

The British monarchy on screen

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Elizabeth I: the cinematic afterlife of an early modern political diva

Elisabeth Bronfen and Barbara Straumann

In the American TV mini-series *Political Animals* (2012), Sigourney Weaver plays Elaine Barrish Hammond, a divorced former First Lady who serves as Secretary of State. In a trailer for the series, Hammond explains her own will to power by invoking a comparison to historical female politicians: 'I took this job as Secretary of State because I feel I can make a difference. Eleanor Roosevelt, Cleopatra, Elizabeth the First. That's the kind of company I want to keep.'¹ Because it traces the imaginary legacy of its protagonist not only to the tragic last pharaoh of ancient Egypt but also to the last of the Tudors, this recent TV drama serves as a useful point of departure for this essay, which aims to look at Elizabeth I in relation to cultural anxieties regarding women and public power in the twentieth century. Discussing Elizabeth I as an early modern political media diva may seem preposterous, and yet our claim is that she anticipates the very enmeshment between celebrity culture and political power that is so particular to the charisma of celebrities in the public arena in the twentieth and early twenty-first century. What is at stake in our discussion is, therefore, a self-consciously ahistorical reading of Elizabeth I through the lens of her subsequent recycling as a film icon.

In proposing to look at Elizabeth through her cinematic refigurations, we take our cue from Mieke Bal's notion of doing a preposterous history, by which she means reversing chronological order and looking at the past through the lens of its subsequent recyclings. Bal offers an ingenious spin on the term 'preposterous' as she foregrounds the notion of a reversal 'which puts what comes chronologically first ("pre") as an after-effect behind ("post") its later recycling'. Looking preposterously at the visual culture of the past through later refigurations that have coloured our conception of this past means drawing attention

to what remains hidden when one limits oneself to more conventional intertextual influences. In the case of Elizabeth I, a preposterous history entails revisiting the portraits of this early modern queen, the anecdotes surrounding her person, as well as memorable passages from her writings in relationship to the way these have been reconceived on the silver screen. Such a revision does not collapse past and present in what Bal calls 'an ill-conceived presentism', nor does it 'objectify the past and bring it within our grasp, as in the problematic positivist historicism'. Instead, the kind of 'preposterous reversal' which she proposes refers to a way of doing history, of dealing with the past today.² Applying Bal's notion of doing a preposterous history to the cultural survival of Elizabeth I allows us to draw attention to the manner in which this Renaissance queen can be discussed as the first political diva precisely because she is such a resilient example for a complex gendering of sovereignty in the context of the mass consumption of politics.

Elizabeth I is perhaps not the only early modern queen but certainly one of the most memorable ones to use her public self-display – both her actual body and its diverse representations – to strengthen and disseminate her political power. The many portraits brought into circulation during her lifetime allowed her both to control her public image and to cement her political power by making it possible for her subjects to materially possess her image.³ With her costly summer progresses, furthermore, she also came to anticipate nineteenth- and twentieth-century political mass entertainment. Above all, however, she is the early modern queen who has had a particularly forceful cultural survival in Anglo-American visual culture. This is not least because she can be read subsequently as juggling the public persona with the private, that is, the natural (feminine, ageing, dying) body with a symbolic body that needed to constantly be reaffirmed as being eternal. As Ernst Kantorowicz famously writes in his classic study on the king's two bodies in medieval and early modern culture, it is the union of body natural and body politic that guarantees the continuity and 'immortality' of the sovereign as a political institution.⁴ Standing for the symbolic mandate that the monarch occupies as the deputy of God in the political landscape of his or her realm, the body politic needs to be embodied by a body natural and, at the same time, also remedies the imperfections and mortality to which the individual body is inevitably subjected. In the period between the individual's death and the accession of the next monarch, the declaration 'The king is dead, long live the king!' effectively affirms the survival of the body politic.

In the case of Elizabeth I, Kantorowicz's model helps us understand how the cultural survival of this early modern queen has been inspired by the way in which her contemporaneous representations already turned her into a highly iconic figure, thus, ensuring the cultural circulation of her symbolic body to this present day. At the same time, the theory of the monarch's two bodies also refers us to the fact that in the case of the female sovereign, the body natural tends to be more foregrounded (because of her potential role as wife and mother but also because of her exceptional status as a feminine leader in a predominantly masculine world). What distinguishes Elizabeth I from many other female monarchs are the many seemingly contradictory positions that she brought together by gendering the symbolic body of the king and emphasising that she was a queen: namely that of the virgin, the mother only to England, the glorious warrior, and the distant lover, fascinating but also unreachable for all, except as a representation. As we shall see, Elizabeth's play with her myriad roles, but also her status as a public figure positioned between her symbolic body and her feminine natural body, is particularly pronounced in the cinematic recyclings of her figure.

So far seminal critical work has been done regarding the portraits of Elizabeth in the context of early modern portraiture, underscoring the alignment between religious and political allegory.⁵ At the same time, Michael Dobson and Nicola Watson have also convincingly discussed the manner in which the changing representation of Elizabeth I in subsequent literary and visual culture can be seen to reflect various shifts in British national self-definition. Suggesting that Elizabeth I is 'the nearest thing England has ever had to a defining national heroine', Dobson and Watson trace how, for example, the early modern queen was turned into the plain-speaking and beef-eating figure of Queen Bess, who came to stand for a nostalgic recollection of an idyllic 'Merry Old England', how the first Elizabeth was invoked to celebrate the coronation of the second Elizabeth as the hopeful beginning of a new Elizabethan age in the aftermath of the Second World War, or how the early modern politician came to be imagined as a double of the first female British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, who attempted to redefine England with her ideology of ambition, greed, new money, militarism and power-dressing.⁶

The allegorical relation between the Queen and the nation can, however, be traced as far back as her early modern portraiture. In fact, the status of Elizabeth I as a national icon is particularly prominent in the so-called 'Ditchley' portrait by Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger, where she can be seen to stand

on a map of England.' The sheer size of her superhuman figure, the anatomically improbable proportions delineated by the enormous sleeves as well as the virginal whiteness of her dress, face and hands, all underline that this is not a realistic portrait of an individual person, but a 'state portrait' foregrounding the symbolic body of the Queen, which serves as an abstract allegorical sign for her country. Indeed, visible beneath the figure of Elizabeth I is the territory of the different counties which she would have visited during her extended summer progresses in order to affirm her political sovereign power and which, in the portrait, she seems to protect with her enormous figure cloaked in its mantle. Like the Queen's theatrical self-display during her progresses, the portrait can be seen as an attempt to turn England not only into the stage where she performed her political power but also into a nation state unified by her allegorical figure.

