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Medial Chances and Challenges for the British Monarchy: On the Reciprocal Relation between a Post-Political Institution and its Media Representations

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Abstract:

Mandy Merck's edited volume *The British monarchy on screen* comprises seventeen articles dealing with the multifaceted layers of media representation of the British monarchy. Its sections are devoted to studying topics covering the interactions between monarchy and media in Victorian times as well as the role of the empire and commonwealth relations within filmic depictions of the monarchy, leading to forms of popular participation in royal events and contemporary Anglophone cinematic takes on the British monarchy. The collection thus offers new perspectives on an ancient institution whose popularity indicates its enduring importance for British culture and society. The thematic and material diversity in conjunction with the methodological clarity of the featured contributions offers an interesting read, providing several points of departure for fruitful future research both in the realm of media studies and royal studies.

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Merck, Mandy (ed.): *The British monarchy on screen*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016. 432 pages, 70 GBP. ISBN: 978-0-7190-9956-4

Abstract:

Mandy Merck's edited volume *The British monarchy on screen* comprises seventeen articles dealing with the multifaceted layers of media representation of the British monarchy. Its sections are devoted to studying topics covering the interactions between monarchy and media in Victorian times as well as the role of the empire and commonwealth relations within filmic depictions of the monarchy, leading to forms of popular participation in royal events and contemporary Anglophone cinematic takes on the British monarchy. The collection thus offers new perspectives on an ancient institution whose popularity indicates its enduring importance for British culture and society. The thematic and material diversity in conjunction with the methodological clarity of the featured contributions offers an interesting read, providing several points of departure for fruitful future research both in the realm of media studies and royal studies.

The *British monarchy on screen* is not only the volume's enticing title, but a topic that is as old as moving images themselves. During the reign of Queen Victoria, the British monarchy became a media monarchy and, ever since, a symbiotic relationship between monarchy and media can be perceived. Claiming that "[t]he reign of the current British monarch is as foundational to the history of television as that of her great-grandmother Victoria is to the cinema" (p. 4) the volume edited by Mandy Merck sets out to shed light on questions such as: Which roles do filmic and televisual depictions of

royalty play in promoting the monarchy “as patriotic signifier and entertainment commodity”? (p. 1) In how far do these representations impart power structures and political meanings? How does the increasing casualness of social relations affect “the deference with which the British royal family has historically been portrayed in its national media”? (p. 2) And what functions do the audiences have for ceremonial royal occasions and their broadcasts?

In general, the volume convinces by covering a broad range of topics while not losing track of the central research interests of media and royal studies, offering both diachronic and synchronic perspectives on representations of the British monarchy. The first three parts offer valuable insights into portrayals of Queen Victoria (part I) and Queen Elizabeth I (part II) as well as into the monarch’s role in the formation of the Commonwealth and issues of post-imperial dependencies (part III).

Within part IV “Popular participation in royal representation”, the articles by Jo Stephenson and Ruth Adams, especially, offer innovative perspectives on recent royal events as they go beyond fictional representations of the British monarchy and focus on 'factual' media events. Taking the royal wedding of 2011 as a starting point, Jo Stephenson’s article “The regal catwalk: royal weddings and the media promotion of British fashion” discusses the relation of monarchy and fashion as well as its impact on a branding of the monarchy, and provides an overview of concepts relevant for the study of royal media events (e.g. dead time, live speculations, the mode of presentation, crowd, emotion, royals as celebrities). Furthermore, it argues that the British media coverage of royal weddings follows a standard formula, which “develops, but doesn’t change” (p. 259).

The article by Ruth Adams presents the results of a small empirical case study conducted during the royal wedding (2011) and the Diamond Jubilee (2012). In “The Queen on the big screen(s): outdoor screens and public congregations” Adams juxtaposes viewing experiences of media events in crowds outdoors and in front of home TV sets. She addresses important questions concerning a fetish of the 'real' (cf. p. 271) and concludes that the new trend of watching together might hint at “a desire for new forms of collectivity” (p. 281). The outcomes of this study thus suggest a trend countering the observable atomization and privatization of contemporary western societies and add a valuable new aspect to the study of media events.

