit the analytical possibilities (cf. Higson 2003, 255). Therefore, this study aims to produce new and useful perspectives on royal representations that have not been covered by the focus on the heritage genre so far. Following Monk’s proposal in her article entitled “The heritage-film debate revisited”, certain elements which have been subsumed under the term heritage cinema will be considered as “pan-generic” heritage characteristics here (2002, 192).

The analysis of the visuals and aesthetics of the films in this study is highly indebted to the heritage-film debate regarding, most importantly, the feminist revisions. These revisions redirected the focus from the leftist perspective,<sup>27</sup> which dismissed the films on the grounds of class and

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was then applied to a number of films including *Chariots of Fire* (1981), *Another Country* (1984), *A Passage to India* (1984), *Room with a View* (1985), *Maurice* (1987) and *Howards End* (1992) (1986, 12). Its dissemination exemplifies “how critical discourse contributes to shaping the changing meanings and cultural value of genre” (Pidduck 2012, 105). For a detailed and reflective summary of the heritage debate, see Vidal 2012.

<sup>26</sup> The specific style of the heritage film has been described in slightly derogatory terms as a “country house version of Englishness” or a “museum aesthetic” because of its showcasing of heritage attractions (Higson 1996, 233).

<sup>27</sup> In recent years, the leftist perspective that considers heritage cinema to be “regressive”, associates it with reactionary politics and accuses its visual pleasures of commodity fetishism targeting a specific (predominantly female, middle-class, middle-aged) audience has been frequently criticised (cf. Higson 2003, 46-48). The contra position has recently found further support in Claire Monk’s qualitative empirical study, *Heritage Film Audiences* (2011). In her research, Monk shifts the focus onto an aspect of heritage film studies which has so far been neglected by the mainly text-focused heritage-film debate and provides an important corrective to the top-down approach. Monk’s research hypothesis suggests that real heritage film audiences were “more diverse—demographically, culturally, politically and in their broader film tastes—than the narrow, bourgeois, ‘older’ heritage audience projected in the founding critiques of heritage cinema” (2011, 33). On the basis of two different cohorts, Monk demonstrates the existence of “polyvalent readings”, which include both highly conservative viewing positions, and perspectives that

regarded them as “conservative films for middle-class audiences” that “function to maintain the values and interests of the post privileged social strata”, and shifted it towards the representation of gender and sexuality (Higson 2003, 46; cf. Vincendeau 2001, xx). The concepts of femininity and masculinity, gender identities, gender roles and sexualities of the screen representations of Elizabeth I, George III, Victoria, George VI and Elizabeth II are of particular interest to this discussion.

*Elizabeth* has played a central role in the academic discourse on heritage cinema because it constituted “a paradigm shift within the English heritage film” (Church Gibson 2002, 136). Church Gibson argues that it “moved so far beyond the constraints of the heritage genre as to alter and destabilize it” (ibid.). In order to describe the new quality of the films produced since the mid-1990s, Claire Monk introduced the term “post-heritage”<sup>28</sup> into the critical debate (1995, 33). However, far from rejecting the characteristics of the traditional heritage film in the sense of the Merchant Ivory films, the films labelled post-heritage still revel in the well-known (visual) pleasures and combine them with an increasing hybridity of genre and style (cf. Monk qtd. in Higson 2003, 44). This phenomenon should be read not so much as a clear break, but as an example of cinema’s potential for development and the unstable and flexible nature of critical categories such as heritage cinema (cf. Higson 2003, 44).

In terms of its research design, this study uses the same discussion as can be found in heritage discourse regarding the concept of history that the films disseminate and their relationship to the past. Films that deal with episodes in British (national/royal) history are never too far away from being labelled nostalgic<sup>29</sup> for the way they conceive history.<sup>30</sup> In her

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were more varied and sometimes radically different (2011, 162). A key finding of the study shows that “perceptions, uses, and readings of period [...] films by their audiences are diverse in ways that cannot validly be viewed as textually determined” (ibid.). Indeed, Monk concludes that there is no “homogenous entity” that displays unified tastes and views (2011, 167). Instead, audiences need to be understood within “a complex social, educational and cultural intertext extending beyond the films themselves” (2011, 168).

