

**Zeitschrift:** SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature  
**Herausgeber:** Swiss Association of University Teachers of English  
**Band:** 39 (2021)

**Artikel:** Long live the Queen! : Queen Victoria as a national icon in film  
**Autor:** Straumann, Barbara  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-919528>

#### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

#### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

#### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 24.02.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# Long Live the Queen! Queen Victoria as a National Icon in Film

Barbara Straumann

How do films about Queen Victoria use the Victorian monarch as a national icon? And how do their representations speak to the present in which they are made? The following contribution focuses on *Victoria the Great* (1937) and *Sixty Glorious Years* (1938) by Herbert Wilcox and Anna Neagle as well as the recent feature film *Victoria & Abdul* (2017), directed by Stephen Frears and starring Judi Dench. Responding to the Abdication Crisis in 1936 and the geopolitical situation in the late 1930s, the first two films construct Queen Victoria as a figure who stands for the stability of the monarchy and, in so doing, unifies the nation as an imagined community. Focusing on the queen's friendship with her favourite Indian servant Abdul Karim, Frears's comedy of manners juxtaposes Victoria's tolerant attitude with the racist bigotry of her royal household. It does so in order to construct the Victorian queen as a benign monarch but, in so doing, promulgates a spirit of imperialist nostalgia. Created in the context of the Brexit debate, Dench's sovereign thus represents a national figure that is inseparable from a problematic longing for an imperial past.

**Keywords:** Royal biopics, queenship, invented tradition, imagined community, imperialist nostalgia

*Sixty Glorious Years* (1938), one of many biopics about Queen Victoria, traces the life of the Victorian monarch from her early years on the throne to the Diamond Jubilee celebrations and her death. The narrative framing of her demise is particularly pertinent to a discussion

of Queen Victoria as a national icon because it represents her as the symbol of an entire age and hints at her posthumous use as a national figurehead. The sequence shows several subjects of different social backgrounds commenting on the impending death of their queen: a group of individuals anxiously awaiting news regarding the state of her health in front of the gate at Osborne House, urban pedestrians and omnibus passengers in disbelief at what they read in the newspapers, a flower vendor in the streets asserting that the queen will never die, an elderly middle-class couple noting that the queen's death "will be the end – of our world" (01:27:23-26) as well as three Westminster politicians who reminisce about the change and achievements of an entire era and express their pride in having lived in such a significant historical period. For the politicians, the queen embodies an entire age. As one of them puts it, "more than a great queen is passing into history – an era" (01:27:27-31). By showing the response of several subjects, the sequence highlights how individuals of various social backgrounds are united in the shared grief over their monarch's death. By emphasizing the status of the Victorian monarch as a collective figure, the film also seeks to unite its cinematic audience. The sense of pride the politicians express stands for a nostalgic patriotism which *Sixty Glorious Years*, released in 1938, revives shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War. Made at a time of geopolitical crisis, the film points to the remembrance of Queen Victoria and the era she embodied as a source of national unity and pride.

Royal biopics and historical films more generally are marked by a complex relationship between past and present. As James Chapman notes, "a historical feature film will often have as much to say about the present in which it was made as about the past in which it was set" (1). While evoking past periods, historical films simultaneously address contemporary issues. Like historical films, royal biopics invariably straddle two historical periods, which they bring into dialogue. While drawing on historical lives, they also tend to convey cultural concerns, political interest, and attitudes prevalent at the time of their production. Many films about queens reflect changing notions of gender and attitudes to female power in the specific ways in which they represent the relationship between the queen's two bodies, her body politic and her body natural.<sup>1</sup> Yet many royal biopics also use queens as collective figures in

---

<sup>1</sup> See Ernst Kantorowicz's well-known discussion of the concept of the king's two bodies; the volume edited by Regina Schulte for discussions of how this notion plays itself out in the case of various queens, whose body natural is always highlighted; as well as

order to develop national narratives in response to the times in which they were made.

Queen Victoria has appeared on screen more frequently than any other British monarch. Her life and reign, characterized not least of all by their longevity, have enjoyed an even longer cultural afterlife in film, ranging from early cinema to contemporary television.<sup>2</sup> In the following, I will examine a small cross-section of this afterlife by analysing how Victoria is constructed as a national icon in cinematic representations from two different time periods. My focus will be on two examples from the late 1930s: *Victoria the Great* (1937) and *Sixty Glorious Years* (1938), which were both directed by Herbert Wilcox and which both feature Anna Neagle in the role of Queen Victoria.<sup>3</sup> This will be followed by a discussion of the recent feature film *Victoria & Abdul* (2017), directed by Stephen Frears and starring Judi Dench. What national narratives do these biopics of the Victorian monarch develop? How does their use of Queen Victoria as a national icon speak to the historical moments in which they were made, namely the volatile political climate of the late 1930s in the case of Neagle and Wilcox, and the context of Brexit in the case of Frears? As we shall see, all these examples respond to moments of political crisis but, in so doing, develop different arguments: *Victoria the Great* and *Sixty Glorious Years* attempt to create national unity and cohesion in the face of the 1936 Abdication Crisis and the impending geopolitical conflict, whereas *Victoria & Abdul* can be seen to produce a wishful fantasy of Britannia and, at the same time, support a spirit of imperial nostalgia in the context of the Brexit crisis.