In the 'Ditchley' portrait, Elizabeth I appears to be divided on many different levels. Her gigantic figure simultaneously touches the earthly ground and reaches up to heaven, thus evoking the notion of the sovereign as doubled by his or her human nature and divine status as a monarch anointed by God. At the same time, the figure of the Queen also marks the dividing line between the serene sunlight on the left and the dark stormy sky riddled by lightning on the right. Yet Elizabeth is, significantly enough, also represented as an androgynous figure. Her clothes symbolise her feminine chastity and purity by virtue of their dazzling whiteness, but they also look metallic, like the armour of a warrior prince. Indeed, while Dobson and Watson trace the cultural afterlife that Elizabeth I has enjoyed as a national icon, it is the complex relationship between gender and power in this afterlife that we want to highlight. As the quotation from the mini-series *Political Animals* at the beginning of this chapter indicates, contemporary political culture suggests that it is timely to revisit the issue of power and gender, precisely because the world of media and the world of politics have become ever more intertwined. To be more precise, this chapter explores the particular way in which, at three different historical moments, the body of Elizabeth I and the theatricalisation of her power intersect with the body of the modern film star. In order to do so, we focus on four actresses: Flora Robson in *Fire Over England* (William Howard, 1937) and *The Sea Hawk* (Michael Curtiz, 1940), Bette Davis in *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (Michael Curtiz, 1939) and *The Virgin Queen* (Henry Koster, 1955), Jean Simmons in *Young Bess* (George Sidney, 1953) and finally Cate Blanchett in *Elizabeth* (Shekhar Kapur, 1998) and *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (Shekhar Kapur, 2007).

Read in conjunction with each other, these films not only offer idiosyncratic enactments of an early modern political diva but also allow us to distinguish the diverse cultural needs and anxieties each refiguration of the past addresses and satisfies. For this reason, as we move from one historical period to the next, our discussion brings into play the double-voicing at issue in cinema's historical reimagining of Elizabeth I. As Robert Burgoyne notes, when epic cinema refigures history on screen, it inevitably deploys genre memory. By transporting recollections of the past into the present, history is to a degree always reimagined and reconceptualised from the position of the contemporary now.⁸ This means that the cinema screen functions as a conceptual space, straddling a historical event with a present which it claims to speak to by having recourse to a past, but also to previous representations of this past. In the following, we will look at three historical moments in which Elizabeth I came to re-emerge in mainstream cinema so as to examine what ideological values were negotiated by virtue of a theatricalisation of her glamorous political self-representation.

After Sarah Bernhardt's melodramatic performance in *Les Amours de la Reine Elizabeth / Queen Elizabeth* (Henri Desfontaines, Louis Mercanton, 1912), revolving around her ill-fated love relationship with Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, the first wave of films highlights the manner in which, during the rise of totalitarian governments in the 1930s, cinema engages with and reflects on authoritarian power regimes. While films such as *Gabriel Over the White House* (1933), *Young Mr Lincoln* (1939) and *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) offer various takes on the presidency, from Gregory La Cava's quasi-dictatorial leader, to John Ford's nostalgic politician and Frank Capra's benign figure of paternal authority, the costume melodramas of the late 1930s and early 1940s displace the struggles of male leaders such as Roosevelt and Churchill onto the figure of the Queen and her political adversaries.⁹ Part and parcel of this displacement is the manner in which quasi-historical representations serve to support the war effort by moving into an earlier historical period in order to transcode current political concerns. The 1950s films emphasise how the last of the Tudors gives rise to a debate between the heart and the politics of a powerful sovereign in the context of the political imaginary of the period, including Cold-War paranoia, anxiety about women in the workplace and the coronation of Elizabeth II. The final examples from the late 1990s and the early twenty-first century explore the resuscitation not only of Elizabeth I on screen but also of the previous stars who embodied her. The cultural concerns at issue in this case involve

the manner in which the media have become the site where political battles are fought through as a battle of images.

How do these cinematic refigurations speak to the cultural issues and concerns that the re-enactment of Elizabeth I on screen is meant to address if not resolve? What aspects of this Queen are remembered? And why is it at the body of this Queen that the problematic of gendered sovereignty has come to be so resiliently debated? Our claim is that the Queen's two bodies bring together a feminine body natural with the symbolic mandate she assumes and fulfils. As the woman (mother, lover) is pitted against the politician, the mediality of her material embodiment also comes to be foregrounded. Moreover, these screen re-enactments thematically address the conflict between private person and public persona particular to female sovereignty because the Queen is both stateswoman and potential wife and mother (or virgin in the case of Elizabeth I). This raises the question of how each of the four film divas, by enacting the historical Queen, presents her own two bodies, that of a woman and that of a figure of celebrity culture. Even more important is the question how each of the four actresses brings her celebrity image to her performance of the Queen in a specific historical-cultural context.

It is important to note that all of the films discussed here make little use of narrative development. Both the portrait of the Queen that is brought to the screen as well as the particular story each film tells about her are fairly static. The scripts pick up on and rewrite one of several key historical anecdotes that have been handed down, notably the events leading up to the victorious battle against the Spanish Armada, Elizabeth's jealousy over her courtiers' romantic affairs with one or the other lady-in-waiting, the political volatility surrounding her ascension to the throne or the uprising of the Earl of Essex towards the end of her reign. If, then, there is little dramatic action and very little psychological development in these film narratives, we are instead presented with precisely those clichés with which Elizabeth has come to be identified, notably the tension between her duty as a sovereign and her desire as a woman; the emotional tension between her ageing and the agelessness of her as a queen; and thus the actual feminine body and its containment in the costumes and paraphernalia of political sovereignty.

