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Item Type	Chapter in book
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Citation	Halligan, B. (2021) Multitude void: the regal mode of imperial legitimation, in Politics of the Many: Contemporary Radical Thought and the Crisis of Agency, London: Bloomsbury.
Publisher	Bloomsbury Academic
Download date	2026-04-15 16:06:22
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/2436/623677

Chapter Seven

Multitude Void: The Regal Mode of Imperial Legitimation

Benjamin Halligan

... communicative production and the construction of imperial legitimation march hand in hand and can no longer be separated. The machine is self-validating, autopoietic – that is, systemic. It constructs social fabrics that evacuate or render ineffective any contradiction...¹

The dimensions of the democratic and ethical aberration that are the British Royal Family are such that a popular mandate seems to be understood to be a necessity for its continued survival. No such mandate exists or has been invited; it has only ever been surmised, as a constant from the notion of divine selection, to the secular age – that is, across, as Faus puts it, “the slow historical birth of a desacralization of authority and the emergence of what we usually call democracy.”² And, thereafter, as Blain and O’Donnell note, the British Royal family is unique, in a European context, as “the only monarchy not required to justify itself by its

¹ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (London: Harvard University Press, 2001), 34.

² José Ignacio González Faus, “Anthropology: The Person and the Community,” in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 506.

contribution to political modernity.”³ Such a mandate has not been put to the test. Tom Nairn’s study of the monarchy spends its first two sections pondering this democratic aberration (which he terms “The Mystery”), and with Nairn flummoxed by data that suggests, nevertheless, popular support even among unlikely groups, such as the unemployed (which prompts the subsequent subsection, “Are We All Mad?”)⁴

As a self-styled, self-defining “institution,” the Royal family assumes deference is afforded to it rather than earned by it. Even the very term “institution”, as freely deployed by popular historians and commentators, is telling: an historical entity, so outside of or partly excused from, or expected to chafe against, the vulgar norms of democratic regulation. Thus the mysterious aberration is nonetheless institutionalised. Nairn’s and Billig’s “Mystery” is amplified and interrogated in Hardt and Negri’s theorisation of democracy. Perhaps the Royals are no aberration, but merely consistent with the logic of Western social democracy? That is: that the

³ Neil Blain and Hugh O’Donnell, *Media, Monarchy and Power* (Bristol and Portland: Intellect, 2003), 179.

⁴ Tom Nairn, *The Enchanted Glass: Britain and Its Monarchy* (London: Verso, ([1989] 2001), 19-25. Further data can be found in Michael Billig, *Talking of the Royal Family* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 7-8. Billig also addresses those things Nairn finds hard to explain; he has a chapter called “The Continuing Mystery” (56-85) in his sociological study of the British Royal family. For an overview of data on popularity around late 1960s / early-mid 1970s, see Fred I. Greenstein, Valentine Herman, Robert N. Stradling and Elia Zureik, “The Child’s Conception of the Queen and the Prime Minister,” *British Journal of Political Science* 4:3 (July 1974): 257-287.

Royals are called into existence with that very “audacious conceptual leap made by the theory and practice of parliamentary representation (from the ‘will of all’ to the ‘general will’)” – as a necessity in the bureaucratic transformation of “the many” into a set singular figures, so that the resultant dull politicians of Westminster and Whitehall are offset by a measure of regal charisma and Buckingham Palace.⁵

Despite outward appearances to the contrary therefore, the continued existence of the Royals would seem to remain in the balance, and contingent – at best, an operative assumption. The British mainstream media can be said to have managed to achieve a status quo to this end through rendering as ineffective any serious opposition to this condition of contradiction. Even reserved and tactical criticism is voiced within the orbit of a sense of the Royals as news, and therefore newsworthy, and therefore part of the fabric of our lives. In this sense, the Royal family exists as a media strategy, in the gap between, as Hardt and Negri put it, “communicative production” and “the construction of imperial legitimation.” This chapter will seek to explore a salient aspect of the workings of this media strategy in terms of how the Royal “subjects” (i.e. the masses) are returned to their feudal role of silent, approving observers, and so come to function as evidencing that mandate. That is, via Hardt and Negri’s etymological prehistory of “the multitude”, this mass is presented as “the people” since “[t]he people is one. The population, of course, is composed of numerous different individuals and classes, but the people synthesizes or reduces these social differences into one identity.”⁶ For this conception, or synthesis or

⁵ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Declaration* (New York: Argo-Navis, 2012), 44.

⁶ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2005), 99.

reduction, the spectacle of an anti-multitude is conjured up: as homogenised and unified, dispersed and singular, commoners (rather than possessors of the common), and pointed to their leader – “Capital wants to make the multitude into an organic unity, just like the state wants to make it into a people.”⁷ The spectacle has, I argue, pace Situationist critiques, the aspiration to an affective quality: as a component of the “network force of imperial order”, it counters or radically revises multitude.⁸ It is from this vantage point that this chapter cautiously and partially equates “imperial” and Royal, in terms of wishing to explore the creation of “legitimation”. Certainly military imperial trappings abound – various British Royals seem to have army positions and titles, and Dacre records thousands members of the armed forces at the procession and then funeral of the Queen Mother.⁹ But the legitimation of imperial enterprises, in the sense understood by critics of globalisation, is often “soft” too (constitutional, political and legal). And Hardt and Negri note the operation of a

⁷ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 101.

