

Dramatisation of History: *The Queen*

Yrd. Doç. Dr. Sibel ÇELİK NORMAN

anadolu üniversitesi, iletişim bilimleri fakültesi
scnorma@anadolu.edu.tr

Abstract

This essay examines the British film The Queen in the context of the ongoing debate over fact and fiction in historical films and the impact of "History by Hollywood" on public perceptions of the recent past. The long-established practice among dramatists of inserting fictional dialogue and imagined episodes into historical narratives has been given a new dimension by the sophisticated editing techniques and increasing accessibility of contemporary film, leading to a critical debate concerning the work of Oliver Stone. The essay argues that the more subtle approach adopted by director Stephen Frears and scriptwriter Peter Morgan in The Queen may have an equally significant influence on the interpretation of recent history, a fact that has been overlooked by critics due to a mistaken categorisation of such films. It is suggested that The Queen should properly be considered as a development within the genre of heritage cinema, with its characteristic blend of nostalgia and deference, which is ill-suited to the purposes of historiography.

keywords: historical drama, Oliver Stone, Stephen Frears, dramatic licence, heritage cinema

Résumé

La Dramatisation de l'Histoire: *The Queen*

Cet essai examine le film anglais *The Queen* (La Reine) dans le contexte du débat contemporain au sujet de la réalité et fiction dans les films historiques et l'effet de "l'histoire racontée par Hollywood" sur les perceptions publiques du passé récent. La pratique ancienne parmi les dramaturges d'ajouter les dialogues et les événements imaginaires dans les narratives historiques a été donnée une dimension nouvelle par un montage sophistiqué et l'accessibilité grandissante des films modernes, entraînant un débat critique au sujet des films d'Oliver Stone. Cet essai propose que l'approche plus subtile du réalisateur Stephen Frears peut avoir une influence également considérable sur l'interprétation du passé récent, ce qui a échappé l'attention des critiques selon une catégorisation fautive d'un tel film. L'on débat sur le fait que *The Queen* soit correctement considéré comme un développement du genre cinéma d'héritage, avec son mélange caractéristique de la nostalgie et de la déférence, ce qui est peu convenable aux buts de l'historiographie.

mots-clés: drame historique, Oliver Stone, Stephen Frears, licence dramatique, cinéma d'Héritage

Özet

Tarihin Dramatizasyonu: *The Queen*

Bu çalışma *The Queen* (Kraliçe) adlı İngiliz filmini tarihsel filmlerdeki gerçeklik ile kurmaca arasında süregelen tartışma bağlamında, "Hollywood tarafından anlatılan tarihin" yakın geçmişe dair algı üzerindeki etkisi açısından incelemektedir. Dramaturların köklü uygulamalarından olan tarihsel anlatılara kurmaca diyaloglar ve hayali olaylar katma, çağdaş sinemanın artan erişilebilirliği ve gelişmiş kurgu teknikleri ile yeni bir boyut kazanmaktadır. Bu durum Oliver Stone'un çalışmalarına ilişkin eleştirel bir tartışmaya yol açmıştır. Bu çalışma yönetmen Stephen Frears ve senaryo yazarı Peter Morgan'ın *The Queen*'de benimsemiş oldukları daha ince yaklaşımın yakın geçmişin yorumlanmasında aynı oranda etkili olabileceğini tartışmakta ve bu durumun bu tür filmlerin hatalı sınıflandırılmalarından dolayı eleştirmenler tarafından göz ardı edildiğini öne sürmektedir. Tarih yazımının amaçlarına uygun olmayan nostalji ve hürmet niteliklerinin karışımıyla *The Queen*'in miras sineması türünde bir gelişme olarak değerlendirilmesi gerektiği önerilmektedir.

anahtar kelimeler: tarihsel film, Oliver Stone, Stephen Frears, dramatik yetki, miras sineması

1. Narrative and Characterisation in *The Queen*

The narrative of *The Queen* (Stephen Frears, 2006) is built on the following events: after Princess Diana's death in a car accident in Paris in August 1997, the British Royal Family, in line with official protocol, insisted that Diana, who had been divorced from Prince Charles the previous year, was no longer a member of the Royal Family and all arrangements connected with her funeral should be carried out as for any other private citizen. The royal standard at Buckingham Palace was not flown at half-mast on the grounds that the flag not flown unless Queen Elizabeth herself is in residence. She was at the time on holiday at Balmoral (in Scotland), and declined to return to London in order to share the nation's mourning for the Princess. Tony Blair, who had been prime minister for only three months at this time and at 44 was the youngest holder of that office since the eighteenth century, took the initiative to persuade *The Queen* that the Royal Family must return to London, that the royal standard must be flown at half-mast over Buckingham Palace and that the monarch must make a televised statement to the nation. The resulting exchanges between a callow politician and a veteran monarch (Elizabeth had been on the throne for nearly fifty years) constitute the narrative core of the film. The sense of national drama is provided by sequences showing the unique expression of public sentiment on behalf of the dead princess, the elaborate staging of her funeral, the images of the orphaned princess and the outcry of the tabloid press at the perceived indifference of the Royal Family.