*Victoria the Great* and *Sixty Glorious Years* are both composed of crucial scenes from Queen Victoria's life that are presented as episodic vignettes and arranged in chronological order. The first film begins with Victoria's accession to the throne, while the second one starts by showing her as a young queen already married to Albert. However, the two films greatly resemble each other in giving much space to the couple's

---

Margaret Homans's analysis of the symbolic power Queen Victoria had as a female monarch. The relationship between Queen Victoria's body natural and her body politic is very much at the centre of two contemporary film productions: *The Young Victoria* (2009) with Emily Blunt, directed by Jean-Marc Vallée; and the current ITV series *Victoria*, produced by Daisy Goodwin and starring Jenna Coleman (2016-).

<sup>2</sup> According to Steven Fielding (67), Queen Victoria appears in over one hundred films and television programmes.

<sup>3</sup> Because of the great success of the first film *Victoria the Great* in 1937, Wilcox and Neagle made a very similar film – *Sixty Glorious Years* – only one year later, this time in colour. Neagle not only played the title role but also part-funded *Victoria the Great* and wrote much of the script (Street 126).

relationship and their joint work in the interest of the common good. In depicting Victoria and Albert as a close and loving couple, the films emphasize not only their private life but above all their public service for the country. For example, we see them support the repeal of the so-called Corn Laws, which benefitted landowners but made food expensive for the common people. Following Albert's painstaking planning, they jointly open the Great Exhibition in order to "promote a better understanding between all the people" (*Sixty Glorious Years* 00:32:40-42). They even conceive of the dynastic alliances of their children with the European aristocracy as a way of promoting international peace. Observing the courtship of their eldest daughter Vicky and Prince Frederick of Prussia, Albert notes: "[F]or those two children, so much can be done for the peace of the future" (00:56:20-33). In contrast to Victoria, whose German roots are hardly explored in the two films, Prince Albert is repeatedly shown to be vilified as a foreigner by the people and the press describing him as "a foreign agent, an avowed enemy of this country" (00:45:28-31). However, both films follow a reverential approach by putting a strong emphasis on the couple's great sense of duty and service to the country. They construct Albert as a 'good German,' characterized by his keen interest in the arts and science as well as his relentless work for the nation.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the peace project underpinning their plan to marry Vicky off to the Prussian crown prince, the couple try to preserve and promote international peace by attempting to avert the Crimean War or by intervening in the Trent Affair in order to prevent Britain from entering the American Civil War on the side of the Confederate States.

At the same time, *Sixty Glorious Years* represents Victoria as a queen who is ready to go to war if necessary. After the Fall of Khartoum and the death of General Gordon, the queen reprimands Prime Minister Gladstone for having avoided a military intervention. She underlines

---

<sup>4</sup> *Victoria the Great* opens with the misgivings of the Archbishop of Canterbury and Lord Conyngham about the accession of an unknown young girl who appears to have no will of her own and is instead dependent on her uncle "King Leopold of Belgium and Stockmar the German" and "that German mother of hers" (00:02:10-33). However, both *Victoria the Great* and *Sixty Glorious Years* depict Victoria as a British queen who no longer speaks German. Albert teaches her German words and corrects her accent, and she instructs him in English. While later biopics such as *The Young Victoria* (2009) or the ITV series *Victoria* (2016-) feature British actors in the role of the Prince Consort, Albert is here played by the homosexual Jewish-Austrian actor Adolf Anton Wilhelm Wohlbrück. A popular theatre and cinema performer in Austria, Wohlbrück moved to England in 1936 and established a career in British cinema under the name of Anton Walbrook, specializing in continental characters.

that there are situations in which war is unavoidable. This is important as the two films can be seen in the context of the volatile geopolitical climate of the late 1930s. Especially the Khartoum episode in *Sixty Glorious Years* makes an argument against appeasement politics towards Nazi Germany. By invoking this particular event in national history, the film calls on the cinema audience to be prepared for armed conflict should this become necessary. The message is all the more persuasive given that Neagle's queen is certainly no war-hawk but ready to resort to military action only after all other means have been exhausted.

As well as preparing the audience for war in *Sixty Glorious Years*, Wilcox and Neagle's portrayal of Queen Victoria responds to another critical moment in recent history, namely the Abdication Crisis of 1936 (Street 130; Chapman 76-78).<sup>5</sup> The intention of Edward VIII to marry the divorced socialite Wallis Simpson caused a constitutional crisis as their marriage was opposed by both the government and the Church of England. Given the choice between remaining on the throne or abdicating in favour of Wallis Simpson, Edward famously decided to marry "the woman I love." Created after the abdication, *Victoria the Great* and *Sixty Glorious Years* both affirm the institution of the monarchy in the context of these contemporaneous events. They do so by placing emphasis on royal duty in their portrayals of the queen and her prince consort. Edward's insistence on his individual desire is juxtaposed with Victoria and Albert's embodiment of "duty, service and sacrifice" (Chapman 78). In *Victoria the Great*, the dutiful monarch decides to cut their honeymoon short because of pressing government business. Albert, who wishes for a longer honeymoon in the scene in question, is later shown to be extremely hard-working despite the strong public opposition he finds himself confronted with. In fact, *Victoria the Great* goes so far as to suggest that it is his tireless hard work for the nation's welfare in producing a diplomatic solution in the Trent Affair that causes his premature death.

