

Visual Presentation of Court Culture: The Seduction and Disenchantment in TV Series “The Crown”

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Abstract. Historical TV dramas have changed the narrative mode of historical events and their backgrounds and visually reproduced history for the audience with exquisite scene construction and costume. Different from traditional historical themes, the royal family and the court culture behind it rely on their unique distance from the public’s vision as the basis for their existence. The mystery of power is still very important to the monarchy in modern society. However, the visual entertainment of popular culture is trying to disintegrate it. This article takes the TV series “The Crown” about the British royal family launched by the streaming media company Netflix in 2016 as an example, uses case analysis as a research method, studies some of the key contents of the five-season TV series currently launched, and discusses the seduction and disenchantment of court culture behind the image in the TV series. The research results show that in the process of visual presentation of the royal family, the role of the media will simultaneously show the seduction to the audience and the audience’s breaking of this seduction, and this contradictory relationship also affects the palace itself behind the historical drama.

1. Introduction

The monarchy and its representation of power, as a mysterious ritual of class distinction, have always participated in the operation of society as a taboo, sacred, and un-touchable organizational structure in the past history. In order to distinguish the royal family from the ordinary citizen class, and maintain the legitimacy and stability of its own rule while displaying authority, court etiquette, which is the culture used to define, regulate and educate the social order, as Pierre Bourdieu said, “culture capital” has become a symbolic force that keeps royal power at a distance from secular society [1]. Namely, through appropriate aesthetic distance and ambiguous atmosphere shaping, the monarchy with court life as a symbol can maintain the social order under its rule with a mythical and noble attitude. However, television series, especially the streaming drama in recent years produced by Netflix, seem to be gradually compressing the living space of this palace “aura”. As the leading stream media company that owns 232.5 million subscribers around the world, Netflix has in recent years released numerous prevalent TV series like *Rise of Empires: Ottoman*, *The Empress*, *The Windsors*, and including the example this article is going to analyse as well: *The Crown* [2]. *The Crown* is a TV series based on the British royal family, first launched by Netflix in 2016 and currently has five seasons. It has received a reputation for depicting specific details of British society and the royal family during the reign of Elizabeth II in different periods, although Netflix did not make a disclaimer at the beginning of the show that “this show is not a real historical event” until the trailer of

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season 5. The series is planned for six seasons, and each two seasons corresponds to the different stages of Elizabeth II [3,4].

Benefiting from the advancement of costumes, props and special effects technology, these innovative mediated history stories create or restore a world that people have missed but never met: a solemn and forbidden royal realm, through allowing the unseen segment of the past to be retold by transmedia [3]. They serve audiences with delicately produced nostalgia for filmed past in a visual presentation, shaping and defining a historical archive in the streaming media age, a brand-new storytelling way to construct fantasies [5]. As a prevalent and relatively low-cost mass entertainment, streaming TV series provides audiences with an easy and convenient way to understand history, and the visual form of expression helps the vivid interpretation of the story, which is easy for the audience to accept in terms of communication logic. Given such circumstances, there is a not to be ignored concern frequently mentioned: the historical TV series is invisibly blurring the bounds between reality and romance portrayed by it. More significantly, as Gambarato claims, it is not a problem that can be solved by a disclaimer declaring “based on historical events”, and it is not even about a disclaimer because TV drama like *The Crown* has already achieved the result of blurring lines regardless. Season 4 of *The Crown* has been constantly criticized by not only the historians but also the former staff from British royal offices for misleading character images of Princess Diana and the royal family. What worries critics is that many audiences may have bought into the image of royalty portrayed by the show [3]. While distorting and

resetting history and reality, TV dramas also break the audience's distance from viewing objects. In the process of exploiting the screen as a medium and the visuality mechanism, namely, seduction and disenchantment, TV series create what Baudrillard called a "world of obscenity" [6]. This article is going to do a content analysis of The Crown mainly from two aspects: the visual presentation of seduction and disenchantment, which is related to why the audience tends to accept the images represented by TV drama. Theories of visuality criticism and cultural criticism will be applied to the progress of analysing the scenes, scripts and characters of this show.