In other words, the cinematic revisitation of Elizabeth I primarily entails a *mise-en-scène* of her embodiment of sovereign power, her performance of political spectacle. In so far as there is any narrative action, this involves the film heroes and their female lovers, both of whom function as satellites to her stationary

body. These men go into the world, either as soldiers or explorers, and bring the world back to their Queen. But precisely in that they are the ones to move outside the court, while we, as the spectators of this *mise-en-scène*, can both follow them and notice their absence, their mobility serves to underscore the static architecture of the court, which is built around Elizabeth at its centre. At the same time, while it is hard to keep the plots of the different films apart, each film is characterised by the specific star who embodies the Queen. Indeed, what makes these films so ideologically telling is the tacit equation between Elizabeth I and the stars Robson, Davis, Simmons and Blanchett, who preposterously resurrect the image we have of this early modern queen from her portraits and from the historical anecdotes surrounding her reign. Put another way, at issue in these films are less the stories they tell than the way in which they cast the Queen as a star, using reference to the historical figure as advertisement for a studio and its film, invoking her both as a commodity to be consumed, but also to sell the political narrative that she encapsulates. Our claim is that these films are not simply to be understood as historical costume melodrama, but instead as media images of power. Over and beyond the implicit or explicit usage that they make of actual portraits of Elizabeth, the function of these historical reimaginings of her is to create mediatised representations of political power that make this power consumable.

MODERN SOVEREIGNTY

The cinematic re-enactment of Elizabeth I in the context of 1930s geopolitics coincides with a general interest in charismatic queens. In 1933, Greta Garbo appeared in Rouben Mamoulian's *Queen Christina*. The following year Flora Robson played the Empress Elizabeth of Russia alongside Elisabeth Bergner in Alexander Korda's *The Rise of Catherine the Great*, Claudette Colbert brought Cleopatra to the screen in Cecil B. DeMille's monumental epic and Marlene Dietrich offered her impersonation of Catherine of Russia in Josef von Sternberg's *The Scarlet Empress*. Two years later, Florence Eldridge played Elizabeth I alongside Katherine Hepburn in John Ford's *Mary of Scotland*, while Anna Neagle performed Queen Victoria under the direction of Herbert Wilcox in *Victoria the Great* (1937) and then in *Sixty Glorious Years* (1938). Also in 1938, Norma Shearer played the fated French queen in W. S. Van Dyke's *Marie Antoinette*. In most cases the historical reimagining on screen equates the queen with the respective Hollywood star. Yet at the same time, these female

sovereigns also reflect on political leadership in more general terms. More specifically, as fascist governments in Germany, Italy and Spain gained power in the course of the 1930s, the preposterous gaze at earlier queens served to address a cultural present, namely the impending crisis of war. The two historical refigurings of Queen Victoria reflect on England's politics of appeasement, while the fatal demise of Marie Antoinette warns against blindness towards political unrest.

Most explicitly, however, the theatricalised politics of Elizabeth and her battle against the Spanish Armada are used to underline both the threat of and the necessary fight against a fascist takeover. The British production *Fire Over England* (1937) proposes a political allegory in which the defeat of the Armada figures as a determined reaction against Franco's Spain, with Elizabeth of England and Philip of Spain standing in for modern democracy and fascism respectively. In the pivotal scene of the film, before the actual battle begins, we see Flora Robson's Elizabeth spoon-feeding frail Lord Burghley with 'good English broth'. This underscores the Queen's self-fashioning as the mother of England. At the same time, we can already hear the drumbeats announcing war on the soundtrack. The editing then moves to a depiction of this warrior queen as she addresses her troops at Tilbury. The camera work positions Robson not apart from but in close proximity to her soldiers, as, dressed in full battle regalia, she rides to encourage them in their battle. Having reached the camp, Robson quotes parts of Elizabeth's well-known Tilbury speech. Most notably she calls out to her men – citing the historical speech verbatim – that she has 'the body of a weak and feeble woman' but 'the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too' – and, in doing so, emphasises her political androgyny.¹⁰ The visual argument is that because she is shown in the midst of her soldiers, she is one of them. Even on her white horse, which she rides side-saddle, she is hardly more elevated than her troops. Moreover, her bearing appears poised and calm (her horse does not move while she is speaking). The sequence closes with the burning of the Spanish ships. On the soundtrack we hear harps and the voice-over of Robson, invoking the divine force whose wind has scattered the nation's enemies. The disembodied voice seems to mark a divine position so that Robson's voice becomes the voice of the nation and perhaps even of divine providence.

Flora Robson began her career as a British theatre actress, and her public image is hardly one of glamour. During the Second World War, she moved back and forth between Hollywood and the London theatre to support the war effort on both sides of the Atlantic. More explicitly than in *Fire Over England*,



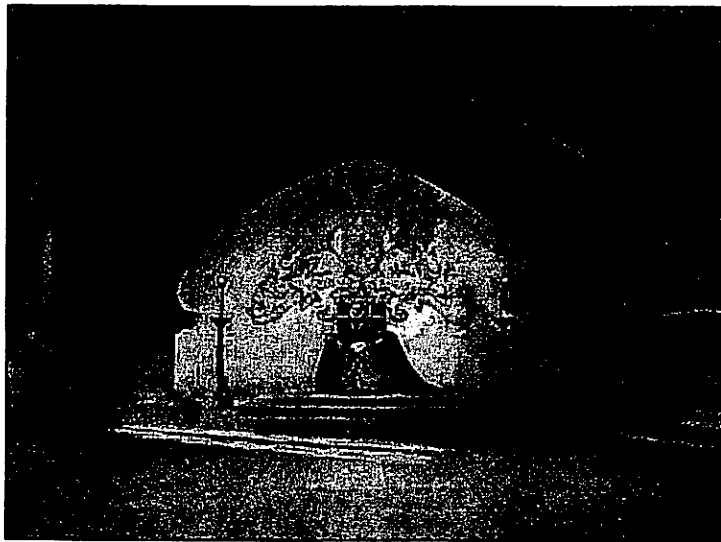
12 Flora Robson as Elizabeth I addressing her people aboard ship in *The Sea Hawk* (Michael Curtiz, 1940).

