

## 8. Watching TV with Stanley Cavell: Further Remarks on *The Crown* as Metatelevision

DAVID LaROCCA

Stanley Cavell's contributions to the study of television as a medium commenced in earnest in the immediate wake of the expanded edition of *The World Viewed*. By the early 1980s, he had occasion to write more directly about how television differs from film and to articulate some of its special features. In a recent stocking-taking on the matter, contributors to the open-access *Television with Stanley Cavell in Mind* probed these and related issues as part of an ongoing investigation into the philosopher's legacy.<sup>1</sup> In that volume, I drew Cavell's reflections on TV into conversation with thoughts on metatelevision as the mode expresses itself in *The Crown* (2016-23, Netflix).<sup>2</sup> As he was by the art of film, Cavell remained intrigued by the special ways in which a medium can call attention to itself – and television, it turns out, manifests its own potentialities. In this special issue of *Conversations*, I pick up where I left off there, continuing an exploration of the meta-traits that are so ably and admirably achieved in Peter Morgan's celebrated, award-winning television series. For those keeping track, the following portion of remarks address the first four seasons of the series.

### I.

If Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh (Tobias Menzies) lobbied to make the interior of Westminster Abbey available to all – entrancing global television audiences while at

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1. Available open access at <https://tinyurl.com/3yzdpw8b>.

2. David LaRocca, "When TV is on TV: Metatelevision and the Art of Watching TV with the Royal Family in *The Crown*," in *Television with Stanley Cavell in Mind*, ed. LaRocca and S. Laugier (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2023), 85-98.

the same time ratifying the reality of his wife's investiture as Queen — the sudden intrusion of BBC documentary cameras in the private residence of the Royal Family became a cause for chagrin. Philip turns away, Elizabeth (Olivia Colman) looks at him worriedly, and then back at the TV set, distractedly, and asks the crew "What do we do now?"<sup>3</sup> Margaret (Helena Bonham Carter) adds plaintively: "Do you expect us to say something?" A reverse shot gives us the black and white television set at the bottom of the frame (displaying images of its own, those new-fangled computers noted above), and a film crew perched above the set, reduced to near-outlines for the brash backlighting. The director replies tentatively "Yes," and Margaret asks in turn: "Did someone prepare something?" Nervously, the director coaches: "I think the general idea is it be unscripted to reflect a normal evening." Of course, we viewers of *The Crown* realize how the entire scene (like the show we are watching) is scripted, that lines have been prepared for our actors whose characters are searching for what to say. "This is nothing like a normal evening," Margaret informs him dryly. "If it was a normal evening, we'd all be on our own in sad isolation in individual palaces. It wouldn't be crowded like this" — and here a gesture to sister and mother, all sitting on the same couch, shot in receding perspective, "This is like some kind of nightmare Christmas." And with that a wide shot, another brilliant tableau, showing everyone seated in large couches and chairs, flanked by studio lights and servants prepared to respond.<sup>4</sup> With Margaret's gloss, the frame suddenly looks like just such a painfully awkward holiday occasion immortalized on a postcard sent to friends and family. At last, something the family can agree on as the wonderfully resolute, Princess Anne (Erin Doherty), shoots Margaret a wide smile of confirmation and commiseration.<sup>5</sup> The scene ends with the two sisters and their mother (the Queen Mother played by Marion Bailey) inadvertently giving the director what he wants — something unrehearsed, "something unscripted to reflect a normal evening" — albeit barbed by the denigration of the medium and its offerings. The director stammers, looks to his left, that is, to Philip, for orientation, then suggests with a stammer: "Uh, perhaps, Your Majesties, Your Royal Highnesses, perhaps you might comment on what's on the television."<sup>6</sup>

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3. *The Crown* (2016-23, Peter Morgan), "Bubbikins" (s3, e4), 00:27:00.

4. *Ibid.*, 00:27:41.

5. *Ibid.*, 00:27:45.

6. *Ibid.*, 00:27:54.

THE QUEEN MOTHER: That'd be easier if there was something remotely amusing to watch.

THE QUEEN: I agree. This is deathly.

MARGARET: Things might improve with a drink.

THE QUEEN MOTHER: Everything improves with a drink.

THE QUEEN: Not everything.

MARGARET: Don't be such a prig. [*snaps her fingers to call a servant*] "And cut," says the director.