Wilcox and Neagle portray Victoria as a dedicated monarch who has led "a long, productive life" (Ford and Mitchell 159). In the deathbed scene in *Sixty Glorious Years*, a close-up of the dying queen is superimposed with scenes of the young queen receiving the news of her accession and taking her oath during the coronation ceremony. Accompanied

---

<sup>5</sup> As Chapman notes, both films by Wilcox and Neagle "assert the need for national unity, but they do so in response to different circumstances: thus *Victoria the Great* is concerned principally to validate the institution of monarchy in the wake of the Abdication Crisis of 1936, whereas *Sixty Glorious Years* is a strident call for national preparedness that was released shortly after the Munich Agreement of 1938" (64).

by the melody of “God Save the Queen,” the young queen promises that she will do “my utmost to fulfil my duty to my country” (01:28:36-39). The queen’s great sense of duty is also underlined at the end of *Victoria the Great*, which simultaneously highlights her great popularity. The film culminates in the Diamond Jubilee celebrations, with cheering crowds proving how adored this queen is by her people. Travelling in an open carriage as part of the royal procession, the queen is enthusiastically greeted by the masses. During the Thanksgiving service at the steps of St Paul’s Cathedral, the Archbishop of Canterbury congratulates her, referring not just to the longevity of her reign but expressing above all that she is “enthroned forever in the hearts of [her] people” (01:42:51-54). Affirming the Archbishop’s words, the crowds follow his call “[t]hree cheers for Her Majesty!” by shouting “[h]ip hip hurray!” as if in one voice (01:43:51-01:44:03). Similarly, their collective singing of “God Save the Queen” is reminiscent of Benedict Anderson’s comments on the “unisonance” and “unisonality” that is created by songs, especially the joint singing of national anthems, which play a significant role in the formation of national communities (145). As the anthem is fading away, the noticeably moved Queen addresses her beloved dead husband: “Albert, we have done our best” (01:44:43-46). The credit sequence, finally, revisits her long reign one last time as it juxtaposes a young and an old version of the queen, which represent the monarch in the year of her coronation and her Diamond Jubilee. Wearing a glamorous dress and ermine fur coat and a more subdued outfit, respectively, the young and the old queen look at each other approvingly, accompanied by “Land of Hope and Glory,” Edward Elgar’s first “Pomp and Circumstance March” and one of Britain’s quasi-anthems. As well as demonstrating Neagle’s remarkable ability to transform herself in keeping with Victoria’s long life, the final tableau underscores that her young self seems pleased with what she has achieved and her old self has no regrets, thus reinforcing a sense of continuity.

Following a decidedly reverential approach, Wilcox and Neagle portray a sovereign who is capable of creating national unity and cohesion. An important means are the series of vignettes which the films consist of and which intertwine the Queen’s life with national history and present both in the form of a filmic pageant. The queen’s biography and the fate of her nation thus become coterminous. From a visual standpoint, however, the use of Victoria as a collective icon becomes particularly palpable at her coronation in *Victoria the Great*. Following the coronation ceremony in Westminster Abbey, we are presented with a series of superimposed images. A shot of Neagle wearing her crown, holding

her royal insignia, and sitting on the coronation chair is first blended with Westminster Abbey, followed by ringing bells, firing canons, the procession of the Gold State Coach, and enthusiastic masses of people. The most significant superimposition combines three visual layers: a static frontal shot of Neagle's queen with her royal regalia, the moving Gold State Coach, and the cheering crowds.



Fig. The Queen as a composite collective figure in *Victoria the Great* (00:15:40)

These visual layers suggest that Queen Victoria represents a composite collective figure. The body of this beloved queen is made up by her subjects similar to the way in which the body of the sovereign is composed of the individual bodies of citizens in the frontispiece of Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* by Abraham Bosse. Reminiscent of Bosse's famous image, Neagle's Victoria wears and holds the regalia marking her symbolic investiture as sovereign. However, rather than inducing awe and fear as the sovereign authority does in the consenting individuals in Hobbes, this queen is shown to inspire love in her people.<sup>6</sup> The enthу-

<sup>6</sup> A similar layering of images of the queen and her subjects can be found in *Sixty Glorious Years*: as the monarch returns from the Diamond Jubilee service at St Paul's to Buckingham Palace in her carriage, her image is superimposed with the cheering crowds (01:21:10-20).

siasm of the crowds, greeting their new monarch following her coronation, suggests that what is at stake is a politics of the heart – a kind of ‘politics’ that is typical of celebrities.<sup>7</sup> Rather than her political power, the scene underlines Victoria’s symbolic power as a popular monarch. As sovereign, she reigns over her subjects, but she also needs them, their acclamation, applause, and support. The crowd cheering the monarch as if in one voice implies collective unity, while she represents that unity. The series of blended images is followed by the crowds enthusiastically greeting their new queen in front of Buckingham Palace and the queen receiving their homage on the balcony, while the people continue to rejoice into the night.

Not surprisingly, the filmic depiction of the coronation in *Victoria the Great* closely resembles the contemporaneous coronation of George VI, another dutiful monarch devoted to country and family, who assumed his royal mandate following his brother’s abdication. In contrast to the historical coronation of Queen Victoria, which was a chaotic affair, the coronation of her great-grandson was an instance of what Eric Hobsbawm and others have called the “invention of tradition.” Modern nations in particular tend to use invented traditions in order to create a national identity. They establish seemingly old traditions that are claimed to be rooted in a historic past, instead of being new and constructed. As David Cannadine has shown, the pageantry of the British monarchy, which forms a key element in the creation of national unity in modern Britain, is largely a product of the late nineteenth and twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> Royal rituals with “no exact precedent” (such as Westminster Abbey weddings for royal children or state funerals for dowager queens) creat-

---

<sup>7</sup> As Steven Fielding observes: “Screenwriters like to present Victoria and her successors as the heart of a heartless political world” (79).