her performance of Queen Elizabeth in the 1940 Hollywood film *The Sea Hawk* (whose director, Michael Curtiz, helmed *Casablanca* two years later) is explicitly aimed at rallying the American audience in its support for the Allies fighting overseas. Equally significant is the much-enhanced theatricality of this historical reimagination. In the final scene of the film, Robson's Elizabeth once again addresses her people, this time not on shore but on a ship. Set off by a canopy she stands on what looks like an elevated stage, thus turning the entire ship into a theatre. Compared to *Fire Over England*, there is more distance between her and her audience. In fact, she can be seen to tower over them. Curtiz's film language not only evokes Hollywood's more glamorous film techniques, but it also gives Robson more of a Hollywood star treatment. The editing moves from a long shot that establishes the scene of her political appeal to a medium shot as she explains to her loyal subjects that 'a grave duty confronts us all. To prepare our nation for a war that none of us wants, least of all your Queen.'

Gesturing toward the shift in President Roosevelt's stance regarding the war, Elizabeth proceeds to assure her ladies-in-waiting as well as the troops surrounding her that while she has tried by all means in her power to avert this war, a time to act has come: 'But when the ruthless ambition of a man

threatens to engulf the world, it becomes the solemn obligation of all free men to affirm that the earth belongs not to any one man but to all men.' By now the camera has seamlessly moved into a medium shot of Robson. While she claims freedom as the title and soil on which England, as a nation, exists, her gestures become more martial. As she pledges ships worthy of English seamen, the camera moves to a close-up of first Errol Flynn and Brenda Marshall, the two romantic leads, now shown to be the Queen's privileged addressees. They are also, however, the cinematic point of transition between the reimagined historical past and the contemporary audience. As Robson's Elizabeth invokes a 'navy foremost in the world, not only in our time but for generations to come', she speaks not only to her diegetic audience. The war effort she invokes is clearly directed at the American movie audience in the year 1940. The historical displacement works to underline the urgency of Roosevelt's own plea to the American people, to whom he had previously pledged that he would not go to war. Curtiz thus has recourse to Elizabeth's skill at political spectacle to suggest a cultural heritage and a cultural debt. With her speech, Robson, as a renowned British actress, is effectively calling upon her fans in America to support the British troops as allies.

One year earlier, Michael Curtiz had directed the historical costume melodrama *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex*, in which Errol Flynn had also played the romantic lead. In this case, however, the role of Queen Elizabeth was performed by Bette Davis. *Private Lives* is one of the films which came out in Hollywood's *annus mirabilis* of 1939, when owing to a change in policy in the Hays Office, it had become possible to bring anti-Nazi sentiment explicitly to the screen. Thus, even if the film foregrounds the private life of the Queen, most notably the tension between her desire as a woman and her duty as a politician, it does so to transform an absolute monarch into a quasi-democratic leader. In a seminal dialogue between her and her favourite lady-in-waiting, she laments the constraint her queenship poses on her romantic desires. 'Thank heaven you're not a queen', she assures Lady Margaret, 'to be a queen is to be less than human, to put pride before desire, to search men's hearts for tenderness and find only ambition, to cry out in the dark for one unselfish voice and hear only the dry rustle of papers of state.' The camera remains in a medium close-up of Bette Davis, as she concludes, '[T]he queen has no hour for love, time presses, events crowd upon her, and for a shell, an empty glittering husk, she must give up all that a woman holds most dear.' Throughout this dialogue scene, the camera remains fairly static.



13 Bette Davis as the isolated Queen in *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (Michael Curtiz, 1939).

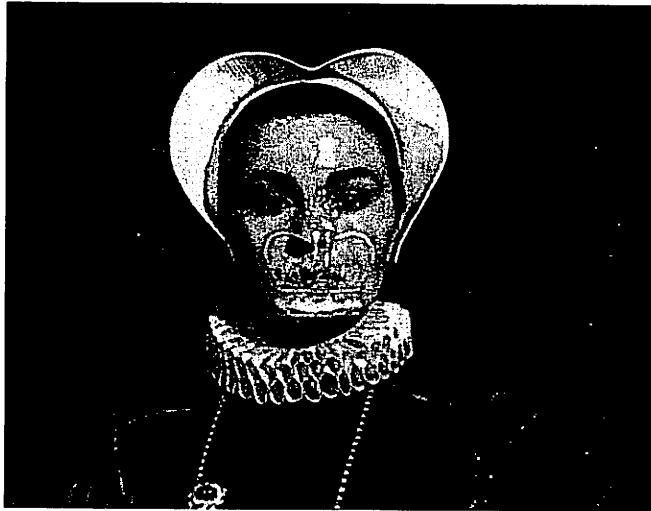
Only once Elizabeth has asked Lady Margaret to fetch one of her councillors does the camera move into a close-up of her face. Significantly enough, the close-up shows it reflected in a shard of the mirror she has broken just before the dialogue begins. For a brief moment she looks at herself in anguish and then turns over the reflection that gave us the Queen and the star as a visual fragment. With this detail, the film evokes William Shakespeare's *Richard II*. However, in contrast to Shakespeare's history play, where the breaking of the mirror signals the separation of the two bodies of the king, Bette Davis's Elizabeth completely fuses with her symbolic mandate, thus emphasising the need for a sovereign in times of political threat to cast aside all romantic ambitions that might stand in opposition to national security. In 1936, Edward VIII famously abdicated in order to marry 'the woman I love'. In contrast, Davis's Elizabeth puts her duty as Queen above her personal happiness. She is wedded to her throne just as Bette Davis was committed to her professional ethos, which meant that she was not afraid of playing older women or unflattering roles, both of which were not conducive to a traditional Hollywood glamour image.

