

After the death of Prince Philip - The Monarchy and The Crown: A review of a British spectacle and a TV series

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Neil Faulkner of Anti*Capitalist Resistance reviews 'The Crown' a Netflix series.

The death of Prince Philip has evoked a mainstream British media response revolting in its obsequiousness and serial lying even by its own pitifully low standards. From *The Daily Mail* to *The Guardian*, we have had page upon page of fake news and false eulogy. Official statements and ritualised expressions of condolence have been faithfully recycled, packaged in awe and deference, like they were hallowed truths. The BBC's coverage, led by an orgasmic Nicholas Witchell, British journalism's Uriah Heep, has been so dull, vacuous, and unending that the state broadcaster has apparently received 100,000 complaints.

Guy Debord theorised 'the society of the spectacle' in a book of that title published in 1967. What he highlighted was the chasm between appearance and substance. After all, a spectacle is precisely that, something seen, mere show, an appearance that need have nothing behind it, or nothing that resembles it, like the painted wood-and-canvas of pantomime stage scenery. So it is with the enduring farce that is the British monarchy.

Only once have the British people had a healthy relationship with the monarch. That, of course, was when they executed Charles Stuart as a traitor in January 1649, at the climax of the English Revolution. Restored in 1660, the monarchy has been evolving ever since, a feudal appendage of an essentially bourgeois state, its role to provide ideological cover, a mantle of 'tradition' (all invented, of course), for an exploitative, oppressive, violent class society that enriches and empowers a minority at the expense of everyone else.

[Dave Kellaway has explained much of this in other articles on this site.](#) [1] Here I want to draw out one or two themes highlighted by what I think must be described as a masterpiece of television drama - Peter Morgan's *The Crown*.

It has been produced by Netflix, but don't let that put you off. Netflix is a hollow corporation, a transnational tech giant that produces nothing but creams off most of the profit by virtue of its control of the market. This is characteristic of modern neoliberal capitalism, a form of profiting without producing, and it is not the fault of the cast and crew who actually make the TV shows that this is the framework within which they are forced to work. Michelangelo worked for the Pope. That didn't mean he wasn't a great artist.

Nor should you be put off by the label on the tin - as I was for a long time, convinced that a TV series in the form of a soap opera about the British monarchy couldn't possibly be of interest to a Marxist revolutionary. But my eldest daughter recommended it - knowing my politics and broadly sharing

them – so I sampled it and was immediately hooked.

There have been four seasons so far, each of 10 one-hour episodes, covering the period from Elizabeth Windsor's marriage to Philip Mountbatten in 1947 to the fall of Thatcher in 1990. Two further series are planned.

Each episode is a self-contained drama. The staging, direction, photography, and editing are exceptionally slick, and the performances are consistently first-class and utterly convincing – to the point where it seems almost invidious to single out particular actors. There doesn't seem to be a dud performance, and many are quite chilling, none more so perhaps than Gillian Anderson's portrayal of Thatcher. To a socialist whose active political memories go back to the 1984 miners' strike that mad psychotic stare is oh-so-familiar.

Is everything in the drama true? Of course not. It is art, not history. Idiots who think you critique a work of art by pointing out factual errors merely reveal their ignorance of film, TV, and creative work in general. There is compression of time and characters; there are invented scenes, elements of caricature, and much exaggeration.

But the test of a work of art is not its reportage of a sequence of events, but its representation of an essential, underlying truth. Louis Mountbatten (uncle of Philip) may not have gone as far towards leading a coup to overthrow the 1964-70 Labour government as he is depicted doing in the series; but he was in contact with the conspirators, the plot was real, and none of those involved was ever arrested for planning to overthrow the democratically elected government of the day. So the essential truth is this: the British ruling class, headed by the Royal Family, is deeply anti-democratic in its instincts and would be perfectly willing, were parliamentary processes to get 'out of control', to terminate them.

Thus the Nazi connection. The Duke of Windsor (the former Edward VIII, the uncle of the Queen) was an admirer of Hitler and the Nazis. He made a highly publicised visit to Hitler after his abdication in 1937 – when he was pictured giving the *Sieg Heil* salute – he was a strong supporter of appeasement (the policy of backing fascism in Europe), and was touted by the Nazis as a potential puppet ruler of Britain in the event of a successful invasion. One episode is devoted to this.

For sure, much of the series is pure soap opera, where great political events are mere noises off and the main focus is the family drama. I had to press the pause button to explain the significance of the Battle of Saltley Gate during the 1972 miners' strike to my kids. They knew about the 1984 strike (and defeat). They didn't know about the 1972 and 1974 victories. Kids need to know this stuff.

But even if important things like Saltley become cameos – we see the Queen watching it on telly – the family drama remains compelling. Unlike the torrent of guff about Philip today, this is family drama in the raw, the Windsors unphotoshopped, depicted in all their ghastliness – the racism, the snobbery, the sneering contempt for ordinary people, the unquestioning sense of entitlement, the feudal lifestyle with its rooms full of liveried flunkies, the infantile obsession with precedent and protocol, the ludicrous fancy dress and court rituals, the apparent absence of any self-awareness, any sense of how laughably naff it all is.

One of the most interesting things about the characterisations in *The Crown* is the pervading sense of self-alienation that pervades the palaces. They are barren places, spiritual and emotional deserts, without warmth or empathy or human decency. The Windsors seem pickled in their own formalism, the life drained out of them, their whole beings invested in pretence and sham. We watch, for example, the destruction of Diana Spencer by a family of the living dead as utterly dysfunctional as any described in the work of R D Laing.

You long for one of the characters to burst out of the frame, to shatter the protocols, to make a speech of denunciation; or perhaps to step out of role and address the audience directly with something along the lines of: 'How can you allow this charade, this tedious spectacle, this transparent fake, to continue into the third decade of the 21st century? All at your own expense. Are you all brain-dead?'

Don't watch the funeral of a social parasite. Don't listen to court jesters like Witchell. Start watching *The Crown*. It tells a whole series of essential truths about the feudal bauble with still decorates the British capitalist state.

Neil Faulkner

P.S.

- Anti*Capitalist Resistance. Initially 14 Apr 2021:
<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/the-monarchy-and-the-crown-a-review-of-a-british-spectacle-and-a-tv-series/>
 - Neil Faulkner is the author of *Alienation, Spectacle, and Revolution*: a critical Marxist essay (out now on Resistance Books). He is the joint author of *Creeping Fascism*: what it is and how to fight it and *System Crash*: an activist guide to making revolution.
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Footnotes

[1] Available on ESSF (article 57614), [Britain – Prince Philip – Isn't the Duke of Edinburgh Scheme Fantastic?](#).