In terms of the overall narrative framework, the film remains faithful to the facts as later known, with only minor exceptions. The reluctance of *The Queen* to leave Balmoral, the issue of the Palace flag, the huge crowds and floral tributes, the eventual arrival of the Royal Family in London, their contact with the crowds and the proceedings at the funeral are a matter of public record. What was not publicly known at the time was the part played by Blair in advising *The Queen* or the content of the meetings and phone conversations between prime minister and monarch, which are always confidential. These exchanges were created by the scriptwriter, as were the domestic scenes in the Blair household and within the Royal Family; in fact what the film chiefly represents are the imaginary private dramas that may have occurred behind closed doors. The main events were naturally subject to close scrutiny by the media, but the right to privacy of the British monarchy was largely respected, which acted as a limitation to media coverage.

Regarding characterisation, the script of *The Queen* followed the versions widely accepted in the British press: *The Queen* depicted as formal, aloof, professional and her husband, the Duke of Edinburgh, as irascible and opinionated. Prince Charles, heir to the throne, is treated with more sympathy than might have been expected given that his relations with the press were never good and he was held responsible by many citizens for the failure of his

marriage to Princess Diana. Prime Minister Blair had been a landslide victor in the recent general election and was seen at that time as a young, articulate modernizer, which is broadly how he was portrayed in *The Queen*. His wife was well-known for her republicanism and for her readiness to speak her mind, which are also reflected in the film. Blair's press officer, Alastair Campbell (the only other figure within the Blair administration to have a major role in the film) was known as a combative and aggressive journalist (Lanchester 2007: 8) likely to have disagreed with Blair's support for the monarchy, as the film also suggests.

In sum, the filmscript was historically accurate in terms of the main events and accorded with the general perceptions of media and public in terms of the principal characters. The circumstances of Princess Diana's death, which were to become a matter of intense controversy, are not addressed by the film, and the relationship of Prince Charles to his wife, during and after their marriage, is likewise omitted.

The role of Tony Blair was played by Michael Sheen and that of Queen Elizabeth by Helen Mirren, British actors well-known for their appearances in film and television. *The Queen* was a winner at the Academy Awards (Helen Mirren for Best Actress) and at the BAFTA awards (Best Film). The film cost \$15 million to make and earned estimated gross revenues of approximately \$125 million (<http://www.imdb.com>: 2007 figures). It was described in the latest edition of *The British Cinema Book* as 'a breakthrough in British Cinema' (Murphy 2008: 84).

2. Partiality and Omission in The Queen

The events in England following the death of Princess Diana are told in *The Queen* in an apparently impartial manner, with none of the three main protagonists - the Royal Family, the Blair Government and the British press - attacked or seriously criticised. The monarchy is depicted as obstinate at first but ultimately yielding to the persuasion of a pro-monarchist prime minister, who was responding to the legitimate wishes of the populace as expressed by the press. In such a way, it may be said, a constitutional monarchy is meant to function in a democratic state.

The Queen herself is shown as insistent on the prerogatives of her family and the importance of precedent, and reluctant to be advised otherwise by a novice prime minister. After her initial resistance, she is persuaded to respond to the 'will of the people' by returning to London, flying the flag at half-mast at Buckingham Palace and making a live television statement, which was well-received by the public. Two scenes in particular serve to indicate her character as a private person and her response to the dilemma between precedent and protocol on the one hand and political necessity on the other. The first of these - which in the mind of many viewers may have proved the most memorable

scene in the film - shows her driving her own car through the Scottish hills, getting the vehicle stuck in a river and encountering a fine red deer which is being tracked by hunters including her husband and grandchildren. She tries to hurry the stag away from the spot in an attempt to save its life. The following day, she discovers that the stag has been killed and goes to see its corpse hanging upside down in the larder of a neighbouring landlord.

There are elements in this episode calculated to engage the attention of audiences accustomed to think of *The Queen* as living a highly protected existence, with staff and servants always at hand. The idea that *The Queen* drives her own car - a not very new or elegant Landrover - in rugged terrain, without companion, bodyguard or assistant, would come as a surprise to many viewers, and the image of her caught in a river, on her own, amid wild, mountainous country would be dramatic. The audience is invited to identify with her admiration and sympathy for the stag and her sadness when it is found to have been killed. These sentimental effects are perhaps more impressive to the audience than the metaphorical message: that *The Queen* herself, like the stag, is threatened by her own family, in that the misdemeanours of members of her family, including Prince Charles, Princess Diana and the Duchess of York, have brought the monarchy into disrepute (Junor 2005: passim).