The first article of part V, “Television’s royal family: continuity and change”, by Erin Bell and Ann Gray focusses on TV coverage of the British monarchy “during a particularly sensitive period for the Windsor family of ageing and generational change” (p. 291 f.). Even though their focus on the most recent royal events is highly promising, their choice of source material does not allow for a detailed description of diachronic developments, as promised by the title. The theoretical approach is limited

to Dayan and Katz's seminal study of media events (1992), and is thus not adequate with respect to the material.

Basil Glynn starts off with a lengthy but merely additive overview of international filmic depictions of King Henry VIII and discusses the TV series' *The Tudors* (2007-2010) international production contexts. Because this article is one of the very few academic publications dealing with *The Tudors*, the possibilities for innovative insights are plentiful. An important new aspect provided is that *The Tudors* is a post-national and post-historical television series. The article's value lies in giving a concise overview of the existing depictions and research as well as in bringing together a broad range of approaches. However, Glynn does not elaborate on the notion of post-national monarchical depictions in detail, thus only marginally seizing the opportunity to tackle the highly relevant issue of Britishness/Englishness in an era of post-national TV at play here.

Part VI "Monarchy in contemporary anglophone cinema" engages with issues of contemporary depictions of monarchy in fictional representations, which foster a reciprocal relationship between institution, representation, and spectators. Andrew Higson investigates how contemporary films from various genres shape an image of the British monarchy and why they play an important part in "modernising the monarchy, in updating the royal heritage" (p. 348). These filmic depictions not only influence how contemporary audiences view the monarchy, but they also, to some extent, sustain the existence of the institution itself by ensuring its continuous presence within the (popular) cultural sphere. His article "From political power to the power of the image: contemporary 'British' cinema and the nation's monarchs" covers a large amount of source material and provides profound and far-reaching analyses. Higson concludes that the films about the British monarchy are "indicative of the way in which the British royal family [...] has become a global cultural commodity, a brand that embraces particular types of stories and images, and a particular sense of British identity that can be marketed to audiences around the world" (p. 359). The article offers innovative takes on modern monarchy and is thus a great asset for the whole volume.

Scholars agree that a strong divergence of academic interest in and socio-cultural significance of the British monarchy can be diagnosed. Merck's volume presents the outcome of a project which adds to this discourse, tackling the interdependency of media and monarchy. The research was conducted in the aftermath of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee in 2012 – at a time when the monarchy's popularity was at a new height. Therefore, the publication could hardly have addressed this research gap at a more suitable moment. The questions that the volume's editor Mandy Merck sets out to address are not only concisely studied in her own contribution focussing on Stephen Frears' film *The Queen*, but are also comprehensively dealt with throughout the whole volume. However, part V does not live

up to the volume's overall innovative outset, as it does not add new theoretical insights. Rather, it introduces more examples and thematic issues generating few transferable results. This does, nevertheless, not derogate *The British monarchy on screen's* enlightening insights, which render it a delight to read not only for experts in the fields of media and royal studies, but also for a wider academic readership.

German Abstract:

Medien als Chance und Herausforderung für die britische Monarchie: Zur wechselseitigen Beziehung zwischen einer post-politischen Institution und ihren Medienrepräsentationen

Der von Mandy Merck herausgegebene Sammelband *The British monarchy on screen* umfasst insgesamt siebzehn Beiträge, die sich mit den vielschichtigen medialen Repräsentationen der britischen Monarchie auseinandersetzen. Die einzelnen Abschnitte des Bandes widmen sich Themen, die vom Beginn der Interaktionen zwischen Monarchie und Medien im viktorianischen Zeitalter, über die Rolle des Empires und Commonwealths, bis hin zu Formen der popukulturellen Teilnahme an royalen Events und Annäherungen des gegenwärtigen englischsprachigen Kinos an die britische Monarchie reichen. Der Sammelband bietet neue Perspektiven auf eine Institution, deren fortwährende Bedeutung für die britische Kultur und Gesellschaft nicht zuletzt durch ihre stetige Popularität aufgezeigt wird. Die thematische und materielle Vielfalt verbunden mit der methodischen Klarheit der Beiträge macht die Publikation zu einer interessanten Lektüre, die diverse Anknüpfungspunkte für zukünftige Forschungsvorhaben sowohl im Bereich der Medienwissenschaften als auch der Monarchieforschung bietet.

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