<sup>8</sup> Examining the British monarchy and the “invention of tradition” from 1820-1977, Cannadine calls the period between 1877, when Queen Victoria became Empress of India, until the beginning of the First World War, “the heyday of ‘invented tradition’” (108). Many of the royal ceremonial rituals generally believed to be ancient and timeless were in fact only invented from the 1870s onwards. “By modern standards,” Dorothy Thompson notes, “Victoria’s coronation was modest, almost casual” (27). Even though the event attracted large enthusiastic crowds (Ridley 15), the actual coronation ceremony was a chaotic, muddled affair with a lot of confusion and disorder, several gaffes and blunders. For instance, Victoria was given the orb at the wrong moment and did not know what to do with the heavy object; the Archbishop forced the coronation ring onto a wrong finger so that she had trouble removing it later; and the altar in the sacred shrine was covered with sandwiches and bottles of wine (Baird 78-80; Wilson 86-87; Worsley 98-99, 102). As Cannadine remarks, “the majority of the great royal pageants staged during the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century oscillated between farce and fiasco” (117).

ed a seeming continuity with a historic past (Cannadine 151). The coronation of George VI was “an extravagant, imperial re-affirmation of the stability of monarchy after the interruption of the abdication” (152).

The high-profile event took place on 12 May 1937, the date scheduled for Edward’s coronation, and just five and a half months before the release of *Victoria the Great* on 28 October 1937. Designed as a public spectacle consisting of numerous royal events, it was the first coronation to be (partly) filmed and broadcast on radio. Because of the media coverage, cinemagoers watching *Victoria the Great* would have been reminded of this recent royal occasion. For them the coronation sequence with Neagle would have evoked newsreel images of George VI being enthusiastically greeted by the crowds as the State Coach drove through the streets of London during the procession from Westminster Abbey back to Buckingham Palace. Like Neagle’s Victoria, the royal family showed themselves to the public on the palace balcony, and in the words of one newsreel commentator, whose voice is accompanied by the cheering crowds: “[F]or days to follow the flood-lit palace is the magnet that draws London’s jubilating night crowds, and into the glare of the floodlamps steps [sic] our king and queen nightly to receive our homage” (*Coronation of George VI and Queen Elizabeth* 00:04:51-00:05:07). If the historical coronation of George VI is considered to have drawn on the royal pageantry of “invented tradition,” *Victoria the Great* projects tradition onto the coronation of the earlier queen, thus producing an imaginary historical continuity.

Yet the exchange between the queen and her subjects in the film’s coronation sequence also evokes the relationship between a film star and her admirers. Victoria’s subjects cheer her like fans applauding a star, while the queen receives their tribute like a star standing on a stage lit by floodlights. In fact, it was her performance of Queen Victoria that propelled Neagle to national and international stardom. She belonged to a relatively small group of film stars who emerged and established themselves in Britain while many other British film stars rose to fame only after moving to Hollywood.<sup>9</sup> Neagle came to “signify Britain and Britishness” (Street 124) by playing strong iconic British women such as Florence Nightingale, nurse Edith Cavell, Allied intelligence officer

---

<sup>9</sup> See Jeffrey Richards (161-64) on the difficulty of the British film industry in developing its own film stars at the time. Following the success of their two Victoria biopics, Neagle and Wilcox worked in Hollywood for a few years before returning to Britain after their final American film, *Forever and a Day* (1943), a product of the war effort featuring mostly British Hollywood actors and focusing on the history of a London family house until its destruction in the Blitz.

Odette Samson, and pioneering female pilot Amy Johnson. In 1951 a *Picturegoer* reviewer wrote that “she [was] as much a part of Britain as Dover’s white cliffs” (qtd. in Street 124).

Interestingly, however, it was Neagle’s performance of Victoria that “invest[ed] her with the status of a sort of monarch of the British cinema” (Street 125). The fact that Neagle, who was later declared a dame of the British Empire, posed as Queen Victoria for Madame Tussauds (Ford and Mitchell 160) underlines how closely associated she was with the Victorian queen and vice versa.<sup>10</sup> The two films by Wilcox and Neagle create national cohesion in the context of the Abdication Crisis and the looming war as Neagle plays Queen Victoria as a national figure-head, while simultaneously presenting herself as a performer in the process of achieving national stardom. Casting Neagle in the role of Victoria as dutiful monarch during moments of national crisis, the films provide the nation with a sense of “continuity, community and comfort” (Cannadine 105).

Similar to *Victoria the Great* and *Sixty Glorious Years*, Stephen Frears’s *Victoria & Abdul* (2017) owes a great deal to the star charisma of Judi Dench. Like Neagle, Dench became cinematic royalty due to her performance of Queen Victoria. Regarded as “the greatest Shakespearean actress of our day” (McDonald 131), she had long been “an acknowledged queen of the British theatrical world” (Ford and Mitchell 169). She had also started to appear as M, the strict boss in the Bond films. Yet it was her performance of Queen Victoria in John Madden’s *Mrs Brown* in 1997 and Queen Elizabeth I in *Shakespeare in Love*, also directed by Madden, one year later that transformed her into a cinematic queen.<sup>11</sup> It is her authenticity and credibility as a long-time professional and as a much-loved public figure that Dench brings to her performance of Victoria in *Victoria & Abdul*. Playing her royal role, Dench can be haughty and imperious, but she also foregrounds the vulnerable and fragile sides of the queen, who still mourns the deaths of Albert and her loyal Scottish servant John Brown and who is in need of intimacy and affection as a human individual.