⁸ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 62. Hardt and Negri have also considered the non- or anti-multitude, in terms of the mob of the right, and points of overlap between fascist and anarchist/insurrectionary strategies of assembly, occupation and action – the “dark mirror of right-wing movements”; see Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Assembly* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 47-57.

⁹ Nigel Dacre, “The Funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales,” in *The Court Historian* 18:1 (2003): 85, 86.

“mixed constitution” rather than any feudal, pyramid model of command.¹⁰ Indeed, Royal leaders offer some reassuring nostalgia in this confusing contemporary arrangement: back to the simpler days of high command, and born leaders.

In the late 1970s, the provocative appropriation of Royal imagery by British punk culture (by Malcolm McLaren for the Sex Pistols, and Derek Jarman for his 1978 film *Jubilee*, amongst others) was more idiosyncratic than shocking: the Royals as representing something – for better or worse – particularly, even wretchedly, English. This idiosyncrasy arose from a sense that the Royal Family were irrelevant a priori; informed (and exasperated) British liberal thought, such as that then associated with the *New Statesman*, would have associated them with the Trade Unions at this time – as unreconstructed, parasitical organisations ripe for pruning, if not complete dismantling, with an inflated sense of importance outstripping limited political sway, and a patrician obstacle to the coming neoliberal reforms of the manufacturing base and welfare state.¹¹ And yet, decades later, and on the other side of the first, brutal

¹⁰ On the “mixed constitution” of Empire, which contains elements of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy, and shuns circumscription within the strictures of the nation-state, see Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 304-324.

¹¹ Survey data on other groups possibly representing of British liberal thought, and who may not have been enamoured with the state of the Royal family, can be gleaned from Greenstein, Herman, Stradling and Zureik, “The Child’s Conception of the Queen,” 258, footnote 5. This is in respect to members of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) in the late 1960s, and those listed in *Who’s Who* in the early 1970s: roughly, respectively, those critical of the establishment to a sufficient degree

phases of the reforms, the Royal Family persists. No matter how scandalous or depraved the behaviour of its individual members, no mainstream political party, and no mainstream news/media group, would call for its abolition. The “general will,” it should be inferred, would seem to render republicanism unimaginable: a dream deemed impossible, even by its dreamers, under the stasis of “common sense,” or pragmatic aegis of that which Mark Fisher diagnosed as a pervasive “capitalist realism”.¹²

The Royal family remains present as, to borrow a term used in relation to Walter Benjamin’s writing, a concept of history – that is, as an idea of the present day use of history, or the historical: monarchists and establishment types talk of continuity, moralists and conservationists of example, conservatives and clerics of figureheads.¹³ Naturally enough, therefore, the media construction of the Royal family

to join a campaigning group, and those very much embedded within the establishment, and declared notable.

The question of perception was commonly placed between two poles at this moment, both of which arose from television schedules of June 1969: either the regal maximalism of the investiture of the Prince of Wales in Caernarfon Castle, or the regal minimalism of the documentary *The Royal Family*, directed by Richard Cawson, which sought to show the family as much like any other. The documentary, for obscure reasons, has remained unseen since 1972.

¹² Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (London: Zero Books, 2009).

¹³ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, [written 1940] 1969), 253-264. The

tends to frame news narratives within the visual tropes of idioms or genres that approximate abstract ideas of history (the historical epic, the costume drama, period settings, fairy tale weddings, and so on). Which engagement of Queen Elizabeth II is not understood as “historic”? One-offs are unique and so historical; regular events, through the Queen’s involvement, become part of a historical continuum.¹⁴ This state of personification, in the melding of history and person (that is, abstraction and corporeality), raises a number of problems in terms of media representation and these problems are sporadically apparent at the moment of the intersection of abstraction and corporeality, or the passage from one to the other: a Royal death. The role of the media in this, in terms of reportage, is two-fold: both the spectator-reporter of the tradition, and the creator-maintainer of the tradition.

The concern of this chapter is not that which is typical of left-liberal critiques of contemporary media: to point out such contradictions, usually as viewed from an

essay has also been translated as “On the Concept of History”, but neither “theses” nor “concept” appear in Benjamin’s original writing.

¹⁴ The classic analysis of the fictional and relatively recent nature of such “Olde Worlde” posturing (and set design) is David Cannadine, “The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual: The British Monarchy and the ‘Invention of Tradition’ c. 1820-1977,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 101-164. This is a theme too of Patrick Keiller’s London essay films (*London*, 1994; *Robinson in Space*, 1997; *Robinson in Ruins*, 2010) and much psychogeographical writing, particularly one of the foundational texts: Iain Sinclair, *Lights Out for the Territory: 9 Excursions in the Secret History of London* (London: Granta, 1997).