2. The seduction of symbolic rituals

Bourdieu claims that cultural symbols and practices, namely appearance, including daily habits like art taste, costume style, etiquette and abstract, metaphysical creations like science, religion, and language, are functions of strengthening social classes. Thus, cultural capital was born to distinguish those who have capital from those who do not and to deprive the latter through symbolic rituals such as religion or monarchy, which uses symbolic power to sanctify objects to conceal class interests under aesthetic adornment [7]. This kind of deprivation relationship needs to be established on the temptation of presentation; while condescendingly showing the difference of cultural capital, it also appeases this difference. The power of court etiquette — what Bourdieu called cultural capital and field — is referenced several times throughout the show, as in season 4, Prime Minister Thatcher at the time and Princess Diana, who was engaged, both had embarrassing scenes because they did not adapt to court etiquette. This directly and clearly reflects the characteristics of court culture: strong symbolic meaning and exclusivity. In terms of visual and aesthetic cultural capital, at the beginning of the whole play, the audience is presented with an imaginative, luxurious, sacred and solemn ceremony: Elizabeth's wedding. The clergy, flowers and candlesticks, as well as the statues, are reflected through the stained glass windows, the Gothic arch that reveals the sublime atmosphere, and the choir that sets off the romantic and holy tone. Created by strong visual effects, a fairy tale world separated from the mortal world: the royal family. During the progress of viewing and comparing, the inner ambiguity led by represented images, and the ambivalence between fiction and truth, are exploited by force from visual presentation. The ambiguity of the inner image contains a potential conflict of power between the display of dominant power through the symbolic text and the concealment of the real situation behind the image: like a well-dressed ball, gorgeous costumes are used to attempt to hide the mediocrity behind the appearance. The aforementioned conflict ultimately culminates in the phenomenon of seduction, which serves as a social mechanism for the manifestation and embodiment of cultural capital.

The seduction is closely related to the symbolic, cultural power behind the ritual, constructing an ambiguous power relationship between viewers and who are viewed and creating a mystery during the age of anti-mythic

[8]. The Crown's presentation of Elizabeth II's fantasy wedding provides viewers with a direct and sumptuous dream to fulfill their inner desires of prince, princess, romance, and power, and the power to participate in this sacred ceremony. During the marriage oath, Elizabeth expressed her love to Philip with tears in her eyes, emphasizing that she would "to obey". This intimate process was shown to the audience by the camera. The history of the royal family has been restored in a state that Baudrillard called "obscenity" at the moment its wedding is visualized, which means an attractive, illusionary power may cause the collapse of reality, and the ambiguous mystery is created between reality and fiction [6]. Through close-up scenes and seductive lines: the spectacular ceremony implicitly shows the power over the happiness of marriage whilst appeasing the emotions of the audience who lack this kind of power, not to mention the pleasure of the male gaze contained in "to obey". The holy marriage of the royal family is presented to the audience on the other side of the screen, who can hardly tell whether it is historical reality or fiction. The stage and atmosphere are delicately built, and in the end, the mystery is handed over to the audience for appreciation, even judgement. However, it may not be that easy for the audience to escape from the seduction. The image is regarded as a symbolic activity of society and culture rather than merely an appreciation. The ideological dimension of the image is not directly proclaimed; conversely, it is repressed, due to the imperative nature of ideological praxis in neutralizing its essence, thereby creating an illusion of eternal and universally applicable principles. Consequently, the audience often perceives it merely as a spectacle, prompting the question of its significance. Images, especially the visual illusions and pleasure provided by mediated images, can easily cause visual paralysis to the viewing subject, making the viewer unconsciously sink into ideological identity, and this is what the seduction wants [9].