In contrast to the extensive ground that the films by Wilcox and Neagle cover in their depiction of the queen’s biography and the history of her nation, *Victoria & Abdul* focuses on a single revisionist episode,

---

<sup>10</sup> Also note the musical film *Lilacs in the Spring* (1954), in which Neagle plays an actress dreaming she is Queen Victoria.

<sup>11</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of Dench’s career, especially on the Shakespearean stage but also in film, see McDonald (103-44).

namely the queen's personal friendship with her favourite Indian servant Abdul Karim (Ali Fazal), who, in a sense, comes to fill the gaps that Albert and Brown have left in her life. As in *Mrs Brown*, the focus is on the queen as an individual subject with her own emotional needs and anxieties. At the same time, the royal biopic, made during another national crisis, namely the Brexit debate, raises the question of how the national past is put to use in the present. In other words, how does the film reimagine the Victorian sovereign at a time when a divided Britain struggles to redefine itself as a nation?

The question concerning the role Queen Victoria plays in contemporary British culture is all the more pertinent given the fact that she shares a number of similarities with Britain's present female monarch. Queen Victoria was the longest reigning monarch until she was overtaken by her great-great-granddaughter Queen Elizabeth II in 2015, which means that the reigns of both queens represent long periods of national history. Like Victoria, Elizabeth II fulfils an important symbolic role as a national figurehead who is seen on parades, visits, and other public occasions. However, in contrast to Victoria, who liked to exert political influence, Elizabeth II remains above politics. This has led to a great deal of speculation about the queen's political position on Brexit. When she wore a blue hat adorned with blue flowers with yellow seed pearls for the State Opening of Parliament in 2017, the media and public assumed that the queen was paying tribute to the European Union flag and making a subtle comment on the recent Brexit vote. Angela Kelly, the queen's personal assistant and senior dresser, who designed her hat and outfit, claims this was not the case: "It was a coincidence" (137).

Elizabeth II does not take any political position, but she does present herself as one of Britain's symbols contributing to national identity constructions. In Danny Boyle's 2012 Olympic Opening Ceremony, she famously makes a humorous cameo appearance as James Bond (Daniel Craig) meets Her Majesty at Buckingham Palace in order to accompany her to the stadium, where she allegedly jumps out of a helicopter with a Union Jack parachute. Her addresses delivered in the far less optimistic times of spring 2020 attempt to reassure the public by recalling Britain's national past: in her speech broadcast during her self-isolation at Windsor Castle during the coronavirus pandemic, she cites Vera Lynn's hopeful wartime song in asserting, "[w]e will meet again" (*The Queen's Coronavirus Broadcast* 4:13-15); and in her speech on the seventy-fifth anniversary of VE Day, she pays tribute to the VE Day speech of her father,

George VI (*The Queen's VE Day Address*).<sup>12</sup> As a national icon, she continues to address her people as a nation although politically that nation is deeply divided.

Stephen Frears's film implicitly refers to Elizabeth II in that it portrays Queen Victoria, another British female monarch playing a key role as a national figure, in her mature years. While *Victoria & Abdul* does not directly comment on Britain's present monarch and her attempt at a neutral handling of the current political crisis, the film responds to the cultural climate surrounding Brexit in an ambiguous fashion. On the one hand, it develops a wishful fantasy of Victoria as an open-minded Britannia, while on the other hand, it supports a spirit of imperialist nostalgia.

Rather than celebrating the pageantry of pomp and circumstance as Wilcox's films do, Frears's film pokes fun at court ceremonials. The plot is set in the context of the Diamond Jubilee in 1897, requiring the queen to attend countless ceremonial occasions, some of which literally send her to sleep. Not amused by her tedious schedule, the tired, listless queen and empress claps eyes on the handsome servant Abdul Karim, who presents her with an Indian mohur, a commemorative gold coin, during an official banquet and a wobbly jelly at a garden party. Injecting her with new life, Abdul has a spectacular career at court, moving from servant to personal footman, spiritual adviser and teacher or munshi. Victoria asks him to teach her Urdu and confides her feelings of grief and loneliness to him. Ultimately, she makes him a member of the royal household with his own servants and a cottage for his family to live in. The court is scandalized by the fact that a Muslim Indian has moved to the very centre of royal power – a position which is highlighted by the fact that he is the only person present while the queen opens her royal red boxes. Members of the royal family and household eavesdrop on their conversations in disbelief.

Presenting itself as a comedy of manners, the film exposes the racist bigotry of the royal household, while depicting Victoria as tolerant. The open-minded attitude of Dench's queen is reminiscent of the speech Neagle's Victoria gives when she is proclaimed Empress of India in *Vic-*

---

<sup>12</sup> Queen Elizabeth II has also featured in royal biopics. In *The Queen* (2006), directed, like *Victoria & Abdul*, by Stephen Frears, Helen Mirren's Queen Elizabeth II has to reconnect with the public after the tragic death of Lady Diana and, in so doing, fashion a public image that will help consolidate the power of Tony Blair as Prime Minister. In the Netflix series *The Crown* (2016-), which traces the trials and tribulations of the royal family, Elizabeth II (Claire Foy, Olivia Colman) is characterized as a dutiful monarch who stands for tradition and continuity.