old fashioned notion of the presupposed impartiality of news media, or its functioning in respect to calling others to account. Rather, this chapter seeks to shed light on the functioning of the construction of a sense of a historical continuum and its aspects. “[M]edia power is not defined by its political statements” Berardi, Jacquemet and Vitali argue, since “[t]elevision is not a medium for the creation of consensus or for a kind of rational persuasion ... Television is a means of pervasion, rather than persuasion. It operates on the cognitive modalities for reception, interpretation and decision, rather than on the ideological content of the message.”¹⁵ Such an operation is apparent in the presentation of the Royal person. That is, that during life the Royal person is fantastical, unreal in their beauty, generosity, understanding, suffering... a star, or akin to a star, in the Hollywood sense. And, after their life, this perception changes: they are (were) only human after all, like us, and suffered like us too and are regaled by the same trivia of life. So, in dying they are reborn as recognisably human. This reading, or perhaps “state of affairs”, was furnished with empirical evidence in Rob Turnock’s study of viewer reactions to the media coverage of the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, in 1997.¹⁶ Turnock had established monitoring groups for a prior

¹⁵ Franco “Bifo” Berardi, Marco Jacquemet and Gianfranco Vitali, *Ethereal Shadows: Communications and Power in Contemporary Italy* (New York: Autonomedia, 2009), 39.

¹⁶ And this reading also looks back to Ernst Kantorowicz’s *The King’s Two Bodies*, which traced, in Medieval theology, ideas of the regal figure as actual person (monarch) and symbolic figure, and/or embodied abstraction (as monarchy itself, represented in this monarch figure, and her predecessors and successors). The same theological “issue” is also the basis of Steinberg’s reading of the figure of the infant

research project; so the groups (families, friends) were watching television, as they ordinarily would, and then completing the questionnaires devised by Turnock and his team. Shortly after the formal disbanding of this project, and with the news of Diana's death breaking, Turnock quickly reactivated the groups. His findings, later published in *Interpreting Diana: Television Audiences and the Death of a Princess*, are not presented as an illumination or exposé of the postmodern condition – a concern which vexed Anglo-American academia in the 1980s and 1990s – but they certainly work in such a way. What is made critical in Turnock's examination of the nature of this viewing is the idea of "news" itself, as grounded in, or drawn from, or as a reportage of, events. His conclusions evidence a reversal of expected norms: the viewers only came to accept the "impossible" news of Diana's death once it was presented with the dramatic characteristics of fiction – a pervasive element is added. And this translation or fictionalisation is a process that seems to run as a parallel to the usual dynamics of news reporting, and it draws on the way in which television news becomes self-perpetuating and self-validating:

Christ in Renaissance art: the consistency of prominently displayed genitals as emphatically illustrating the incarnation of God into the worldly realm. See Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press [1957] 2016); Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and Modern Oblivion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

[...] at times of crisis people automatically turn to their television sets and this was certainly the case when the news about Diana broke. They do this because they cannot believe what they have heard from family or friends, and in some cases even from the radio. Those who rushed to their televisions, or those turning on casually, were met with extensive blanket coverage of this extraordinary event on the three main terrestrial channels. For many respondents [in the monitoring groups], the extensive coverage was not only necessary because Diana had been so important, but also because television actually demonstrated *how* important she was.¹⁷

The news, in itself, was difficult to accept – sudden, upsetting and tragic, outside the parameters of the normal run of expectations, and so forth. And the medium par excellence of and for such breaking events – 24/7 broadcast news – was halting in its typical role as verifier and validator of the news. Reality would seem to have outmanoeuvred television.

BBC news anchorman Jeremy Paxman recalled endless preparations for the Queen Mother's anticipated passing in the 1980s and 1990s (a cupboard of grey suits

¹⁷ Rob Turnock, *Interpreting Diana: Television Audiences and the Death of a Princess* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), 14; Turnock's italics. As Clancy later argued, there is a body of thought that claims the very beginnings of television itself in the United Kingdom were effectively and essentially in relation to the monarchy, through the coverage of the coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953. See Laura Clancy, "Queen's Day – TV's Day": The British Monarchy and the Media Industries," *Contemporary British History* 33: 3 (2019): 427-450.

and black ties, bi-annual weekend practice runs, "... long sets of guidelines were produced and laminated... [e]laborate chains of editorial command were established..."), which he relates to an institutional uncertainty in the BBC as to its role: "... was its job to tell the nation the news ... or was it somehow to act as part of the Establishment, and to become Chief Mourner?"¹⁸ The role, for Turnock, is clear, and goes beyond such questions of editorial policy and editorial line: as he puts it, "Television as Comforter":

Not only did television institutionally sanction Diana's death as something important, but also the appearance of members from different levels of the establishment and the depiction of a broad sweep of the public (with particular emphasis on young people, gays and blacks) offered some reassurance to those upset at home that their emotions were not aberrant ... many rushed to their televisions for confirmation of the news of Diana's death ... for reassurance that others were feeling and responding in the same way.¹⁹

At this point of the need for reassurance, the news dissemination system meets its very opposite: the fictional, or fictionalisation, of real events. The life and figure of

¹⁸ Jeremy Paxman, *On Royalty* (London: Penguin, 2007), 15, 16. This rehearsed drill for the Queen Mother's funeral then became, in the urgent circumstances, the template for the coverage of Princess Diana; see Dacre, "The Funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales," 85. The Queen Mother was Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon (1900-2002), the mother of Elizabeth II.

¹⁹ Turnock, *Interpreting Diana*, 20.