THE POSTWAR PROFESSIONAL WOMEN

The revisitation of Elizabeth I in the 1950s must be read in the context of the redomestication of the American female workforce at the end of the Second World War. It is important to recall that between 1941 and 1945, over 6 million women were working in defence plants to sustain the war effort, with over 20 million women in the workplace at large. Once the war was over, a great effort was made to persuade women to return to the home and give back their 'job to G.I. Joe'. (The scholarship on film noir has emphasised the cultural anxieties arising from this redistribution of gendered notions of work.) But many of the women stayed on. The 1950s are thus a highly ambivalent period, reintroducing the melodramatic positioning of women in the heart of the home. Yet the films of the decade attest to the fragility of this construction. Not only do many of the female stars relocated in the domestic space seem uncomfortable there, but other films also – even if only subtly – include women in white-collar work, often tragically negotiating their desire for love, family and maternity with the equally powerful desire for a career.

In this context of a cultural ambivalence regarding the re-emergence of working women which has not yet transformed into an active women's movement one might fruitfully place both of the historical reimaginations of Elizabeth I in the 1950s. In *Young Bess* (George Sidney, 1953), Jean Simmons, whom the Hollywood audience would have known from her performance of Ophelia in Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet* (1945), plays the young woman about to become England's queen. Significant for the violent passion she brings to her performance of this role is the fact that in 1952, she was the female star in Otto Preminger's film noir *Angel Face*, playing a war-traumatised young British woman, who kills first her parents, and then her husband when he decides to leave her. In *Young Bess* Simmons again brings a young woman's radical will to power on screen, recalling how, in Preminger's film noir, her eyes are able to shift seamlessly from innocent purity to demonic force whenever her desires are in danger of being thwarted.

In a pivotal scene in *Young Bess*, it is precisely this dangerous passion which is emphasised as she describes her imperial aspirations to Thomas Seymour (Stewart Granger), whom she wants to become the future admiral of her fleet. As she promises an opportunity that he has never dared to dream of, she stands in front of him, an ambitious young woman invoking the figure of the post-war working women of America. While she imagines where she would send



14 Jean Simmons as Elizabeth I in *Young Bess* (George Sidney, 1953).

him and how she would build up her navy, he is drawn into her passion. Yet as he brings into play the issue of romance, assuring her that he envies the man who will be her admiral, the tone of the scene changes, and we realise that her political ambition is shown to be in conflict with her romantic desire. The passion she has for her (future) empire transforms into a jealousy that she must contain as Seymour leaves her side to embrace his true beloved, Catherine Parr (Deborah Kerr), the last wife of her late father, Henry VIII (Charles Laughton). Her discussion of the possibilities open to an England with a grand fleet speak to the American imperialism of the early 1950s, the Cold-War obsession with cultural expansion, implicitly transcoding early modern England into postwar America. Simmons's performance is ominous in the way she speaks (namely with a childlike yet determined voice) but above all in the fiery look with which she beholds her rival, realising that, because she cannot win the battle for the heart of Thomas Seymour, all she has left are politics and war.

As in *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex*, the *mise-en-scène* is fairly static throughout the dialogue between Elizabeth and Seymour. However, once Elizabeth realises that she is confined to her role as a political figure, the camera isolates her. It zooms into a close-up of her fiery eyes, thus foregrounding a cultural anxiety regarding women in power that recalls the anxiety that

Elizabeth evoked in early modern England as a female monarch. One might well speak about an uncanny viewing effect. It is as though we are drawn into a feminine gaze that becomes all-assuming and all-consuming. Unlike Audrey Hepburn in *Roman Holiday* (William Wyler, also 1953), she is not the docile princess who will quietly relinquish romance for her symbolic mandate. Instead there is something decidedly sinister about both her passion and her ambition.

Bette Davis returned to the role of Elizabeth in the 1950s, using her performance to comment on her own position as a politically engaged actress. Throughout the 1940s, Davis had firmly entrenched herself as one of the grand character actresses in Hollywood, and by 1950 was able to address the issue of the ageing star in *All About Eve*. Yet what the contemporary audience of *The Virgin Queen* (1955) would also have remembered was the fact that she had been a key supporter of anti-Nazi sentiment since 1933. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, Davis had become particularly energetic in supporting the war effort, known for her bond-drive work as well as founding with John Garfield the Hollywood Canteen, where stars entertained the troops (work which Delmer Daves commemorates in the eponymous film of 1944).¹¹ When she comes to play Elizabeth again in Henry Koster's costume epic, she is firmly installed as the older woman who has remained a powerful star in the Hollywood system, as well as a forceful political figure. She embodies the veteran professional woman in the American cultural imaginary. The scene portraying the early modern Queen in relation to mid-twentieth-century cultural anxieties regarding feminine rule comes at the end of the film. Her love interest, Walter Raleigh (Richard Todd), is about to embark with the woman of his heart (Joan Collins) on his voyage to America. Initially she does not want to be privy to his departure, but her adviser skilfully draws her to the window to see the ship sail off.

Her gaze through the spyglass first zeroes in on the romantic couple, the visual signifier for the romance she has to relinquish. Then, prompted by her adviser, she sees the flag under which the ship is sailing to the New World, namely hers. As in *Young Bess*, she is thus positioned between love and state power. Her poignant comment, 'I have to attend to business of state', as she turns back to her desk is significantly double in its meaning. Business of state is all she has, but business of state is also *what* she has. The spyglass with which she isolates first the romantic couple and then the insignia of her political power marks Davis's Elizabeth as the holder of the gaze. Not only can she thus survey her subjects, her gaze also determines what we see. She draws us back to herself, sitting at her desk, dealing with the business of state. Although she embodies



15 Bette Davis as the ageing Elizabeth I in *The Virgin Queen* (Henry Koster, 1955).

the cultural fantasies of Western hegemony during the Cold War, she does so as a woman. She may be frozen in her symbolic position, but she also inhabits it and its immense power.