In terms of the seduction conducted by the monarchy, The Crown has discussed the distance between the object — the throne, and the subject — the people who put their eyes on it, through the interpretation of character dialogue. In episode 5 of season 1, Winston Churchill, Prime Minister of the UK at the time, said to Elizabeth after learning of Prince Philip's intention to televise the Queen's coronation: "What is the purpose of the crown? What is the purpose of the monarchy? Does the crown bend to the will of the people to be audited and accountable? Alternatively, should it remain above temporal matters?" Subsequently, the Queen had an argument with Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, and she said: "The people look to a monarchy for something bigger than themselves. An inspiration. A higher ideal. If you put it in their homes, allow them to watch it with their dinner on their laps..." Obviously, Winston Churchill and the Queen, on behalf of the government and the crown, show no intentions to break the ambiguous distance between them and the people, not to mention presenting this old symbolic ritual like a public play. They want to keep the seduction, not the entertainment. Nonetheless, Philip emerges triumphant due to his unwavering belief in the imperative nature of

modernizing the monarchy, thereby facilitating power-sharing, including the visibility of power, with the subjects, thus preventing its abandonment. The Crown shows the view of watching and being watched from the perspective of the royal family through dialogue, and this is similar to the temptation it presents to the audience as a historical drama. According to Wu, there does not exist pure, objective and neutral visuality, which means that viewing itself has desirable power operation included in it, and individuals depend on gazing at objects to reflect their inner desires to complete their identifications of themselves [9]. The queen, the costumes, the court etiquette, and the throne are all included in the utilitarian and wistful perspective of the audience, making a visual trial in the dramatized history. Therefore, that leads to another side: disenchantment.

3. The disenchantment of historical series

The English social commentator in the 19th century, Walter Bagehot, had described the daily life of the royal family as a “mystery”, and he asserted that the mystery itself must not be exposed to the public like it is naked in the spotlight. As subjects of the monarchy, individuals collectively embrace a sense of sacred reverence towards royalty, thereby emphasizing the unattainability of capturing the crown through visual mediums such as filming and photography. The populace harbors a reluctance towards a commonplace monarchy, consequently establishing the fundamental condition for the royal family’s existence as one shrouded in unknowability [10].

There are not many film and television works based on the life of the British royal family. Before *The Crown*, there were not enough opportunities for the public to have a detailed understanding of court culture through visual presentation. However, *The Crown*, in a rather long soap opera, presents the image of the royal family to the audience in a life-like way, which to a large extent, shortens the distance between the royal family and the public and secularizes the image of the royal family members. Episode 4 of season 3, which tells the story of the royal family members’ intention to restore their image by accepting documentary filming, presents the concern of visualized court life. “We are being filmed watching television [...] This really is plumbing new depths of banality”, says Princess Margaret, while the director of the documentary suggests royal members act like they are having a usual evening, “This is nothing like a normal evening. If it was a normal evening, we’d all be on our own in sad isolation in individual palaces.” The filming of this documentary in the play was proposed by Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh. The original intention was to expand the contact between the royal family and the common people so that the “subjects of royal” could learn more about how it works in order to increase the support of the royal family. This decision is not easy for the royal family to make because it means that the camera lens — this extremely aggressive tool — will expose the mystery of the royal family, thereby depriving the royal family of the symbolic power to rule.

Subsequent to the documentary’s airing, it failed to attain the anticipated impact and faced criticism regarding the portrayal of the royal family. One such critique was voiced by *The Guardian*, which stated, “That (documentary) stripped of all ceremony and mystery, we would marvel at how normal they were, how remarkably like us.” As mentioned before, historical TV series may or have already blurred the line between history and fiction. If the seduction presents the audience with a wonderland of romantic, mysterious royalty, then the scene above could break the previous imagination and bring the audience a miserable, apathetic, troubled royal family. It is the power of visual presentation, of disenchantment, to castrate monarchy: acting royal members as ordinary people who will make mistakes, have affairs, and get themselves stuck. This way for the audience to gain identity by looking at images and comparing them to real situations is part of what Laura Mulvey calls “voyeurism” and “narcissism”. If “voyeurism” is the pleasure of being seduced to view the object as a sexual object, which means that objects are viewed by audiences as something they desire but can not obtain, then “narcissism” is the pleasure of self-identification through the comparison between inside and outside the screen, that is the pleasure of depriving the sanctity of the object [11].

The story of Prince Charles and Diana, which has been another controversial part of *The Crown* since season 4, gradually disintegrated the seduction created in the early stage of this drama and accelerated the disenchantment of the royal family’s “divinity” more sharply. In episode 3 of season 4, titled “Fairytale,” Diana, a young girl who joyfully embraces a prince’s matrimonial proposition, establishes her domicile within the vacant palace, symbolically representing a confinement akin to a cage. The film’s portrayal of Diana’s eating disorder is striking: a disillusioned, emotionally isolated princess who torments herself. The cumbersome court etiquette, flashy decorations inside the palace, and the yearning of mortals for royal fairy tales are stripped of their halo under the gloomy image tone, showing its true appearance: a tragedy.