Diana, once re-imagined as a soap opera star in the countless speed-edited obituaries, had found the co-ordinates that were finally understood to be tenable and believable for the grieving people: the mother, the wife, the “loose woman”, the schemer, the person-wronged, the listener, one of us, the person we admire, dislike, talk about, and a talker / communicator herself (as typifying a female soap opera character: prone to drama, gossipy, providing her own running commentary).²⁰ To be clear: this is not a matter of decrying broadcast news for its adoption of fictional traits, abandoning its traditional conventions in favour of populist infotainment. Rather, this is a matter of the ontology of the flow of the reportage of broadcast news, as mounting an interpretative intervention against the reality from which it is drawn, and that it shapes and disseminates, to control and author reported reality. This tendency was Baudrillard’s central thesis of *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1995): spectacles of war whose strategic value can primarily be identified as their reportage potential, rather than illustrating a routing of the enemy.²¹ Or, for Paul Virilio, a reading that collapses (Hollywood) entertainment into warfare – “this cinematic artifice of the war machine”: from showcasing military technology of the present and future, in the guise of entertainment, to equipping that technology to project its own fantasies, in the “decoy-image-cum-ship-image.”²² And hence the Retort collective’s expansion of

²⁰ See Turnock, *Interpreting Diana*, 40-41.

²¹ Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

²² Virilio here talks of the way in which naval defence systems include the projection of false ship images to the sensors of incoming missiles. Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (London: Verso, [1984] 2009), 62, 110.

Eisenhower's term – from “military-industrial complex” to “military-industrial-entertainment complex.”²³

The weak point in the flow of the news broadcast comes in the sense of control: specifically, control of the broadcast images of crowds, the meanings of which are offered by the commentariat – those television pundits who specialise in expertise, or relatable reactions: one of the principal elements of autopoieticism of infotainment. Such meanings are, extra-diegetically (that is, via voice-over), inscribed onto the images.

What, then, becomes pervasive through this wrangling of meaning? Brian Massumi, writing of the post-9/11 colour coded alerts of possible terrorist attacks in the US, finds the pervasion of fear.²⁴ And a fearful collective state, engendered through the obscurity and imprecision of the colour terror alerts, is both the basis for notions of a safer future to come, and the goal of the misinformation and paranoid flights of fantasy about amassed arsenals primed for assault on the homeland. Massumi, as with Baudrillard, Virilio and Retort, is concerned with the legitimization of imperial adventurism abroad and repression at home. For Berardi et al, this is an element of the media power of the contemporary media politician. My analysis retains a more modest focus: the partial basis of the legitimization, in the case of a minor player in post-1989 geopolitics. But a minor player that, nevertheless, romanticized imperial adventurism, between senses of the white man's burden, and the primacy of white history. So the potential of pervasiveness remains, through media reenactments

²³ Retort, *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War* (London: Verso, 2005), 37.

²⁴ Brian Massumi, “Fear (The Spectrum Said),” in *positions* 13:1 (2005): 31-48.

or mock-ups of historical / Royal matters: affective rearguard actions to whitewash crimes abroad. Perhaps the best context for this rearguard operation is provided by Niall Ferguson, who complains of the lack of aspiration in travel-shy graduates to engage in historical (rather than well-remunerated media) enterprises: “America’s brightest and best [graduates] aspire not to govern Mesopotamia but to manage MTV... [u]nlike their British counterparts of a century ago, who left the elite British universities with an overtly imperial ethos...”²⁵ Royal legitimization offers example – imaginary possibilities for tomorrow’s graduate colonial masters: John Buchan over Bill Gates, social engineering over social media, nation building over product rebranding.

This chapter will now briefly review something of the operation of making meaning: both in terms of what is presented as history in the making by the very few, and in terms of the ways in which this making eclipses the many – the massed individual subjects of this history. Considered in the light of multitude, this operation seems to strive to identify the materialisation of aspects of the “political body”. Hardt and Negri note that

... one of the recurring truths of political philosophy is that only the one can rule, be it the monarch, the party, the people, or the individual; social subjects that are not unified and remain multiple cannot rule and instead must be ruled. Every sovereign power, in other words, necessarily forms a *political body* of

²⁵ Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 204.

which there is a head that commands, limbs that obey, and organs that function together to support the ruler.²⁶

The media re-enactment or mock-up is this process of it “forms”. And, since “[t]he concept of the multitude challenges this accepted truth of sovereignty,”²⁷ this review also looks for accidental or inadvertent evidence of such a challenge, in the processes around making meaning.

This section concerns a lesser star in the Royal firmament: the Queen Mother, whose funeral was held on 9 April 2002. This analysis draws on just a few eventless minutes of BBC One’s television coverage, which lasted several hours across that afternoon. 2002 represents a pre-social media age, and therefore this operation of making meaning is bolder, since it is understood to be more absolute and less fragmented: this coverage as *the* media concerning this event. (For more recent Royal events, news and coverage has flooded out across social media too, as well as broadcast television – resulting in a fragmentation that would require an analysis quite different to the one presented in this chapter.) And the Queen Mother represented a figure less charged or freighted in terms of the idea of, as it were, a concept of history: this was not a beginning (as with a coronation or marriage), and not the passing of someone whose currency with the times was anything like that of Diana.²⁸

Typically, the broadcast shuffled between outside shots of the cortege (cars, outriders), more general shots (places, people, crowds), and studio discussions,

²⁶ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 100; their italics.