*toria the Great*. Addressing several Indian characters, Neagle's queen emphasizes that "it is my greatest wish to see my new subjects on an equality with the other British subjects of the Crown, happy, contented and flourishing" (01:39:13-24) before adding that she feels not like a queen or empress, but rather like a mother or "the grandmother of a great family" which is to be guided by "its own principles of democracy, tolerance and freedom" (01:39:49-01:40:12). As if translating Neagle's public speech into the queen's personal life, Dench's Victoria shows great generosity in her treatment of her Indian friend. If *Victoria the Great* affirms democratic principles in the face of the rise of fascism in the late 1930s, *Victoria & Abdul* seems to emphasize open-mindedness at a time when xenophobic sentiments were surfacing together with a nationalistic rhetoric in the context of Brexit. By focusing on Victoria's generosity and friendship, the film personalizes Anglo-Indian relations in a sentimental manner, while at the same time, the relationship between the queen and her servant cannot be separated from, and hence remains entangled in, the larger imperialist context.

While the members of the royal household and family are characterized by their racist prejudice, Victoria's friendship with Abdul Karim evokes 'positive' stereotypes. Abdul Karim is the exotic Other who captures her imagination and allows her to dream: he is the one who tells her about the architecture, art, and food of a foreign colourful country she cannot visit; and he gives her private lessons in Urdu, which he tells her is "the most noble" language in India (00:31:27) and thus the language most appropriate for the Empress of India. Mohammed Baksh, the other Indian servant in the film, is far more radical and outspoken with regard to the British Empire. Early on he expresses his wish to return to India, pointing out to Abdul the oppression practiced by the British: "These people are the exploiters of a quarter of all of mankind" (00:23:27-30). Later when the queen's private secretary Sir Henry Ponsonby and her son Bertie try to blackmail him into providing dirty information on Abdul, he tells them that Abdul seeks preferment like everyone else and thus "crawls up the stinking greasy pole of the shitty British Empire" (01:08:20-29).<sup>13</sup> Mohammed is made to pay dearly for his stance – the Prince of Wales makes sure that he dies in England by denying him medical treatment – whereas Abdul advances at court as an Orientalized figure. His handsome and winning appearance means that

---

<sup>13</sup> Towards the end of the same scene, Mohammed tells a haughty Prince of Wales: "[S]tick your stupid British Empire up your stinky royal bottom hole, Mr Bertie Prince, sir" (01:09:00-09).

he primarily serves as an ornament, an object of the queen's gaze, at least initially. In contrast to her son, who threatens to deprive her of her royal power by having her certified insane, Abdul is represented as a devoted servant who idolizes his empress and willingly subjects himself to her, for instance by kissing her feet. The film's exclusive focus on Victoria's emotions means that the individual character of Abdul is left out, receiving no attention whatsoever. Rather than revealing his feelings and thoughts, for instance about his life in England and Anglo-Indian relations, the film treats him as a screen onto which the queen can project her fantasies of the exotic, much like India, the country that he personifies for her.

While Dench's Victoria cannot visit India, Abdul's vivid descriptions allow her to undertake imaginary journeys and encounter Indian culture through his evocative accounts. This becomes particularly palpable in a film scene modelled on a well-known historical photograph which shows Queen Victoria working on her boxes in the presence of one of her Indian servants under a canopy outdoors.<sup>14</sup> Using the same mise-en-scène as the photograph, the film scene is framed by spying members of the household who wonder what the two can be talking about. In contrast to them, we are privy to the queen's questions concerning Abdul's hometown Agra and his descriptions of the history and beauty of the Taj Mahal, the Shalimar Gardens, and the Peacock Throne. Abdul mentions that the large Indian diamond called the Koh-i-Noor was taken from the destroyed Peacock Throne after the Indian Rebellion, to which the empress responds that she is now in possession of the altered diamond. As becomes evident in the course of their conversation, the Empress of India does not know much about the country she rules. In fact, Dench's allegedly enlightened Victoria is completely unaware of the theft and destruction by British soldiers. With the naïve ignorance of Dench's empress, the scene separates Victoria from British imperialism – the aggression, violence, and destruction perpetrated in her name – and instead highlights her enchantment as Abdul tells her about Indian food and spices, thus evoking India as an exotic country that inspires her imagination.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> According to the homepage of the National Portrait Gallery, the 1893 photograph by Hills and Saunders shows Queen Victoria together with Sheikh Chidda. Sometimes the servant is identified as Abdul Karim, for example by Margaret Homans, who provides a detailed analysis of the image (xxiv-xxv).

<sup>15</sup> Exploring the impact India had on the historical Queen Victoria and the influence she had over political and cultural life in India, Miles Taylor points out that "for much of her reign India was lived in her imagination" (6). In keeping with "the martial and

A later scene illustrates Queen Victoria's identification with, but also her appropriation of, an imagined India. In the scene in question, Dench's queen demonstrates how she has introduced Indian art and culture to her court as she proudly presents her newly created Indian Durbar Room at Osborne House to her Prime Minister. Leading him through the Indian corridor, she points out that it has been decorated with a series of commissioned portraits of several eminent Indians, including a painting of the Munshi. Entering the ornamental Durbar Room, she comments on the carvings and carpet before homing in on the throne, an exact copy of the Peacock Throne at Agra. Taking her seat on the reconstructed artefact and pointing to the Koh-i-Noor in her brooch, she declares that "now I really do feel like the Empress of India" (00:54:26).