The light-hearted, if still devastating, end to the scene of family TV watching is followed immediately by two scenes — one in which Philip's mother, Princess Alice (Jane Lapotaire), stumbles upon the resting film crew in a courtyard, impatiently seeking out a light for her cigarette. When the director is told who she is, he snaps his fingers for the camera crew to roll. Philip happens upon a couple of servants looking studiously out the window and turns his attention in that direction, whereupon he finds his mother responding agreeably on camera to a series of probing questions. Philip turns back to the servants: "For God's sake, somebody stop that ... [*then shouts vigorously at them*] Now! Damn it!" Moments later we see a servant in the courtyard interrupting the shot, and thus the filmed conversation, the director obliging but looking around to the walls of surrounding curtained windows as if for an explanation of this abrupt intrusion. Someone, it turns out, is always watching.

The gauzy curtains and distant, invisible intervention of that scene turns to a next scene of unmediated close-ups in shot/reverse-shot, Philip standing at the edge Elizabeth's bed, charged and aggressive, while she sits there in nightclothes, deliberating with him calmly. "It's a nightmare," he declares emphatically, "We have to get her out of here. Somewhere no one will see her." Elizabeth, incredulous, "What?" Philip underscores the apparent motivation for his alarm: "We are in the middle of filming a documentary, which is critical as a public relations exercise. Now, on this occasion, the filmmakers agreed to give up the footage. Next time, they might not be so kind." And here a shift to a wide shot, taking them both in from the side.<sup>7</sup> "Her presence at the palace threatens to derail the entire thing." And then a return to clos-

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7. Ibid., 00:30:55.

er shots, as the couple shifts to such suppressed and thus deflected and deferred family issues, in which Elizabeth asks “Why are you so angry with her?” — “I’m not,” Philip counters abruptly, as if unintentionally confirming his unresolved anger, admitting — despite himself — that the Queen, his wife, has accurately diagnosed his inner state.

We leave Philip to sort out his troubled feelings about his mother to keep track of his sense of the stakes — and thus implied power — of documentary film, and in turn, its broadcast on television. Philip’s reference to the kindness of filmmakers — who have “given up the footage” — calls to mind a parallel scene from an earlier episode (“Pride and Joy,” s1, e8), when Elizabeth, newly Queen, had a row with Philip. Upon discovering their argument had been filmed by a documentary crew, she approaches them and, remarkably, they hand over the film (which was destroyed, or at least, never seen).<sup>8</sup> A scene from the origins of paparazzi, perhaps here in a dignified moment, but out of keeping with decidedly more aggressive arc of such clandestine capturing. Turning to another valence of our “Royal watching,” such invasive media “coverage” contributed to a signal event in the life of the Crown, namely, the death of Princess Diana; a generation later, we see Prince Harry and Meghan Markle’s “stepping back” from duties, motivated, they say, in part by harassment received by the press, creating a kind of lower-stakes, but still boldly salient, echo of King Edward’s abdication in 1936, so he could marry twice-divorced Wallis Simpson. Meanwhile, Philip’s efforts at controlling the narrative — along with the sounds and motion pictures that define them — place him decidedly at the origins of modern media relations, including the art of the so-called “spin doctor.” Unlike most others around him, perhaps even including the documentarians, he is keenly aware of the power of television, the image it creates and conveys, and the pronounced effects such content — whether acquired illicitly or with consent — can have on the life of the family.

In the 1950s and 1960s, journalists, filmmakers, and television producers may have retained a sense of decorum — a clearer sense of what is “fit to print,” or broadcast, and what should be held back or even destroyed; indeed, an entire episode, “Vergangenheit” (s2, e6) is devoted to the suppression of information about King

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8. *The Crown*, “Pride and Joy” (s1, e8), 00:40:15.

Edward VIII's complicity with the Nazi regime, including a literal cover-up in the forest where the incriminating documents from "the past" (of the eponymous title) were buried. At the end of this episode, written by Peter Morgan and directed by Philippa Lowthorpe, we find a medial move familiar to many "based on a true story" films and shows, namely, the abrupt introduction of bona fide documentary photographs, in this case, a five-image slideshow that features King Edward VIII and Wallis Simpson smiling, standing shoulder-to-shoulder, and shaking hands with none other than Adolph Hitler. The imposition of such evidence, as it is meant to be treated, at the conclusion of a dramatic re-enactment or recreation is fitting, of course, because the images offer a kind of proof of guilt. (For contrast, see how "Fagan" [s4, e5] *begins* with authentic documentary footage in order to prepare the viewer for the re-enactment to come, rather than save the historical connection until the credit sequence — a savvy "pre-script" method set against the more familiar post-script strategy, especially common in so called "biopic" feature films).