The second intimate scene is a stroll in the gardens of Balmoral with her mother, the venerable Queen Mother, who of all the Royals was held in most affection by the public. *The Queen* complains that she has been confronted by a dilemma because of her duty to uphold established protocol which maintains and safeguards the status of the monarchy. In her view, correct behaviour is characterised by emotional restraint and discretion, and the violent outburst of grief caused by Diana's death seems alien to her. "It is not how we were brought up", she says.

The Queen's response to the crisis is depicted as motivated by duty and upbringing rather than by indifference to the feelings of her people, but it should be emphasized that the episode has no basis in fact and *The Queen's* private feelings on the issue are not known and probably never will be. Thus the two scenes which lie at the heart of the film's emotional appeal derive solely from the imagination of the scenarist. Their effect is indisputably to encourage on the part of viewers a sympathy with *The Queen* by explaining her insistence on remaining at Balmoral and indicating how the temper of the nation has changed, leaving the monarch isolated in her adherence to an older code of behaviour. The viewer knows from the episode of the stag that she is not immune to sentiment, but even her sadness at the creature's death is treated in restrained and unemotional fashion.

The character and motives of Blair are also sympathetically handled. He is depicted as sincere in his belief that the monarchy will be weakened or

threatened if *The Queen* is not seen to grieve for Diana, and in one scene, also imagined by the scenarist, he loudly harangues his press officer, Campbell, on the monarchy's importance to the country and the great virtues of *The Queen*. While it is known that Blair was a supporter of the monarchy and impressed by the experience and professionalism of the monarch (Blair 2010: chapter 6), this imagined speech goes beyond mere support, being more akin to heartfelt conviction. It is widely recognised among political commentators that Blair needed and nourished a sense of moral righteousness. According to Lanchester, Blair - in this and many other cases - 'fell in love with his own certainty and sense of conviction' (2007: 9). He was an enthusiastic and occasionally naïve person of a kind likely to be impressed by the mystique of the sovereign, but his harangue referred to above expresses his pro-monarchical beliefs more strongly than he did in public speeches or in his autobiography. In the film, he is also shown as prepared to stand up to his outspokenly republican wife, Cherie, which is also a matter of conjecture.

What the film does not emphasise is how much Blair had to gain in terms of his own popularity with the electorate during his handling of the crisis. His designation of Diana as 'the people's princess', an expression which was immediately taken up by the press, was certainly one of his most inspired moments as prime minister (Daily Telegraph: 2007). The element of political calculation on Blair's part is alluded to by *The Queen* in an interview with Blair towards the end of the film, indicating that Morgan was aware of this aspect of Blair's motives but did not choose to stress it.

The British tabloid press, despite its reputation for extreme partiality and intrusiveness, was treated in *The Queen* in neutral fashion, the implication being that the press was in this case simply fulfilling its accepted function by reflecting popular sentiment. The unprecedented extent of national mourning over Diana's death was assumed by Morgan and Frears to have been spontaneous, and this spontaneity was in fact crucial to the film's diegesis, which otherwise would have lacked any real sense of tension. The hundreds of thousands of wreaths, posies and messages left by the public outside the gates of Kensington Palace are undeniable evidence of the public mood, but the role of the media in this outpouring of grief is not examined in the film, and there is no discussion as to whether the tabloid headlines were a reflection of the public sentiment or were instrumental in orchestrating it. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine where such discussion would originate, since the leftish broadsheets such as *The Guardian* and *Independent* were unlikely to take up the cause of Royal Family, the conservative *Daily Mail* was always populist in tone and much of the rest, including *The Times* and *The Sunday Times*, was owned by Rupert Murdoch, an Australian with known republican sympathies. The Murdoch-owned newspapers - especially *The Sun* and *The News of the World* - quickly adopted an antagonistic stance towards *The Queen's* decision to remain in Scotland and challenged the

Royal Family to react. Naturally this was presented by the newspapers concerned as an expression of the people's mood, and the extravagant display of grief for Princess Diana - in strong contrast to British custom - was seen as an indication that the British public had become more demonstrative and emotional, in fact less 'British' in the usual sense of the term (Kear and Steinberg 1999: chapters 1-2). The great popularity of Diana, and public sympathy for her regarding her marriage and her subsequent ejection from the Royal Family, is not in dispute. What is at issue is the extent and manner of the performance of public grief.