The Brexit debate has often revealed a nostalgic longing for a supposedly glorious national and imperial past. In the Leave camp, Europe was denigrated, and it was suggested, or implied, that Britain might strengthen its ties to the Commonwealth again. As argued by Danny Dorling and Sally Tomlinson, "the EU referendum showed up the last throes of empire-thinking working its way out of the British psyche" (41). Elsewhere Dorling and Tomlinson note that "[i]t has taken the British a long time to adjust to their loss of territory, and a great deal of adjustment is still needed" (63). These after-effects of empire in the Brexit debate recall Renato Rosaldo's notion of "imperialist nostalgia." Opening his discussion with films that represent imperialism in nostalgic terms, Rosaldo provides the following definition: "Imperialist nostalgia uses a pose of 'innocent yearning' both to capture people's imaginations and to conceal its complicity with often brutal domination" (108). As a "sentimental discourse" (120), imperialist nostalgia functions as an absolving gesture concealing guilt and complicity. At the same time, imperialist nostalgia serves as a form of mourning and longing for what one has destroyed. In Frears's film, the treatment of Abdul and Indian culture bespeaks a nostalgia for the British Empire, a longing for renewing past imperial connections, but without remembering the ugly underbelly of this supposedly glorious past. Victoria's identification with, and appropriation of, Indian culture are made to look innocent, thus masking the violence of imperialism as the benevolent monarch is

---

evangelical prejudices of her age," Queen Victoria initially wanted to "conquer and convert India" (7). The Indian Rebellion, however, changed her attitude completely, making her "more sympathetic to India and its people, not less, and growing more tolerant and less instinctively racist than her fellow-Britons" (7).

sporting the disputed jewel while sitting on a reconstruction of the destroyed Peacock Throne.

Presenting itself as a seemingly light-hearted comedy, Frears's film proposes an ambiguous argument in the contemporary political crisis. By characterizing the Victorian monarch as a kind and generous person, the film seems to present a wishful fantasy of an open-minded Britannia, thus expressing a longing for an idealized queen who may never have existed in this shape and form. The queen herself takes a stand against racism when she openly criticizes her son Bertie, her private secretary Sir Henry Ponsonby, and Dr Reid for being "racialists" (01:12:38-39). At the same time, however, the film reminds us that the renewal of Commonwealth ties promised by the Leave camp rests on a problematic vision: the relationship is always envisaged as depicted in the film, namely distanced from the real India, and based on British leadership and domination, imagined as benign. Frears's image of the British monarch sitting on the Peacock Throne evokes an imperialist iconography as we know it from visual representations such as Thomas Jones Barker's painting "The Secret of England's Greatness," in which Queen Victoria presents a kneeling East African envoy with a Bible in her audience chamber; or Walter Crane's 1886 British Empire Map, where the 'natives' place their goods and presents at Britannia's feet. In its revisionist construction of Victoria, the film may attempt to articulate and project a wishful fantasy of an unprejudiced broad-minded Britain, but it remains suffused with imperial nostalgia.

The examples discussed in this contribution all use Queen Victoria as a national icon, albeit in very different ways. In *Victoria the Great and Sixty Glorious Years*, the queen functions as a unifying figure. On the screen, the popular sovereign can be seen to unite her enthusiastic people, as demonstrated by the crowds cheering at her coronation and the Diamond Jubilee celebrations. Visually this is supported by the superimposition of cinematic images blending the monarch with her subjects, while the soundtrack suggests the unity of the crowds by virtue of their loud cheering and their joint singing of the national anthem. At the same time, Neagle's performance provides her cinematic audience with a sense of comfort at a time of national crisis. By celebrating a dutiful monarch shortly after the Abdication Crisis, the films by Wilcox and Neagle affirm the stability of the British monarchy. Yet they can also be seen to invoke the nation as an imagined community at a time when, due to the rise of fascism in Europe, the geopolitical situation became increasingly volatile.

With Judi Dench's Victoria, Frears also presents a national figure, but in this case the queen is inseparable from her imperial connections. *Victoria & Abdul* could easily be read as a light-hearted comedy of manners, or simply as a tale about a sentimental friendship cultivated by the queen in her idiosyncratic old age. However, the fact that Frears's film was made during the Brexit debate adds an allegorical layer to the queen's cross-cultural friendship with Abdul Karim. The racist views of the royal household – standing in perhaps for the xenophobia unleashed by the Brexit debate – routinely become the butt of the film's jokes. However, the construction of the queen as a benign monarch is firmly rooted in imperialist nostalgia, perpetuating a vision not of equality but of domination. In the closing scene, Abdul, having returned to Agra after the queen's death, kneels down to kiss the feet of the bronze statue of Queen Victoria against the backdrop of the Taj Mahal. Although the film ends with Abdul, it does so from an entirely British perspective. Abdul is depicted as a loyal servant and friend, whose attitude towards British imperialism is never explored. Instead, the film's closing scene evokes a spirit of imperialist nostalgia by having its Indian protagonist pay homage to a reconstruction of the very statue which was removed in 1947 when India gained independence. In *Victoria & Abdul*, Queen Victoria thus embodies a national figure that remains inseparable from a problematic nostalgia for an imperial past.

## References

### Works Cited

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Rev. ed., Verso, 1991.

Baird, Julia. *Victoria the Queen: An Intimate Biography of the Woman Who Ruled an Empire*. Blackfriars, 2016.

Cannadine, David. "The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual: The British Monarchy and the 'Invention of Tradition,' c. 1820-1977." *The Invention of Tradition*, edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, Cambridge UP, 1993, pp. 101-64.

Chapman, James. *Past and Present: National Identity and the British Historical Film*. I. B. Tauris, 2005.