In this episode, the royal wedding reappeared, but it presented a completely different image from Queen Elizabeth’s wedding in season 1: the gloomy cathedral, the people who were busy and did not pay attention to Diana, the prince and princess arguing over issues in front of the statue of Passion. It seems that the royal marriage is no longer as sacred and fabulous as people imagined but has fallen into an embarrassing and disenchanted situation. Because through the presentation of the TV series, the marriage of the royal family members does not seem to be attractive at all. They also quarrel, suffer from mental stress, suffer from self-torture, and use marriage as a family expedient. In addition to being stated as having something to do with Diana’s tragic circumstances, the entangled scandal between Prince Charles and Camilla, as well as his immature, fragile and sensitive image portrayed in the drama, have also negatively affected the image of Prince Charles in reality, even under the premise that many viewers know that this is just a TV series: according to the questionnaire conducted by Cobo, nearly

20% of 814 respondents have worsened their perception on Prince Charles [10].

Benjamin describes this power to equate film and television characters with camera images as image cutting. TV drama actors lack the process of adapting to the audience during the performance because they do not have the opportunity to interact with the audience at close range. The audience's identification with the actors is actually the identification with the camera. Therefore, the audience occupies the position of the camera and examines the behavior of the actors through optical instruments [12]. In other words, the disenchantment of the images of the royal family members is due to the active interpretation of the visual presentation of the actors by the audience under the image cutting. TV drama's narrative and visual presentation techniques often break down the distinction between reality and imagination that constitutes seduction. Namely, the interpretation of TV dramas will break the seduction while shaping it. This form of presentation exacerbates the contradiction of the boundary of seduction and can even reconstruct reality in some cases, just like Diana, whom people adore more and Prince Charles, whom people do not like, as mentioned above.

To sum up, in the process of the royal family being filmed and objectified, the mystery of the royal family was deprived by the audience's gaze, and the audience's awe of authority was weakened by establishing a visual comparison standard. The audience also spontaneously intervened in the evaluation of the characters as an outsider and unconsciously bound them to the real characters behind the drama. These methods of disenchantment eventually made the image of the royal family no longer as glorious and great as expected.

4. Conclusion

While *The Crown* visually presents the life and history of the royal family, it also explores the significance of the existence and development prospects of the royal power through role interpretation, and the court trivia interspersed with it further emphasizes the complexity of the long-standing regime of the British royal family. Seduction is an important function of historical TV dramas in the process of their visual presentation. The detailed depiction of royal life, including the exact replicas of decorations, costumes, and court ceremonies, established a symbolic predominance. This symbolic power takes advantage of the audience's curiosity and desire for symbolic rituals, creating an ambiguous space between reality and imagination, thereby achieving the seduction of the audience, and this division will continue to serve as a significant means for the royal family to maintain its own existence. Watching, as a low-cost, unconscious output behavior, while passively receiving the cultivation of symbols, also includes aggressive structural behavior, namely, disenchantment. In *The Crown*, disenchantment consists of two parts: the visual presentation and the audience's active interpretation of the actor's performance. TV dramas that use images as the medium of communication fit the audience's interactive logic of viewing as the means of reception and have a hegemonic influence in the

transmission of information. Moreover, because the lens creates a gap between the actors and the audience, it also makes the interpretation of the characters tend to be unipolar, which in turn affects the judgment of the character prototype of the TV series.

As a highly topical and high-quality TV series in recent years, *The Crown* provides the public with an entry to know the British royal family. However, due to the limitations of the length of the article and the research methods, this article is unable to conduct a detailed textual analysis of all the episodes of *The Crown*. At the same time, in terms of the relationship between the image of the royal family and TV dramas, this article cannot make a more accurate evaluation based on the limited given interview data. As a result, the availability of further material or later interviews would aid researchers in their future efforts to undertake thorough study on the interaction between visual media and historical narratives.

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