3. History on Screen: the Critical Debate

In the United States, an intense debate has been conducted among academics regarding the mixture of fact and fiction ('faction') in the cinematic treatment of history. At the centre of this debate has been the work of Oliver Stone, especially *JFK* (1991), his examination of the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963; and *Nixon* (1995), a more traditionally structured biopic of the thirty-seventh US president. (In Stone's so-called Vietnam trilogy, the fictional element was more easily identifiable and the relation of the diegesis to affairs of state more tenuous) *JFK* provoked sharp attacks by historians and film critics (Corrigan 1991, Armstrong 1992, Sobchack 1996, White 1996). These attacks had one feature in common, the charge that Stone's films, and in particular his methods of editing, did not allow viewers to distinguish what was real and what was imagined. According to White, 'the distinction between the real and the imaginary is placed in abeyance' (White 1996: 19); Armstrong and Sobchack were concerned about the possible effect on young viewers: 'The young people to whom Stone has dedicated this film could take his far-reaching conjectures as literal truth' (Gitlin and Armstrong 1992: 14); 'Stone's editing techniques might destroy the capacity of young viewers to distinguish between a real and a merely imaginary event (Sobchack 1996: 20). White argues that the issue goes deeper than editing techniques. In his view, the confusion of real and fictional is part of the modernist/postmodernist 'dissolution of the event as a basic unit of temporal occurrence and building-block of history [which] undermines the very concept of factuality and threatens therewith the distinction between realistic and merely imaginary discourse' (1996: 18). A question of ethics is involved, as Corrigan explains: 'History is reduced to subjectivity ... without the truly ethical point of view found in distinguishing images of history' (Corrigan 1991: 43).

Postmodern theory - politically sceptical, philosophically relativist, hermeneutically suspicious - emphasises the primacy of the transient image in recollection and memory and essentially denies the possibility of genuine objectivity in historiography. The event, which history had regarded as a fixed and immutable point around which analysis and interpretation can turn, becomes itself something questionable and uncertain. This seems applicable particularly to *JFK*, in which Stone employed a style referred to by Grenier as 'romping,

inventing, pummelling, obfuscating, bludgeoning' (Grenier 1992: 16) and by Polan as 'slam-bam montage ... sledgehammer editing' with 'flashbacks put forward as unequivocal and unchallengeable bits of verity' (Polan 1996: 238/9).

Stone has his apologists among academics, including Robert Rosenstone and Robert Brent Toplin, professors of history at the Californian Institute of Technology and the University of Carolina respectively, who defend what they see as a new kind of history-telling, closer to the relativist tone of contemporary academia and playing its part in the deconstruction of meta-narratives. Rosenstone argues that 'what history gives us is no more than an arbitrary set of data pulled together by an ideology, a teleology and a moral' (Rosenstone 2000: 31). Elsewhere he declares: 'History is actually no more than a series of conventions for thinking about the past, and these conventions have shifted over time ... and will obviously shift in the future' (2000: 28). According to him, filmmakers such as Stone are pushing back the frontiers of history, opening up new debates, and making history 'more like real life' by avoiding the usual compartmentalization to which orthodox historians commonly resort.

The criticism of Oliver Stone's *Nixon* focused not on what was confusing and misleading but on what was historically inaccurate. Steven Ambrose, biographer of Nixon, raises the issue of the words spoken in the film by Mao Zedong when *Nixon* visits China in 1972. 'You're as evil as I am,' Mao says, 'in my case, millions of reactionaries; in your case, millions of Vietnamese' (Ambrose et al. 2000: 204). Stone responded that Mao was known for his 'peasant bluntness' and, according to Harrison Salisbury, was an opium addict (in the 1950s). 'Under the influence of morphine and aware of his forthcoming demise, Mao might conceivably talk bluntly,' he argued (Stone 2000: 252). The *Nixon* visit was well documented, however, and records exist of the exchanges between the two leaders. Stone's idea of what Mao 'might conceivably' have said seems an inadequate justification for the insertion of this speech into a meeting between the leaders of two superpowers. Mao's remark was never made but it looks in the film as if it was.

The film also reintroduces the conspiracy theories familiar from JFK. In Arthur Schlesinger's description: 'Periodic cuts to swaggering Texans and sinister Cubans remind us of the "ten or twenty people" who pull the strings behind the scenes. The climax comes on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, where a New Leftist makes *Nixon* recognise what the movie designates as "The Beast". *Nixon* muses, "She understood something it's taken me twenty-five f***ing years in politics to understand. The CIA, the Mafia, the Wall Street bastards ..." ' (Ambrose et al. 2000: 214). Schlesinger (2000) points out the term 'Wall Street bastards' belongs to the 1990s (when the film was made), that there was little animosity between *Nixon* and the CIA, and that the Mafia seems to have been carelessly included. In fact, Nixon's sudden revelation about 'The Beast' in US politics clearly reflects the instincts of the filmmaker rather than the

opinions of the film's subject. Wilkinson, one of Stone's co-writers, wrote: 'The Beast became a metaphor for the darkest organic forces in American Cold War politics: the anti-Communist crusade, secret intelligence, the defence industry, organized crime, big business' (Stone, Rivele, Wilkinson 1995: 48).