Dorling, Danny, and Sally Tomlinson. *Rule Britannia: Brexit and the End of the Empire*. Biteback Publishing, 2019.

Fielding, Steven. "The Heart of a Heartless Political World: Screening Victoria." *The British Monarchy on Screen*, edited by Mandy Merck, Manchester UP, 2016, pp. 64-85.

Ford, Elizabeth A., and Deborah C. Mitchell. *Royal Portraits in Hollywood: Filming the Lives of Queens*. The UP of Kentucky, 2009.

Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. 1651. Penguin, 2017.

Hobsbawm, Eric, and Terence Ranger, editors. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge UP, 1984.

Homans, Margaret. *Royal Representations: Queen Victoria and British Culture, 1837-1876*. The U of Chicago P, 1998.

Kantorowicz, Ernst H. *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology*. 2nd ed., Princeton UP, 1997.

Kelly, Angela. *The Other Side of the Coin: The Queen, the Dresser and the Wardrobe*. HarperCollins, 2019.

McDonald, Russ. *Look to the Lady: Sarah Siddons, Ellen Terry, and Judi Dench on the Shakespearean Stage*. The U of Georgia P, 2005.

Richards, Jeffrey. *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in 1930s Britain*. I. B. Tauris, 2010.

Ridley, Jane. *Victoria: Queen, Matriarch, Empress*. Allen Lane, 2015.

Rosaldo, Renato. "Imperialist Nostalgia." *Representations*, vol. 26, 1989, pp. 107-22.

Schulte, Regina, editor. *The Body of the Queen: Gender and Rule in the Courtly World, 1500-2000*. Berghahn Books, 2006.

Street, Sarah. *British National Cinema*. Routledge, 1997.

Taylor, Miles. *Empire: Queen Victoria and India*. Yale UP, 2018.

Thompson, Dorothy. *Queen Victoria: Gender and Power*. Virago, 1990.

Wilson, A. N. *Victoria: A Life*. Atlantic Books, 2015.

Worsley, Lucy. *Queen Victoria: Daughter, Wife, Mother*. Hodder & Stoughton, 2018.

## Films

*Coronation of George VI and Queen Elizabeth*. Reel 7, 1937, *YouTube*, uploaded by British Pathé, 13 April 2014, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=VHRWJgex5r4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VHRWJgex5r4).

*The Crown*. Netflix series created by Peter Morgan, performances by Claire Foy, Olivia Colman et al., UK, USA, 2016-.

*Forever and a Day*. Directed by Herbert Wilcox et al., performances by Anna Neagle et al., USA, 1943.

*Lilacs in the Spring* (aka *Let's Make Up*). Directed by Herbert Wilcox, performances by Anna Neagle et al., UK, 1954.

*Mrs Brown*. Directed by John Madden, performances by Judi Dench et al., UK, Ireland, USA, 1997.

*The Queen*. Directed by Stephen Frears, performances by Helen Mirren et al., UK, USA, France, Italy, 2006.

*The Queen and James Bond London 2012 Performance*. Directed by Danny Boyle, performances by Queen Elizabeth II and Daniel Craig, UK, *YouTube*, uploaded by Olympic Channel, 27 July 2012, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=1AS-dCdYZbo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1AS-dCdYZbo).

*The Queen's Coronavirus Broadcast*. *YouTube*, uploaded by BBC, 5 April 2020, [youtu.be/2klmuggOEIE](http://youtu.be/2klmuggOEIE).

*The Queen's VE Day Address*. *YouTube*, uploaded by BBC, 8 May 2020, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=vuEf9xMmYuo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vuEf9xMmYuo).

*Shakespeare in Love*. Directed by John Madden, performances by Judi Dench et al., USA, UK, 1998.

*Sixty Glorious Years*. Directed by Herbert Wilcox, performances by Anna Neagle, Anton Walbrook et al., UK, 1938.

*Victoria*. ITV series created by Daisy Goodwin, performances by Jenna Coleman et al., UK, 2016-.

*Victoria & Abdul*. Directed by Stephen Frears, performances by Judi Dench, Ali Fazal et al., UK, USA, 2017.

*Victoria the Great*. Directed by Herbert Wilcox, performances by Anna Neagle, Anton Walbrook et al., UK, 1937.

*The Young Victoria*. Directed by Jean-Marc Vallée, performances by Emily Blunt et al., UK, USA, 2009.

## Images

Barker, Thomas Jones. *The Secret of England's Greatness* (aka *Queen Victoria Presenting a Bible in the Audience Chamber at Windsor*). Oil on canvas, ca. 1862-63, National Portrait Gallery, London, [www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw00071/The-Secret-of-Englands-Greatness-Queen-Victoria-presenting-a-Bible-in-the-Audience-Chamber-at-Windsor](http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw00071/The-Secret-of-Englands-Greatness-Queen-Victoria-presenting-a-Bible-in-the-Audience-Chamber-at-Windsor).

Crane, Walter. *Imperial Federation Map of the World Showing the Extent of the British Empire in 1886*. Published as a supplement to *Graphic*, 24 July 1866, Cornell University Library, 25 Aug. 2015, [digital.library.cornell.edu/catalog/ss:3293793](http://digital.library.cornell.edu/catalog/ss:3293793).

Hills and Saunders. *Sheikh Chidda; Queen Victoria*. Carbon print, 17 July 1893, National Portrait Gallery, London, [www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw06521/Sheikh-Chidda-Queen-Victoria](http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw06521/Sheikh-Chidda-Queen-Victoria).