²⁷ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 100.

²⁸ Another analysis of the coverage can be found in Blain and O’Donnell, *Media, Monarchy and Power*, 179-192.

presided over by veteran presenter David Dimbleby. As expected, the studio discussion effectively shapes the feeds of “real world” material but there is an ambiguity as to the relationship between the two. Which of these two aspects – the location shots / the outside, and the studio / the inside – carries the most weight? Or: what is it that we are meant to be primarily watching – the cortege or the commentators? While shots of a car on a motorway do not deliver much in terms of “television”, such footage must remain the focus of attention – the very *raison d’être* of the broadcast, structuring and determining it. Indeed, the commentators play up to their secondary role in this scheme, with modesty, polite behaviour, and deference.

What is most striking about the totality of the coverage is the silence of the masses, who have turned out to watch or be a part of or mourners for the event. At spectator events, sporting or cultural, “the people”²⁹ can act as an amorphous hinterland of visceral gut reactions – spasms, convulsions, bursts of energy, the stillness of concentration. But the Royal funeral is public and so, as it were, for the people – the moment of the articulation of the popular mandate by the people, who are present to pay their respects. The silence of the people is broken by the isolated figures up above them, the presenter or interviewee, who now seem, in the flow of the coverage, to speak for them. Blain and O’Donnell, in respect to the commentators,

²⁹ I use the term “the people” here self-consciously and in bad faith – as denoting their presentation rather than constitution. However, more recent work has sought to reclaim the term itself, along the lines of unifying popular cultures, solidarity and belonging, and the right to assemble; see Alain Badiou, Pierre Bourdieu, Judith Butler, George Didi-Huberman, Sadri Khiari and Jacques Rancière, *What Is a People?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

note a telling rhetorical trope in this coverage: the continued use of “we” – opportunistically merging the commentator with the people (those standing outside, and those watching the broadcast) into one common collective.³⁰ On what authority does the presenter speak for the people, with what knowledge can she or he speak of them? Here, with this philosophical impasse, an invitation is needed – to the people, to step into the commentators’ cockpit. Or, in legal terms: we need to now hear from some witnesses.

The examples of real people provided are clearly carefully screened: a controlled trickle of civic-minded busybodies and social ladder climbing charity groupies who schmooze with Royalty, often relating their one encounter with the Queen Mother, and are now seemingly auditioning for ennoblement. Here the fraction of the people speak to their media interlocutors (or even, effectively, translators). Talk lines are straightened out – person to commentator, everyman to expert. The people are not seen or heard to speak to each other – that “polyphonic narration” or “exchanges among all the singularities in dialogue” with which the multitude finds and generates the common.³¹ Thus prostrate subjects rewrite post-war history as they momentarily seize the means of (narrative) production, in their allotted 15 seconds (rather than the 15 Warhol minutes) of mass media fame.³² One brief interview is

³⁰ Blain and O’Donnell, *Media, Monarchy and Power*, 24-28.

³¹ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 211.

³² This is not a misanthropic reading but a sentiment predicated from an understanding of the screening – as in selecting – of those given the microphone at such moments. There is a fragment of proof of this: the sketch in the 1992 Chris Morris BBC news satire *The Day Today* in which the unseen interviewer engages

telling: an aged charity associate of the Queen Mother's says, of her: "I think the Queen Mum was a wonderful person...-age." She seems to check herself after the first two syllables of the last word (per/son) and then adds the third syllable (/age) after an uncertain pause: enough of a delay for her to think of what she is saying, seemingly concluding that "a wonderful person" is inappropriately colloquial, and so appends the "-age" to achieve the right rather than the wrong kind of familiarity. The difference between the two is significant: in literal terms, a personage is an important person; a person is "just" a person. In terms of this analysis, and recalling Kantorowicz too, the difference signals the significant leader figure, and the anonymous person of the people. But the nature of the deference to the monarchy is one that cuts in both directions: they are personages who are just like ordinary persons. And yet in the very ordinariness of their personhoods, they transcend just such everyday trivialities, becoming important.³³ The very presence of these screened common people in the box with Dimpleby, remembering the Queen Mother, relating anecdotes, placing her in stories of their own lives, and so on, testifies to this double determinant to the assumed greatness of the Royal.

with tourists and sight-seers outside Buckingham Palace, seemingly elderly and frail, eliciting ridiculous responses to ever-more-ridiculous questions about how they would defend the Queen if she was under attack or even mildly imperilled. How far would they go in assaulting the assailants?

³³ For further on the rhetorical dilemmas of speaking about Royals – between terms of deference and terms that denote their everydayness – see Billig, *Talking of the Royal Family*, 21-22.