<sup>28</sup> In general, Higson considers the proliferation of heritage terminology (post-heritage, alternative heritage, anti-heritage, etc.) as indicative of the significance of the heritage idea in British contemporary cultural debate (cf. 2003, 36)

<sup>29</sup> For a concise history of the term, which began as a physical condition in the seventeenth century and has grown increasingly complex since its first mention, see Higson 2013, 4-9.

<sup>30</sup> The representation of specific versions of “the” British past in these films is complex, and the evocation of nostalgia is just one possible effect.

seminal article on monarchy films in the late 1990s, Kara McKechnie addresses this phenomenon:

A history film with emphasis on the visual is often automatically categorised as a ‘heritage film’, suggesting an unhealthy and conservative concern with nostalgia. Visually displayed history and the very fact that films are set in the past result in accusations of apolitical superficiality and aloofness from relevant contemporary issues. (2002, 219)

Since the 2000s, however, a broadly conceived reconceptualisation and a re-evaluation of the historically variable concept of nostalgia have taken place in academic discourse. Leftist commentators<sup>31</sup> criticisms of period cinema as being sentimentalised, depoliticised, conservative and regressive, and associated with “the spectacular display of period detail and thus contaminated by commodity fetishism [...] [that] gets in the way of a more authentic critical approach to the national past” have been addressed by cultural critics (Cook 1996, 28; cf. Sprengler 2009, 33). They shifted the focus towards the unrecognised critical potential of nostalgia, a concept that eludes easy definition and categorisation, and brims with ambiguity.<sup>32</sup> The ambiguity that is inherent in the concept of nostalgia comes to the fore in the specific relationship between the past and the present: “nostalgia is predicated on a dialectic between longing for something idealised [e.g. the past] that has been lost, and an acknowledgement that this idealised something can never be retrieved in actuality” (Cook 2005, 4). The nostalgic person, as David Metzger observes, is therefore “[f]orever caught

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<sup>31</sup> According to Claire Monk, this highly politicised strand of heritage film critique has “historically and politically specific origins in the UK” because it emerged out of “left and liberal-intellectual reactions against the cultural-political climate fostered by 1980s Thatcherism” (Monk 2011, 432).

<sup>32</sup> Although there were individual early voices in cultural criticism that highlighted the critical potential of nostalgia, the broad reconceptualisation was a long time coming. As early as 1979, the sociologist Fred Davis indicated the ‘positive’ effects of nostalgia—namely, feelings of pleasure, joy or satisfaction (cf. 1979, 14). Davis also suggests that its primary purpose is the continuity of identity: “Nostalgia is one of the means—or better, one of the more readily accessible psychological lenses—we employ in the never ending works of constructing, maintaining, and reconstructing our identities” (1979, 31). Almost at the same time, film scholar Marc Le Sueur points out “how seldom [nostalgia] is considered in a serious manner” in film culture and suggests that this concept “has been seriously underrated as a force in history” (1977, 187). Le Sueur criticises the fact that only a few people have attempted “to establish the general working principles” of nostalgia, the impulses of which are “sometimes allied with very vital and assertive social and political currents” (1977, 188).

in paradoxes” because he or she “wants to close that gap [the distance between past and present] but at the same time he or she realises that it must remain open” (2003, 22). Drawing on Susan Stewart’s seminal (psychoanalytical) study *On Longing* (1984), Metzger argues that, above all, “nostalgia exists as a longing and, with its object forever unattainable, it becomes in many ways a longing for longing, a feeling that feeds upon its own desire” (2003, 22). This echoes Stewart’s description of nostalgia as “desire for desire” (1984, 23). The oxymoron bittersweet is often used to describe the specific effect of “melancholy pleasure” (Cather qtd. in Metzger 2003, 22), implying “that the component of sadness serves only to heighten the quality of recaptured joy or contentment” (Davis 1979, 14). As a concept of history, nostalgia engages in a “dialectic interplay of remembering and forgetting” (Enderwitz and Feldmann 2014, 52) because nostalgia “consists of the stories about one’s past that explain and consolidate memory rather than dispersing it into a series of vivid, relinquished moments, and it can only survive by eradicating the ‘pure memory’, that enormous field of vanished detail, that threatens it” (Dames 2003, 4).