CONSTITUTING A GENDERED SOVEREIGN

The third and last cultural moment we want to isolate is that of the late 1990s and the beginning of the new millennium. At stake in the preposterous cinematic appropriation of Elizabeth I in this period is a culture of political spin-doctoring, prominent first and foremost in the politics of Bill Clinton, Gerhard Schröder and Tony Blair. Because the task of the spin-doctor is to produce a media image, the politics of this time bring the politician closer to the movie star and thus closer to notions of glamour. In Shekhar Kapur's *Elizabeth* (1998), which propelled the Australian actress Cate Blanchett to international stardom and established her global fame and glamour, the spin-doctor is Elizabeth's spymaster Sir Francis Walsingham, played by Geoffrey Rush. After she has liquidated her political enemies, Elizabeth I thinks about possible ways of consolidating her power. In the decisive scene, as seminal to her understanding of her role as queen as Simmons's discussion with Seymour in *Young Bess*, Blanchett stands below a stone statue of the Virgin Mary as Walsingham suggests to her that since her subjects have found no one to replace the figure of the Virgin, she could turn herself into a living embodiment of this religious icon.

Later in this sequence, after her lady-in-waiting Kat has cut off her long hair, she will address her, while looking directly into the camera, and solemnly declare: 'I have become a virgin.' The wording is important; she does not say that she is but that she *has become* a virgin. The formulation underlines that what is at stake is a self-transformation in the course of which she, too, will turn herself into an icon. Like Bette Davis's Elizabeth in *Private Lives*, Cate Blanchett's has to make a sacrifice. But what is affirmed is not the symbolic position of the sovereign in a crisis of national security but rather the public image a political party needs to rally the nation's citizens. Kapur's take on the Renaissance queen is indicative of a certain depletion of the public space at the turn of the millennium. His film taps into a contemporary culture which is characterised by a loss of material substance in public debate. Instead, politics has turned into something that is conducted with media images.

The emphasis on a postmodern image culture is even more pronounced in Kapur's sequel *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (2007). If, in *Fire Over England*, Flora Robson has to go into battle against a Spanish dictator closely resembling Franco, in *The Golden Age*, Philip of Spain recalls the Iranian leader Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Once again we have a scene in which the Queen addresses her troops at Tilbury. The film language, however, is very different from that of *Fire Over England*. The *mise-en-scène* and camera angle Kapur chooses produce a far greater distance between Blanchett and her soldiers. Towering high above them, she is visually isolated against the cloud-riddled pale-blue sky. Moreover, in contrast to the fairly static position of Robson on horseback, her horse constantly keeps moving as she describes the enemy's prowess and the violence of the battle about to be unleashed.

Unlike Robson, who refers to the political androgyny of her queen by citing the historical speech of Elizabeth I, Blanchett does not refer to the 'weak and feeble' body she has as a woman and the 'heart and stomach' she has as a king. Instead she chooses to quote another passage from Elizabeth's famous Tilbury speech as she calls out to her soldiers that she is 'resolved in the midst and heat of the battle to live or die amongst you all'. Departing from the historical speech, she assures them that as long as they 'stand together, no invader shall pass', only to conclude to the loud cheering of her troops: 'and when this day of battle is ended, we meet again in heaven or on the field of victory'. It seems that she does not need to quote the passage regarding Elizabeth's political androgyny directly because it has become part of what one might call the quotable Elizabeth. Moreover, the Queen's martial identity is visually staged

in the way Blanchett, wearing a suit of armour and sitting astride her white horse, is posed above her men. Indeed, she is an iconographic hybrid of medieval and early modern warriors: her flowing loose hair and her plate armour are reminiscent of Joan of Arc, and the sequence also evokes Kenneth Branagh's cry to battle in *Henry V* (1989). Everything about this Elizabeth is citational, a postmodern pastiche. Unlike Robson, Blanchett does not make an appeal to an extra-diegetic audience. Instead her speech is oddly detached – perhaps because today the enemies of state are dispersed. But perhaps also because all that remains in Kapur's 'preposterous' appropriation of this early modern queen is pure cinematic image.

SHIFTS IN THE IMAGE

While each of the films discussed gives embodied life to a particular conception of Elizabeth I, they all end by transforming her into a final 'portrait'. These final tableaux freeze her moving image, and in so doing, pay homage to portraiture as the very art form which they have recast in the medium of the twentieth century. Placed next to each other, they offer a map of so-called pathos formulae, much along the lines of Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*. Defining these aesthetic formalisations of intense affects, Warburg was able to show not only how certain pathos formulae survive in cultural memory but also how they undergo shifts as they are rearticulated at various points in cultural history. Following his gesture, we juxtapose the different final 'portraits' of Elizabeth in the various films in order to render visible a cartography of both the visual and narrative implementation of the female star as queen.¹² Each of the final moments encapsulates the particular way in which the film in question thinks through the fascination and anxiety regarding gendered sovereignty. Also at issue is the manner in which the subsequent films rethink and refigure their predecessors, while their freezing of the Queen into a final 'portrait' reminds us of portraiture, the medium already used by Elizabeth I. In other words, what we want to highlight is how the films cite and reconceive previous representations of queenship according to the cultural concerns of their times. It is for this reason that it is useful to work with Robert Burgoyne's notion of double-voicing in order to address the political fantasies and anxieties of the current moment when the films were released. Placing these final image formulae next to each other means noticing the similarities as well as the thematic and aesthetic shifts that have taken place between the individual examples.