Such a speaking of or for the people is particularly grating in respect of the comments from the art historian Simon Schama, also present, who contrasts the “imperial” areas (in this instance, upper class) to those of the “meat and potatoes” areas (i.e. business and utilitarian environs of the working classes).³⁴ Schama implicitly finds an appropriate grandiosity in the former, and a confirmation of the Queen Mother’s importance to the everyman in the latter. In this identification of common ground between different stratas of the people, as united in a shared deference to their betters, is the return of the notion of history as arising from a hierarchical class structure. And this notion has been a consistent theme in Schama’s work, from his study of the French Revolution, to commentary on the Queen herself as dampening down dangerously emotive public reactions to Diana’s death through a pseudo-rhizomatic, or cosmic, but certainly Kantorowiczian, connection to the mass psychology of her subjects:

The crisis [of royal authority, in the wake of Diana’s death] was rescued by a speech made by the queen, striking for its informality and obviously sincere expression of personal sorrow. The tidal wave of feeling that swept over the country testified to the sustained need of the public to come together in a recognizable community of sentiment, and to do so as the people of a democratic monarchy.³⁵

³⁴ His “meat and potatoes” comment is noted too in Dacre, “The Funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales,” 89.

³⁵ Simon Schama, *A History of Britain: The Fate of Empire, 1776-2000* (London: BBC Worldwide Limited, 2002): 549. But as late as 1969 a poll for the *Sunday Times* included the response-eliciting statement that the monarchy was “making it less likely

Schama's line is found too in an arresting speculative argument, made in passing in a discussion of Royal family portraiture: that the "domestication of majesty" (in the shift from a regal to a family mise-en-scène for public images of royals) could be considered as a pre-emptive attempt to stave off executions by the people, by appealing to their humanity. The domestication, in the visions of harmonious family life, directly reflects "the solid middle class on whom the throne rested", and this reading is then understood to have established the presentation of contemporary royals, now "the family of families, at once dynastic and domestic, remote and accessible, magical and mundane."³⁶ Even the unofficial status title, of the "Queen Mother", arises, for Schama, from this domestication dynamic.³⁷

that Britain will have a violent revolution", presumably in relation to both 1793 (with the execution of Louis XVI) and 1968; see Greenstein, Herman, Stradling and Zureik, "The Child's Conception of the Queen," 258-259, footnote 6.

On the French Revolution, see Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985). Eric Hobsbawm finds in Schama's reading an ahistorical decontextualisation, rendering the events as little more than "gratuitous horror and suffering" (presumably the consequences of the anarchy that would ensue without class hierarchies), and Schama "a disenchanting chronicler of the crimes and follies of mankind"; E. J. Hobsbawm, *Echoes of the Marseillaise: Two Centuries Look Back on the French Revolution* (London and New York: Verso, 1990): 97, 98.

³⁶ Simon Schama, "The Domestication of Majesty: Royal Family Portraiture, 1500-1850," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 17: 1 (Summer 1986): 158.

³⁷ Schama, "Domestication of Majesty," 183.

So the funeral footage is effectively repurposed by Schama as a verification of his thesis. Schama's inferred concept of history – looking to individuals, as a leader class, determining onward progression, which may be derailed by the masses – requires, for such an occasion, something of an immediate delivery. So history is identified as tactile, individualised, all around, tangible or even feel-able within, and see-able without – and the footage, and the commentators, are seen to resonate with these feelings.³⁸

Such empathy for a sense of live history is particularly welcome in the longueurs of the coverage. A funereal, dignified slowness – that of a time for

³⁸ Observing the filming of the Netflix series *The Crown* in February 2020, with Manchester doubling as the New York of 1989, prompted the same conclusions in terms of the construction of populist history. Cameras tracked the comings and goings of the royals, in cars and convoys, breezing in and out of buildings. The extras, employed as crowds keen for a glimpse of Princess Diana, were utilised as so much set-dressing: grouped on streets and plastered against walls to enact their status as silent watchers and inactive witnesses to glamour and history, and standing in an orderly fashion in allotted areas – “seldom given much encouragement by directors and often treated as not much more than moveable scenery”, as Alan Bennett once observed. Their bulk presence signified one message: the verification that the arrival / departure of this one individual matters. And so the cameras frequently soared high above on cranes, so as to amalgamate individuals into one, singular mass. The actual series mostly simply intercuts a soap opera-like narrative regarding the Royals with shots of crowds outside. Alan Bennett, *Untold Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 207.

reflection over action – is achieved in the pace and rhythm of the montage. Such a slowness of tracking shots, and the slowness of the movement of the camera in general, is fairly unique in television (outside the static shots that are required for some sports matches). Even “dead air” – the most conventionally unacceptable thing in broadcast television – is tolerated; moments when voices cease, when cut-away shots impart or add virtually nothing. With such rule-breaking slowness, in the context of the Queen Mother’s funeral, comes gravitas – of and for the idea of history in the making, when history is understood as, finally, an essentially unperturbed (that is, revolution-free) continuum, manifest in this contemporary “democratic” status quo. This slowness aligns the aesthetic with the “end of history” (of the ideological position of Fukuyama).³⁹ That is: the BBC reportage represents the plastic form of such an inactive, immobilised concept of history: of who we are, read into, or projected onto, a supposedly historical event – the passing of a Royal figure. Thus in this funereal slowness is the meeting of the concepts of history as a personality cult, and of history as monarchical, successionist, demanding the sacrifice of our most extraordinary personages’ lives, for this history’s renewal: a history that is bigger than can be managed or manipulated by us, in crowds. We, the people, should be respectful, thankful and silent – and at one remove, since we no longer determine history, or need to: that phase has ended. This is a history to be pondered rather than intervened in: hence this lulling, meditative slowness, ennobling the low language of news reportage.