Ambrose also claims that Stone's film seriously misrepresents the character of the president: 'Stone has *Nixon* drinking steadily and heavily throughout the film and using foul language regularly', and 'the *Nixon* marriage [seems] always on the verge of breaking apart' [Ambrose 2000: 203/4]. The president's close adviser H.R. Haldeman told Ambrose that he had only once seen *Nixon* drunk and Wicker (author of a 1991 biography of the president) also wrote of 'only one authentic case' (ibid). In Stone's movie, *Nixon* used the expletive f*** throughout, eight times in one scene, yet Ambrose who made a close study of the White House tapes never heard the word used by the President even at times of crisis. According to Ambrose's, *Nixon* was 'a shy Quaker boy who seldom used locker-room language' (ibid).

The makers of *Nixon* do not deny the presence of fictional elements. The film opens with a disclaimer, clearly intended to anticipate criticism of the film's accuracy following the controversy surrounding JFK. In this disclaimer, the film is described as 'an attempt to understand the truth based on numerous public sources and an incomplete historical record ... Events and characters have been condensed, and some scenes among protagonists have been conjectured' (Rosenstone 2000: 27). Stone repeatedly declared that he was not a historian (Toplin 2000: chapter 1), even though the press pack for the film included references to an impressive corpus of historical research. Stone's principal argument is that the work of a historical dramatist is to make drama out of history, a function, he points out, traditionally legitimised by the concept of dramatic licence (Stone 2000: 219ff).

The Queen has an orthodox chronological structure and unobtrusive editing techniques. In sequences utilising actual newsreel footage (the crowds in Kensington Park and the funeral in Westminster Abbey), nothing significant is added to the plot, the newsreel serving as authentic historical background only. However, the distinction between real and imaginary in *The Queen* is no clearer than in Stone's work, even if not attended by 'bludgeoning' edits and cuts. In fact, all the dialogue between the main characters is imagined, and only the basic narrative framework is based on fact, but an untutored filmgoer would have no way of knowing this. Film critic Emmanuel Levy described the film as a 'largely fictional fact-inspired account' (Levy 2006), which is exactly right, but Levy would have consulted the publicity material before writing his review. Critic Roger Ebert no doubt represented a much larger proportion of the viewing public when he commented: 'the film creates an uncanny sense that it knows what goes on backstage in the monarchy' (Ebert 2006). None of the leading reviewers commented on Blair's surprisingly pro-monarchist convictions, on

the sentimental treatment of *The Queen* and charitable treatment of Prince Charles or on the motivation of the Murdoch press. With very few exceptions, the film was reviewed with great enthusiasm. Ebert called it 'spellbinding', Levy saw it as the story of 'a vulnerable human being in her darkest hour' (2006) and Schager described Helen Mirren's portrayal of *The Queen* as marked by 'a defiant sadness' (Schager 2006).

In the context of the postmodernist 'dissolution of the event', what *The Queen* does is to sidestep the principal 'event', which in this case is the death of Princess Diana in Paris. There is no footage of the car crash, no flashbacks to Diana's life, no discussion of what led up to her death. Instead, a new, much less visible 'event' is created, namely the response of *The Queen* and the prime minister to the tragedy, around which a network of imagined relationships is depicted. It might be argued that a strictly objective film concerning the actual circumstances of Diana's death would anyway be unfeasible, given the customary discretion of the monarchy, the conflicting versions of the failure of Charles and Diana's marriage and the continuing puzzle of the Paris car crash (the drunken chauffeur; the paparazzi's persistence; the charge levelled by the father of Diana's companion in the car, that there was a British-led conspiracy to put an end to a relationship that embarrassed the monarchy). In Britain, what is best remembered from that time were the floral tributes filling Kensington Park and the sight of the young princes walking behind the funeral cortège. These survive in the collective memory not as 'events' but images, in line with Sobchack's comment, derived from the work of Walter Benjamin, that 'history does not break down into stories but into images' (Sobchack 1996: 20), tending to support the postmodernist concept that filmmakers, through the selection of images and the prominence afforded to them, are effectively able to produce a number of quite different versions of the same series of events. Russell Lack points out that this process is facilitated by what he calls 'the aesthetics of videotape', the fragmented multi-shot sequence, characterised by 'ease of manipulation and accessibility' (Lack 1997: 342).