In the first wave of Elizabeth films, the historical reimagination served to speak *about* and *to* the world of totalitarian politics in the 1930s. The 1950s characterisations of this early modern queen allowed for an articulation regarding an anxiety about professional women. The recycling of clichés in Kapur's post-modern refigurations, finally, connects the pop iconography of celebrity culture to the spin-doctoring of politics at the end of the twentieth century. The cultural survival of the image formulae by which Elizabeth's legacy has taken hold of the contemporary imaginary can be seen as mainstream cinema's sustained engagement with queenship as a form of political celebrity. What the cinematic recyclings of Elizabeth I foreground is a politicisation of celebrity. The star brings her celebrity to her enactment of the historical queen. At the same time, cinema turns stars into political figures, and it does so in a world in which politicians present themselves ever more as stars.

At the end of *Fire Over England* we see Flora Robson praying among her people. She is a bit above them, yet also part of them. Although the camera focuses on her, she is together with her diegetic audience. Behind her we see the romantic couple that has formed under her auspices, played by the stars Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh (who themselves began an affair while acting as lovers in this film). The Queen is the mother of the couple as she is the mother of the nation. At the same time, she is also a Madonna to the people kneeling around her. In the final moments of *The Sea Hawk*, the *mise-en-scène* is far more theatricalised, and yet Flora Robson is still close to her people. She forms the centre of the image; she has the main light. The ship evokes a stage, with the audience grouped around her as she calls upon them to act politically, and implicitly to the audience in the movie theatre. Indeed, in her appeal to us she recalls Roosevelt's appeal to the American nation.

In the first of the two Bette Davis performances, it is significantly the gaze of Errol Flynn (playing Essex, who is about to be executed) that leads to the last scene. What we see, guided by Flynn's gaze, is the lonely figure of the Queen as she is sitting on her throne whilst Essex, her former favourite and love interest, is executed as a result of his political rebellion against her. The *mise-en-scène* of her solitary figure in the almost dark room underscores her isolation, but the scene also culminates in a final 'portrait' that shows her firmly wedded to her throne. The fact that the scene is introduced by Flynn's gaze indicates that the final image could be read both as the fantasy of Essex and as the actual experience of the Queen. While the drum roll on the soundtrack announces his imminent beheading, she moves nervously

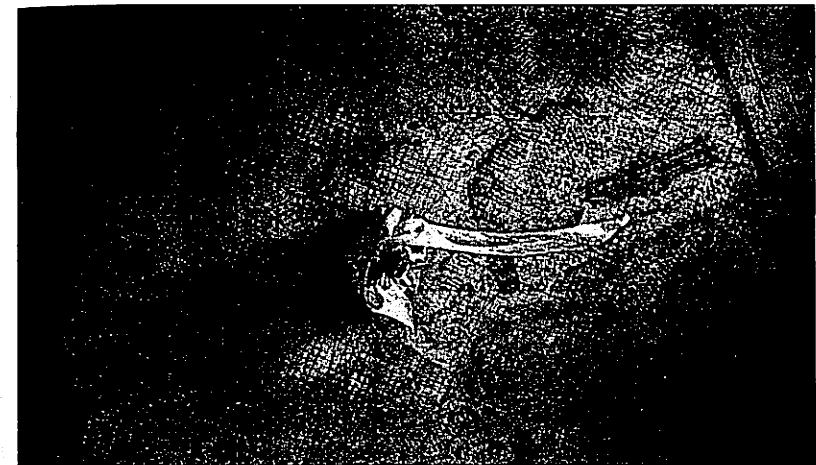
and the camera becomes unsteady as it zooms to a medium shot of the Queen. Then, once the drums stop, signalling that he has been beheaded, she becomes static, as though frozen in her image. Implicitly, once his head has fallen, she becomes secure in her power, in her symbolic position. His head is the sacrifice necessary for her to remain on her throne. The *mise-en-scène* isolates her (no audience is visible as in the other films) but she is firmly positioned there as the camera moves to an extreme long shot, thus offering one final tableau of the Queen who has sacrificed romance for her duty as a stateswoman. In *The Virgin Queen*, when Bette Davis once more plays the part, she actually recycles herself. As in *Elizabeth and Essex*, she is isolated in space, sitting at her desk, and alone, after her courtier has left her to her work. She seems exhausted, perhaps weeping. As in the earlier film, her isolation is foregrounded, yet we also have the final cheerful music, which stands in stark contrast to her pose. As the camera tracks back, we see her as a figure of quiet despair, yet firmly emplaced in her symbolic position. The final image again affirms her in her power.

Young Bess installs yet another image formula, namely the birth of the Queen. We see Simmons, walking onto a balcony, about to accept her mandate to be queen, and hear her cheering subjects, although the crowd remains invisible. The camera focuses exclusively on her, zooming into a close-up of her face, as the actress holds her pose. Then an overlapping dissolve superimposes an image of the crown onto her face. (The release of the film coincided with the coronation of Elizabeth II, thought by many to usher in a so-called new Elizabethan era.) Like Bette Davis, though far less tragically, Simmons also becomes static, indicating that she has become a political icon. As in *The Virgin Queen*, her isolation marks the sacrifice that is necessary, in this case not for the Queen to maintain her power, but for the young Princess to become Queen. The most radical shift towards a frozen image can, however, be found in *Elizabeth*. Initially Blanchett emerges from white light, takes on shape and then invokes one of the many citations making up what we have come to call the quotable Elizabeth. As she turns towards one of her most eminent advisers, she declares: 'Observe, Lord Burleigh, I am married to England.' The throne she moves to is comparable to an altar, on which she, indeed, becomes an icon. The film ends with a freeze frame, transforming the body of the Queen into the fixed symbolic body of the Virgin but also into an image that reminds us of the early modern portraiture of Elizabeth.