³⁹ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

To discuss these strategies in operation is to give an impression, in this analysis, that would seem to be rather pessimistic: the forces of reaction and their control of the means of narrative or meaning production in the mediatised society. But in both the totality of the broadcast, and often in shorter segments too, another impression is given altogether, and one which is emblematic of television engagements with the Royals. Since there is an unavoidable paucity of imagination to the whole, in reality a numbing tedium rather than gravitas, the very self-regard of the funereal slowness strains any sense of passive mourning. Even to briefly entertain the idea of a semiotic analysis of this “living history” genre suggests the inadequacy of the imagery: roads, cars, the people, buildings, overcast skies. For Manghani, in respect of his ‘image critique’ of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the semiotic analysis prompted a complex interplay of meanings and images – “a *site* and a *sight* of critical importance” holding out the promise of “re-citing / sighting history.”⁴⁰ The fact that this dividend of live history has to be constantly flagged up by the Queen Mother commentariat suggests the failure of the texture of this footage to function in a comparably “historical” way. Time and again the commentators use mute shots of large crowds to offer observations along the lines of: “this, surely, proves the monarchy is alive and well!”⁴¹ This happens so often and compulsively, as if

⁴⁰ Sunil Manghani, *Image Critique & The Fall of the Berlin Wall* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2008), 35 and 54 respectively; Manghani’s italics.

⁴¹ Cannadine concludes as much of an earlier model: “the jubilee ceremonial [the 1977 Silver Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II] was an expression of national and imperial decline, an attempt to persuade, by pomp and circumstance, that no such decline had

neurotically, that it does not take a sustained recourse to psychoanalytical thought to know that the fear is that the very reverse of this position must be true; if the monarchy was not already finished as an institution, and untenable without this media life-support machine, then these nervous refrains, citing the silent people's accord, would not be necessary.

What is silenced in these shots is the sense of the agency of the massed, in the suggestion that they have massed just to amass: they line the roads, standing, viewed en masse, as if they have arrived and wait at their destination, as if their story arc is complete. But to think beyond this is unavoidable: the people are gathered in the imperial centre. For Miéville, to be physically present in this centre is to, he recounts of his own excursion, encounter a London “buffeted by economic catastrophe, vastly reconfigured by a sporting jamboree of militarised corporate banality [the then coming 2012 London Olympic Games], jostling with social unrest, still reeling from riots [of August 2011]”, so that “[t]he place is pre-something.”⁴² And those riots, in terms of the people, baffled commentators. Those who optimistically saw the uprising of the oppressed classes, and even glimpsed the contours of multitude, also had to acknowledge the consumerist impulse of the looting (trainers, designer goods, and so on). Those who saw straight criminality run riot also had to acknowledge the quite precise, and highly politicised, origins of the moment – a march by family and friends of Mark Duggan (shot and killed by the London police on 4 August 2011), to Tottenham Police Station, chanting “we want answers.” Hardt and Negri found in the

really taken place, or to argue that, even if it had, it really did not matter.” Cannadine, “Context, Performance,” 160.

⁴² China Miéville, *London's Overthrow* (London: The Westbourne Press, 2012), 14.

events a correlation between this “burning and looting” and “the power of commodities and the rule of property, which are themselves, of course, often [also, as with the Duggan shooting] vehicles of racial subordination”, irrespective of the lack of any socialist ethos in a limited “struggles for the common.”⁴³ Such media bafflement itself prompted Berardi to imagine accompanying Pier Paolo Pasolini to Tottenham – thinking back to Pasolini’s counterintuitive position on the rioting Italian students of 1968, in which he declared support for sons of the poor (that is: the police) against the sons of the wealthy (that is: the students). Berardi wishes to disagree, and yet acknowledges that the sons of the wealthy, despite their revolutionary activities, came to be as Pasolini had described them, to a degree, once they assumed positions of institutional power (further to the successful post-1968 strategy of the “march through the institutions”). Thus “a large part of that social body that we called ‘the Movement’ has shown that Pasolini was not entirely wrong on this point.”⁴⁴

It is this interpretative challenge of uncertainty, in relation to the massed people, that is shirked in the mass media. The crowd footage is eminently pliable: impose silence, depose the multitude, and pose a thesis instead – a people, a deference, therein a mandate, therefore a verification of a natural democratic default to leader figures for the, as the Invisible Committee puts it, “*court society*.”⁴⁵ This, then, is the first kind of void felt in the funeral footage. When the people are massed,

⁴³ Hardt and Negri, *Declaration*, 6.

⁴⁴ Franco Berardi, “Pasolini in Tottenham,” in *The State of Things*, ed. Marta Kuzma, Pablo Lafuente, Peter Osborne (London: Koenig Books, 2012), 213.