These *syuzhet* techniques "set up" the audience for seeing reality *in* the fiction; the order of arrangement contributes to the power of montage, including the mixing of re-enacted scenes and veritable footage or stills. In "Vergangenheit," perhaps it was felt that this genre convention (*viz.*, the late delivery of archival content) was one worth adopting for this particular episode — and its still-volatile topic — since the incrimination is so surprising. Thus, unlike ersatz photographs and film footage (that is, filmed content featuring our actors-in-character rather than the historical persons themselves), the turn to the archive is meant to retrospectively transform the art.<sup>9</sup> If Philip was trying to spin "the people" away from knowledge of his mother, Morgan and Lowthorpe aim to turn us *toward* this morally compromising aspect of King Edward VIII's personal and royal history. Such manipulation — toward and away — is a persistent feature of "historical" films and shows, when fabrication refers to fact, or aims to amplify it anew. In *The Crown*, as in other historically-informed dramatic endeavours, there is no one-size-fits-all methodology, but a case-by-case approach for the treatment of one topic or another. Not to be missed, though, the technology at hand — whether it be photographic camera or home movie camera, television, radio,

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9. See my "Memory Translation: Rithy Panh's Provocations to the Primacy and Virtues of the Documentary Sound/Image Index," in *Everything Has a Soul: The Cinema of Rithy Panh*, ed. L. Barnes and J. Mai (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2021), 188-201.

or other — often seems to give opportunity and license to its implementation or exploitation. Thus, the existence of the King Edward-with-Hitler photographs over-determines their relevance to such an episode, whether they would be theatrically re-enacted or, as they are, simply placed in slideshow fashion, as if without any editorial comment, as if we had not just watched an hour's worth of the creator's case against Edward. The five documentary images — a headline-worthy sentence comprising five bold statements — are animated by all the dramatization that has preceded them.

One of the master terms in Stanley Cavell's television-specific lexicon — “monitoring” — presents itself as especially fecund in the context of television studies more broadly. In his use of the word, we glean at least two striking valences: a literal sense of an actual monitor (the “set” or “tube” as it was known, and now more commonly, the “screen”); and an even more generative figurative incarnation, namely, that of our activity of watching, of addressing our attention to the world-as-we-see-it-represented on the set, on the screen. Drawing these two elements together, we may be said to monitor the monitor. Even so, the tautology resists its claim to gimmick, since it establishes for Cavell the kind of activity we find ourselves involved in as we relate to the medium: in short, not viewing (as with film, and the world *viewed*), but monitoring.<sup>10</sup> Cavell, then, offers us one of the primary, if not the singular, aesthetic stakes for the ontological difference between film and television: where film is understood as “*a succession of automatic world projections,*” television is taken to be “*a current of simultaneous event reception.*”<sup>11</sup>

A bravura sequence in “Pride and Joy” (s1:e8) draws many of the foregoing lines of thought together, and in masterful composite helps us navigate the experience of watching television and film and also the activity of writing about them, indeed, coming to terms with their ontological deviations and overlaps. As Elizabeth and Philip embark on a tour of Australia, confetti flies — but the film stock has been

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10. Cavell, “The Fact of Television,” in *Themes Out of School: Effects and Causes* (San Francisco, CA: North Point Press, 1984), 252.

11. Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971; Enlarged edition, 1979), 72; Cavell, “The Fact of Television,” 252 (italics in both originals). See also Garrett Stewart, “‘Assertions in Technique’: Tracking the Medial ‘Thread’ in Cavell’s Filmic Ontology” (23-40) and Stephen Mulhall, “What a Genre of Film Might Be: Medium, Myth, and Morality” (88-104), both in *The Thought of Stanley Cavell and Cinema: Turning Anew to the Ontology of Film a Half-Century after The World Viewed*, ed. David LaRocca (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020).

warmed, saturated, and the frame rate slowed.<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth and Philip are in a slow-moving car on parade, the Queen waving and smiling, the Prince watching her. Diegetic sound has been stripped away, leaving only the crash of spent flash bulbs — with a burst of light to bleach the frame. Next, we are shown colour archival film footage from the 1954 procession in Sydney, with frame-lines in place, suggesting we are looking through the lens of the camera itself. From one frame to the next, the image is reduced — and shifted to black and white — as it appears on a television screen halfway around the world, the Queen Mother watching. And there we are — *also* watching (her and the small screen before her). Time and again in *The Crown*, the available media (including in this case historical voiceover narration from the live broadcast) are braided, blended, and otherwise composited to create a formidable, many-layered audio-visual texture. In *The Crown*, film becomes television and then television is filmed at which point it is given back to us as the show, understood itself to be part of today's television landscape.