Precedents for imaginative dramatisations of historical events exist in all literary cultures, and the British/American tradition is rich in this respect, including the plays of Shakespeare. Western filmmakers have continued this tradition from *Birth of a Nation* onward. American civil war films routinely include unrecorded speeches by Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant, and Ford's *The Young Lincoln* was a largely fictional account of the president's youth. Recent British films include several fictionalized accounts of the Tudor monarchs and of the 'love affair' between Queen Victoria and her Scottish gamekeeper (Mrs. Brown, Madden, 1997). Morgan's 'largely fictional, fact-inspired account' of the aftermath of Diana's death employs essentially the same devices as Shakespeare's historical plays, in which the imagined conversations and internal dialogues of kings and queens are commonplace, such devices being normally

justified by the term 'dramatic licence', the customary right of playwrights to adjust and embroider historical facts to suit the needs of their drama.

The term originated in the theatre, and it is questionable whether it is equally applicable to the cinema, for two reasons. Firstly, the verisimilitude of theatre has inbuilt restrictions: there is a stage where the actors appear and disappear, there are painted or decorated sets which cannot be mistaken for reality, the performance is slightly or substantially different on different days, there is a curtain and audience reaction (a form of participation) and a bow. In the cinema, every technical advance in cinematography or special effects allows the representation on screen to approach more closely to a simulacrum of reality - better lighting, more sophisticated editing, superior lenses, more expensive and elaborate mise-en-scène. Not all films aim at realism, but if they do, they are better equipped than they were twenty years ago (and much better equipped than the theatre) to achieve it. Rosenstone lists as one of the advantages of filmed history over written history, that 'History becomes more like real life' (Rosenstone 2000: 30), and films, with the help of skilful and sophisticated editing, more easily collapse the distinction between what is real and what is fictional.

A further qualifying factor in terms of dramatic licence is the chronological distance from the period depicted. Tudor times, the nineteenth century, and for most viewers, the second world war, exist only in people's imagination, however scholarly. The alteration of character for dramatic purposes and the invention of imaginary dialogue is permitted and encouraged by the gaps in the historical record. When King Richard in Shakespeare's *Richard III* is accused of the murder of the Princess in the Tower, the accuracy of the charge may be questioned by scholars but the difference of opinion or interpretation affects only historians. When Mao accuses *Nixon* of murder, the impact is greater, because the effects of the US-China détente of the early 1970s are an issue of contemporary significance: the Republican Party is still active, the powers of the Presidency over foreign affairs is a subject of intense debate and many *Nixon* aides are still alive. Similarly, the debate over the rights and wrongs of constitutional monarchy in Britain continues to be of the first importance.

The question arises as to the extent of the influence wielded by cinema in terms of the public perception of recent history. Evidently, its impact cannot be measured only in terms of box-office returns alone, but must also take into account video rentals, television screenings, internet downloads, film clips on popular websites, discussion groups, film magazines, newspaper articles, and interviews with producers, directors, stars and historians on major television channels, the sum of which is effectively unquantifiable. In the absence of meaningful statistics, the critic is obliged to turn to anecdotal evidence. An example in the case of *The Queen* concerns the passage in Tony Blair's

autobiography dealing with his first meeting with *The Queen* as prime minister, which appears as the opening scene in the film. The words spoken by *The Queen* are identical in both cases, but since the book was written two or three years after the film was released, Morgan cannot have derived the speech from the autobiography and claims therefore that the reverse was true - that Blair had unconsciously remembered the words from the film and set them down as an actual record of the occasion (Daily Telegraph 2011). Blair denied it, naturally, but no other explanation is possible: even for one of the (historical) protagonists, the film version had taken the place of reality.

Sheen was three times cast as Tony Blair in the Peter Morgan's so-called 'Blair trilogy': as rising politician in *The Deal*, which concerned the power-sharing arrangement between Blair and George Brown in the early days of New Labour; as inexperienced prime minister in *The Queen*; and as international statesman in *The Special Relationship* (2010), which examined the various dealings between Blair and Clinton. Thus the release of *The Queen* confirmed an identification of Sheen with Blair that already existed in the public mind and which was to be further reinforced a few years later. Since his resignation as prime minister in 2008, Blair's international profile has diminished. He is currently serving 'merely' as a Middle East peace envoy. By contrast, his screen image as portrayed by Sheen, boosted by frequent television screenings of *The Queen* as well as American TV networking of *The Deal* and *The Special Relationship*, constitutes a fixed and pristine image that does not age or fade and is unaffected by subsequent developments. For many viewers, it seems likely that the screen image - with the sense of youthful enthusiasm and innocent goodwill emphasised by the combination of Morgan, Frears and Sheen - will increasingly compete with the reality, especially where Blair's earlier career as prime minister is concerned.