⁴⁵ The Invisible Committee, *Now*, trans. Robert Hurley (South Pasadena, California: Semiotext(e), 2017), 52; their italics.

the reportage says, they yearn for a leader to fill an otherwise chaotic or anarchic void. One leader steps back, another leader steps forward: mark the transition – hear some opinions – feel part of it – even applaud. This is, of course, the very negation of Hardt and Negri’s concept of multitude – in terms, for example, of their discussion of the media’s grappling with mass protests:

The foreign press corps searched desperately in Tunisia and Egypt for a leader of the movements [in 2010/11]. During the most intense period of the Tahir Square occupation, for example, they would each day presume a different figure was the *real* leader ... What the media couldn’t understand or accept was that there was no leader in Tahir Square. The movements’ refusal to have a leader was recognizable throughout the year but perhaps was most pronounced in [Occupy] Wall Street. A series of intellectuals and celebrities made appearances at Zuccotti Park, but no one could consider any of them leaders; they were guests of the multitude.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Hardt and Negri, *Declaration*, 5; their italics. Arguably, during a moment of acute crisis for the Royal family, something similar occurred: the massed grievors outside Buckingham Palace seemed to successfully demand the Royal presence in the immediate aftermath of Diana’s death, prompting a walkabout by the family. The crisis was dramatized in Stephen Frears’ 2006 film *The Queen*, which incorporates news footage of angry vox pops outside the palace – where the wrangling of meaning was, temporarily, lost. Dacre notes this anger as arising from a disputed sense of ownership of the funeral (and so the life), between the Royal family and the “people [who] wanted to play a more personal and more active role in her funeral”; Dacre,

In the funeral footage, the multitude is presented as the guest of the leaders: as the people assembled at the behest of their leaders. This is the second void: they are devoid of meaning, autonomy – voided into a zombie assembly, who have surrendered all claim to the common in favour of a “collective will” of subservience. Such a strategy then avoids an idea of immanence by curtailing their narrative. Hardt and Negri note that the concept of the multitude “is based not so much on the current empirical existence of the class [of class struggle] but rather on its conditions of possibility”, so that the question is “not ‘What is the multitude?’ but rather ‘What can the multitude become?’”⁴⁷ Such a state of becoming is voided or avoided in this spectacle of the people: they have already become. The “possibility of the multitude” is effectively returned to that which Hardt and Negri are at pains to claim it is not – “merely some abstract, impossible dream detached from our present reality”,⁴⁸ with

“Funeral of Diana,” 87-88. But one could add to this tussle a third party exacting a claim too: Diana’s own family, the Spencers. Diana is buried on a private island in the Spencer’s Althorp estate.

⁴⁷ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 105.

⁴⁸ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 226-227. In terms of a later revisiting of the concept multitude, this trouncing can be placed more precisely – an immobilisation, blocking the trajectory and development of “class – multitude – class prime”. In this respect, the inclusion of minority groups in the studio, to talk about royals, also seems to bolster immobilisation: irrespective of any marginal status (ethnicity, sexual orientation, even gender), the Royal resonance is the same and so universal, so that a potentially insurrectionary “intersectional class” is fjorded away from a “multitudinal

“the people” as a “hypostatic reduction of the multitude” whereby “sovereignty claimed to have its basis in the people and transferred its image to them”:⁴⁹ the multitude as trounced by the people. In this, some answer to the concerns of Nairn, Billig, Blain and O’Donnell, and Cannadine is possible: the democratic aberration occurs at the “end of history” – so the ritual, devoid of autonomy, is comfortably accommodated in the era of the ideological endpoint of Western liberal democracy.

So who or what, then, are the commentators trying to reassure? Such media coverage seems desperate to set-up or re-establish or just identify that “public sphere”, to use Habermas’s term, from which the Royal’s mandate springs – but a public sphere without the traction of any members of the actual public. It is as if, at all costs, the public must not be allowed to publicly discuss these matters, or to autonomously populate their own space, in their own ways. Why not? Because it could reasonably be surmised that the weight of the commentary is too much for the cortege to bare: the spectacle is insufficient for the belief in heraldry, for a sense of the natural continuum of a monarchy, for the idea and look of an evolving and living history, for the “Britain” that we “believe in” as Schama says, for the shoring up of the feeling of the social importance of the monarchy, and for a reaffirming of national identity in and through this ritual. That is: the Royal family fails in the role of a concept of history.

class”; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, “Empire, Twenty Years On,” *New Left Review* 120 (Nov/Dec 2019): 89.

⁴⁹ Antonio Negri and Anne Dufourmantelle, *Negri on Negri*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 112.

From this vantage point the funereal slowness seems self-deluding, or an elaborate filibuster. Perhaps Baudrillard overestimated the affective potential of television, when it was the hegemonic visual medium? This televised pomp and circumstance mourns not an individual, but itself: its nostalgic mode is one which harks back to a time when questions of legitimation were not raised, and did not need to be answered – when the broadcast flow was smooth and interpretation convincing, before the ontological uncertainties of being “pre-something.”⁵⁰ At this moment, at least, the “communicative production and the construction of imperial legitimation” fails to “march hand in hand...”⁵¹ and the machine’s autopoietic functioning stumbles. In these respects, Turnock’s maxim can be reversed: it is not we who seek comfort from television, but television that seeks comfort from us, where the “us” is meant to be the people – the voided multitude.

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⁵⁰ Miéville, *London’s Overthrow*, 14.

⁵¹ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 34.

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