In its declared passion for the aesthetics of postmodern pastiche, *Elizabeth: The Golden Age*, finally, works with even more quotable Elizabeths. Blanchett



16 Cate Blanchett as the iconic Queen in *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (Shekhar Kapur, 2007).



17 Cate Blanchett as the Queen astride a map of Europe in *Elizabeth: The Golden Age*.

assumes the pose of the Madonna with Child, again enveloped in white light, as she declares 'I am your Queen, I am myself.' Kapur's Elizabeth is the first one to speak about her transformed state in terms of freedom. And as she makes her declaration of self-identity, she looks at us. She is isolated in her diegetic space and shifts her appeal to an extra-diegetic audience, thus recalling Robson in *The Sea Hawk*. White light then introduces the final image: a top

shot of Elizabeth standing on a map of Europe. By standing in the Channel and facing the continent, Blanchett visualises the imperialism Simmons invokes in *Young Bess*, while the map recalls the famous 'Ditchley' portrait, which shows Elizabeth, dressed in white, standing on a map of England. Adorned with transparent wing-like elements, Blanchett's dress also reminds us of the one in the 'Ditchley' portrait and, more generally, evokes the figure of a flying angel. At the same time, the translucence of Blanchett's ruff and the soft light in which this final scene is shot evoke the 'Rainbow' portrait also attributed to Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger. Painted in the very last years of Elizabeth's life, it represents the Queen as a beautiful young bride with an appearance much lovelier and softer than in her other portraits. As in the 'Ditchley' portrait, her cloak suggests the wings of an angel, bird or perhaps a butterfly. Part of the fabric is diaphanous, airy, almost like gossamer. The radiance and brilliance of the Queen in the 'Rainbow' portrait is precisely what is evoked by the luminous quality of Kapur's film language in this last scene. With this final example, we have arrived in the realm of a highly self-conscious reflexivity. The final sequence quotes portraits of Elizabeth as well as the previous film stars embodying her. So doing, it condenses these previous refigurations in order to produce Elizabeth I as a pure signifier.

We conclude with these final scenes in order to emphasise that at the end of each film, the movement of the Queen's body is frozen into an image, even if Kapur's *Elizabeth* is the only film to actually use a freeze frame. This is the final image, the 'portrait' in both senses of the word, namely the actual image and the image idea, with which the films install the Queen and her power by way of narrative closure. She is the one to survive as a queen (over political adversaries and romantic debacles). She is a survivor, and with her survive her portraits, handed down from one film to the next.

NOTES

- 1 *Political Animals*, TV mini-series written and directed by G. Berlanti, USA Network, aired from 15 July to 19 August 2012.
- 2 Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 6, 7.
- 3 For a discussion of the ways in which Elizabeth I used her visual representation to consolidate her political power see Kevin Sharpe, *Selling the Tudor Monarchy: Authority and Image in Sixteenth-Century England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009).

- 4 Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2nd edn, 1998).
- 5 See in particular Roy Strong, *Gloriana: The Portraits of Queen Elizabeth I* (London: Pimlico, 2003); David Fischlin, 'Political allegory: absolutist ideology and the "Rainbow Portrait" of Queen Elizabeth I', *Renaissance Quarterly* 50:1 (1997); Louis Montrose, *The Subject of Elizabeth: Authority, Gender, and Representation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006); and again Sharpe, *Selling the Tudor Monarchy*.
- 6 Michael Dobson and Nicola J. Watson, *England's Elizabeth: An Afterlife in Fame and Fantasy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 1.
- 7 For reproductions of this and other portraits of Elizabeth I, see Strong, *Gloriana*.
- 8 Robert Burgoyne, *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at U.S. History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, rev. edn, 2010).
- 9 See Burton W. Peretti, *The Leading Man: Hollywood and the Presidential Image* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press 2012).
- 10 'Queen Elizabeth's armada speech to the troops at Tilbury, August 9, 1588', in Leah S. Marcus, Janel Mueller and Mary Beth Rose (eds), *Elizabeth I: Collected Works* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 325–6.
- 11 See Elisabeth Bronfen's chapter on war entertainment in *Specters of War: Hollywood's Engagement with Military Conflict* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012).
- 12 Aby Warburg, *Der Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, ed. Martin Warnke and Claudia Brink, in *Gesammelte Schriften: Studienausgabe II 1.2*, ed. Horst Bredekamp, Michael Diers, Kurt W. Forster et al. (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 3rd edn, 2008).

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Queens and queenliness: Quentin Crisp as Orlando's Elizabeth I

Glyn Davis

Sally Potter's *Orlando*, an adaptation of Virginia Woolf's 1928 novel, first screened at film festivals in 1992, before being released in cinemas internationally in 1993. The film opens in 1600, with Orlando (Tilda Swinton) serving as a poet and page in the court of Queen Elizabeth I (Quentin Crisp). Crisp's appearance in *Orlando* is fleeting. The role, in its brevity, is comparable with Judi Dench's appearance as the same monarch in *Shakespeare in Love* (John Madden, 1998): somewhat infamously, Dench won an Academy Award for her performance, though she is only on screen for a few minutes.

Crisp's scenes as Elizabeth I – in keeping with other cinematic depictions of this particular monarch – are visually spectacular. The Queen arrives by longboat, at night, at a stately home which is decorated inside and out with bouquets and candles. At a banquet, Orlando recites a poem for the monarch, which she finds distasteful. On the following day, Orlando accompanies the Queen, wolfhounds and courtiers on a walk through formal gardens, where Elizabeth attaches a garter, venerable symbol of royal esteem, to Orlando's leg. Finally, Orlando visits the Queen in her bedroom; after Elizabeth has been undressed by her ladies-in-waiting and helped into bed, she and Orlando have an intimate conversation. During this encounter, Orlando is advised by the Queen: 'Do not fade; do not wither; do not grow old.' And so he doesn't: the remainder of the film depicts various episodes from Orlando's life over several centuries. Halfway through it, Swinton's character changes from male to female. Looking in a mirror, she declares 'Same person. No difference at all. Just a different sex.'

On 25 December 1993, the same year that *Orlando* attained widespread distribution in cinemas, Crisp appeared on British television's Channel 4, presenting the channel's first ever Alternative Christmas Message. Subsequently, this has become a mainstay of the channel's festive programming, scheduled