Conclusion

The Queen, with its straightforward editing techniques and understated cinematic style has not attracted the swingeing scholarly judgements delivered on *JFK* and *Nixon*. It may be argued that this is because the events upon which it is based are inherently less contentious and politically significant than the assassination of a president or the Watergate scandal, but other reasons may also be suggested. The first is the mystique of the monarchy in Britain, which ensures that the privacy of *The Queen* herself is respected to a degree unparalleled in the British establishment. The British public knows little about *The Queen's* domestic life and nothing of her political opinions which, as monarch, custom and precedent prevent her from expressing. Everything written or published regarding her relationship with the Duke of Edinburgh or her sons or her mother is based on hearsay or speculation. Similarly, *The Queen's* regular meetings with the prime minister are attended by no aide or scribe and are therefore unrecorded. Consequently, in these important respects, the film cannot be

judged against the facts, which are unknown and, without a constitutional revolution, unknowable. *The Queen's* position, in brief, is surrounded by such extreme formality that only formal aspects of her personality and actions are a matter of public knowledge. At a time when the demands for a more transparent monarchy became pressing - partly caused by the failed royal marriage and the treatment of Diana (Junor 2005), the release of *The Queen*, including its depiction of domestic scenes within the Royal Family, constituted part of the movement towards a less remote Head of State (We may also mention in this context the 2005 television film *Whatever Love Means*, an imaginary reconstruction of the intimate relationship between Prince Charles and Camilla Parker Bowles, which apparently continued after Charles' marriage to Diana, even though Camilla herself was a married woman). The reception of *The Queen* was positive among reviewers and cinemagoers. The box-office receipts far exceeded expectations (Lee 2007) and reviewers commended the film for its fidelity to the facts (Ebert 2006), its impartial, non-judgemental approach (Levy 2006) and the quality of the acting. No questions were asked about its omissions or inventions.

Scriptwriter Peter Morgan pointed out in relation to *The Deal* that 'with most English dramas about politics, you expect either a satire or a story with a very strong agenda. What you get here is an *emotional piece*' (quoted by Gritten 2003). In other words, what interested Morgan in the power-sharing agreement reached between George Brown and Tony Blair was not the political implications of such an agreement, unusual though it was, but the relationship between the two protagonists. The same may be said for *The Queen* which, as we have seen, avoids any comment about media exploitation of the Princess's death or the benefits to the Labour Party of Blair's intervention or the prospects for the monarchy of the eventual succession of Prince Charles and concentrates almost exclusively on the exchanges between *The Queen* and the Prime Minister, their background, content and effect.

The chief characteristic of the approach of the two protagonists is the film is its even-handedness. Neither *The Queen* nor Blair receive preferential treatment. Initially, this may seem surprising. Frears is known as a director with leftist and progressive views (notably in *My Beautiful Laundrette*, which aroused intense hostility among conservative critics). Such views are normally associated in the UK with republican sentiment. In fact, the film is strongly pro-monarchist. *The Queen's* resistance to leaving Balmoral and her strict adherence to protocol is depicted with sympathy, and her meeting with the public in London, potentially awkward, culminates in a touching show of affection from the crowd. At no point during the film is the relationship between Blair and *The Queen* portrayed as antagonistic. Thus a film which, like *The Deal*, is essentially 'emotional' lacks conflict, passion, and either disappointment or fulfilment. The disagreement between Blair and Queen Elizabeth was satisfactorily resolved, in that the wishes of the public were met, but by that time in the film, the focus had shifted to the spectacle of the funeral: the crowds, the flowers and the

young princes. It may be argued, in fact, that *The Queen* is an unusual cinematic phenomenon - a highly successful film lacking the normal generic elements to be expected either in a political or historical drama.

What it has instead - and this must surely be the basis for the film's success - is a privileged and confidential perspective on the formidable, unknown, immaculate figurehead of the British state - the oldest and most widely respected monarch in the world. The emotion that is provoked by the film is not joy or sadness or hope or fear but the sense of *nostalgia* and *deference*, and therefore *The Queen* should be understood as a development or evolution of the British Heritage genre. Among Frears' more recent work is *Mrs Henderson Presents* (2005), a factual/fictional story of wartime London, strongly nostalgic in its appeal, to which *The Queen* is much more closely related than to *My Beautiful Laundrette* or *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*.