Given the complexity of nostalgia, it is constructive to draw on different approaches focusing on divergent aspects that form the conceptual basis of this interdisciplinary discussion. Scholars from various disciplines, such as film scholars Pam Cook and Christine Sprengler, heritage specialist Andrew Higson, English scholar Nicolas Dames, historian David Lowenthal and sociologist Fred Davies, have challenged the left-wing understanding of nostalgia and call for a more nuanced approach that no longer ignores the enabling and pleasurable aspects.

For these scholars, every manifestation of nostalgia has the potential to “reflect upon its own mechanisms and to encourage reflection in audiences” (Cook 2005, 5). According to Cook, nostalgia “cannot be regarded as a simple device for idealizing and de-historicising the past, as has frequently been claimed” (ibid.). She advocates the notion that nostalgia “might provide ways of actively engaging in the process of reconstructing the past, rather than simply encouraging ‘passive’ consumption of it” (1996, 28).<sup>33</sup> In terms of the ambiguity described

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<sup>33</sup> The idea of audiences being active and autonomous has been qualified by Monk’s study, which demonstrated “the existence [...] of audience sectors and cultures whose responses are significantly mediated, constrained and even over-determined by existing discourse” (Monk 2011, 445). While her study demonstrates “the diversity and complexity of responses and viewing positions among these (plural) audiences, it did not show them to be *free* to respond to the

above, she argues that nostalgia “plays on the gap between representations of the past and actual past event, and the desire to overcome that gap and recover what has been lost” (Cook 2005, 4).

In his early work on heritage cinema in the mid-1990s, Higson describes nostalgia as a “profoundly ambivalent phenomenon”<sup>34</sup> and addresses the dialectic of escapism<sup>35</sup> and critical potential (1996, 238). He suggests that

[n]ostalgia is always in effect a critique of the present, which is seen as lacking something desirable situated out of reach in the past. Nostalgia always implies that there is something wrong with the present, but it does not necessarily speak from the point of view of right-wing conservatism. It can of course be used to flee from the troubled present into the imaginary stability and grandeur of the past. But it can also be used to comment on the inadequacies of the present for a more radical perspective. (Higson 1996, 238)

Film scholar Sprengler attributes the same quality to the concept and argues that an “ideal past might illuminate failures of the present and provoke efforts to fix it” (2009, 32). In his most recent publication on nostalgia, Higson<sup>36</sup> returns to this argument and suggests that the

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films and creatively use them as they wished” (Monk 2011, 445; emphasis in original).

<sup>34</sup> Susan Stewart emphasises the fundamental ambiguity of nostalgia (cf. 1984, 23). It is “the repetition that mourns the inauthenticity of all repetitions” (1984, 23).

<sup>35</sup> The accusation of escapism has been countered by the sociologist Fred Davis and the literary scholar Svetlana Boym (cf. 1979, 116; cf. 2001, xv). Boym argues that nostalgia can be considered as a “rebellion against [the] modern idea of time, the time of history and progress” (2001, xv). This reassessment understands the nostalgic mode as a “conscious decision to reject the logic of modernity and progressive ideologies” (Su 2005, 4). The literary scholar Su points out another aspect of this specific mode of memory, saying that it “encourages an imaginative exploration of how present systems of social relations fail to address human needs, and the specific objects of nostalgia—lost or imagined homelands—represent efforts to articulate alternatives” (Su 2005, 5).

<sup>36</sup> In his article, Higson describes a recent shift from modern to postmodern versions of nostalgia. He argues that the modern, temporal version of nostalgia is based on the “unattainable distance between the past and the present; the post-modern, *atemporal* version erases this sense of distance” (2013, 1; emphasis in original). However, in his description of modern nostalgia as “experience of wistfulness”, Higson omits the pleasurable aspects of the concept’s *bittersweet* quality (2013, 6). He contrasts it with his notion of postmodern nostalgia which “no longer seems to be troubled by wistfulness” (ibid.): “a key aspect of the *culture* of [postmodern] nostalgia is indeed the *business* of nostalgia, where the