The Heritage genre has been widely analysed by critics, usually in terms of social class (Hall 2001), feminism (Monk 1995) and *mise-en-scène* (Higson 2003). The most-quoted films of the genre are based on books by nineteenth century novelists or Tudor and Victorian history. *The Queen*, with its contemporary setting and relative absence of aristocratic grandeur, might seem to fit uneasily in the category, but the soundtrack titles suggest otherwise: *The Queen; Hills of Scotland; People's Princess; The Stag; Elizabeth and Tony; River of Sorrow; The Flowers of Buckingham, The Queen Drives; Night in Balmoral; Queen of Hearts*. Not only is the appeal sentimental and atavistic, but the focus is almost entirely on *The Queen* herself, as indeed is suggested by the film's title. To underline the social distinction between the world of *The Queen* and the world of her prime minister, shots featuring *The Queen* were shot in 35mm and shots featuring Blair were shot in 16mm, according to the DVD commentary to the film. As Ebert (2006) wrote: 'No one is more upper class than *The Queen*, and Tony Blair is profoundly middle class'.

If the generic context of the film is correctly understood, its characteristics can be seen in a different light. *The Queen* is fictional drama built around a few known facts: *The Queen* planned to stay in Balmoral, the press was antagonistic, Blair took the initiative and his standing with the British public was enhanced. The rest is conjecture, relying on a relationship between the young prime minister and the veteran queen which may or may not have existed and on royal motives that may or may not have been rightly interpreted. *The Queen* is not about Diana, not about Blair, not even about the mourning of the populace, it is about *The Queen*, approached with the combination of nostalgia, deference and wistfulness which together provide the mood and style of Heritage cinema.

Bibliography

AMBROSE Stephen, McGOVERN George & SCHLESINGER Arthur (2000). "Nixon: Is it History?" in **Oliver Stone's USA**, Toplin (ed.) Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas.

ARMSTRONG D. and GITLING T. (1992). "Killing the Messenger: Why did the Press react so furiously over Stone's Movie?", in **Image**, Sunday Feb 16, 1992.

BLAIR, Tony (2010). **A Journey**. London: Random House.

CORRIGAN, Timothy (1991). **A Cinema without Walls**. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

DAILY TELEGRAPH (2007). <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1556863/Tony-coined-the-peoples-princess.html>, [09.07.2007].

DAILY TELEGRAPH (2011) July 23. Peter Morgan Accuses Tony Blair of Plagiarizing Lines from his Film *The Queen*.

EBERT Roger (2006). '*The Queen*'. <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article=20061012REVIEWS>

GRENIER Richard (1992). Movie Madness. **Times Literary Supplement**, Jan 24, 16-17.

GRITTEN David (2003). 'The power, the glory-and the heartbreak'. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/ulture/3602995>, [20.09.2003].

HALL Sheldon (2001). "The Wrong Sort of Cinema", in **The British Cinema Book**, Murphy (ed.), 191-199. London: British Film Institute.

HIGSON Andrew (2003). **English Heritage, English Cinema**. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

JUNOR Penny (2005). **The Firm: the Troubled Life of the House of Windsor**. London: Harper Collins.

KEAR Adrian & STEINBERG Deborah Lynn (1999). **Mourning Diana: Nation, Culture and the Performance of Grief**. London: Routledge.

LACK Russell (1997). **Twenty Frames Under**. London: Quartet Books.

LANCHESTER John (2007). Review of 'The Blair Years' by Alastair Campbell. **London Review of Books**, 29/16, Aug 16.

LEE Christopher (2007). "*The Queen*". <http://www.leesmovieinfo.net/botitle.php?t=3907>

LEVY Emanuel (2006). "*The Queen* according to Frears". <http://emanuellevy.com/article=3178>

MONK Claire (1995). "Sexuality and the Heritage Film", in **Sight & Sound** 5/10, 32-4.

NEALE Steve (2000). **Genre and Hollywood**. London: Routledge.

POLAN Dana (1996). "The Professors of History", in **The Persistence of History**, Sobchack (ed.), London: Routledge.

ROSENSTONE Robert (2000). "Oliver Stone as Historian", in **Oliver Stone's USA**, Toplin (ed.), Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas.

SCHAGER, Nick (2006). <http://www.slantamagazine.com/filmreview/the-queen/2462>

SOBCHACK, Vivian (1996). "History Happens", in **The Persistence of History**, Sobchack (ed.), London: Routledge.

STONE, Oliver (2000). "Stone Responds", in **Oliver Stone's USA**, Toplin (ed.), Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas.

STONE Oliver, RIVELE Stephen & WILKINSON Christopher (1995). **Nixon: An Oliver Stone Film**. New York: Hyperion.

TOPLIN Robert Brent (2000). "Framing the Debat", in **Oliver Stone's USA**, Toplin (ed.), Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas.

WHITE Hayden (1996). "The Modernist Event", in **The Persistence of History**, Sobchack (ed.), London: Routledge.