Moving on, with Cavell's helpful conceptual vocabulary in mind, our experience of *The Crown* is enriched for the nuance of his terminological distinctions. For instance, we would be more accurate in describing what the Queen does when she "watches" TV not as viewing, but as monitoring. There is something manifestly, and even pleurably, appropriate about such a mode of relation when invoking Elizabeth II — a sense of her power, but also of her distance while imposing it, of "overseeing" (of monitoring) that befits a reigning sovereign, which it appears, TV makes of us all (yet another sense of "royal watchers"). Indeed, in some highly consequential way, the job of the Queen — as defined and delivered by Elizabeth — is precisely to "watch over" her subjects, the Commonwealth, etc., and not to overtly comment or brashly lay claim to one's control. Mainly because of her power, whether exercised explicitly or withheld for a perhaps even greater exhibition of the same, the Queen is always poised not merely to bear witness to "the news," but to manifest it, to become it. Hence, the curious way in which her long life involved or paralleled certain traits of television as taxonomized by Cavell, principally, in the way her days persistently toggled between the ordinary and the eventful. Thus, "serial procedure" as we find it expressed by the medium of television is a suitable syntagma for the Queen's position, as Cavell puts it:

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12. *The Crown*, "Pride and Joy" (s1, e8), 00:31:18.

the establishing of a stable condition punctuated by repeated crises or events that are not developments of the situation requiring a single resolution, but intrusions or emergencies — of humor, or adventure, or talent, or misery — each of which runs a natural course and thereupon rejoins the realm of the uneventful; which is perhaps to say, serial procedure is undialectical.<sup>13</sup>

Such would be the case in an historical glance at the invention of television (and its technological development during her reign) and a look at certain facts of the Queen's temperament, say, her way of inhabiting the role. But it is a further marvel of the medium that *The Crown* has taken up this uncanny imbrication of technology and temperament, and given us a show that so overtly and artfully makes that intimacy an additional feature of its achievements. *The Crown* is a television show that illustrates the "serial procedure" of the medium's format and of the Queen's form of life. Both are, in Cavell's sense, "undialectical" since both offer "a current of simultaneous event reception." TV, like the Queen, is perpetually an audience to the event and the uneventful.

Given our interest in the relationship between form and content in metatelevision, Cavell's use of the word "format" as the analogue for "show" or "series" is telling since the word activates our attunement to the shape or configuration of the medium as we come to know it on screen. Familiarity with his work from *Must We Mean What We Say?* — such as "Knowing and Acknowledging" (so ably giving us *King Lear* anew) — and aware of how "acknowledgment" functions in his reading of *Othello* in Part IV of *The Claim of Reason*, we are prepared to recognize Cavell's quintessential aggregation of diverse texts and topics, his gathering of concepts from myriad discourses and disciplines, and arrive where philosophical skepticism meet television studies, including shifts in diction to suit the occasion (e.g., Cavell, here aware of the latent conceptual potencies of assonance, of pun, trades "succession" for "successful," as earlier we heard the two senses of "current" — meaning present, adjectively, and in noun form meaning something that flows):

My claim about the aesthetic medium of television can now be put this way: its successful formats are to be understood as revelations (acknowledgments) of

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13. Cavell, "The Fact of Television," 258.



the conditions of monitoring, and by means of a serial-episode procedure of composition, which is to say, by means of an aesthetic procedure in which the basis of a medium is acknowledged primarily by the format rather than primarily by its instantiations.<sup>14</sup>

In other words, television shows show us the conditions for the possibility of acknowledgment. And in a doubleness suited to meta-art, we not only witness such acknowledgment “in” or as we say “on” television (e.g., by characters who interact in a drama; talk show hosts who kibitz with guests; or athletes communicating in the field of play), but through our own individual relationship to the audio-visual display we are said to be monitoring (viz., our TV watching): we “watchers” are situated in a place of near-perpetual demand for acknowledgment by televisual proceedings; we are called upon to monitor these “revelations,” yes, but also to realize that such moments hold us captive, call us to respond in kind (or, occasionally, to deny such acknowledgment, to avert our eyes, to turn away, even to turn off the show); we may even be especially hard on a show that was, by all estimations, “made for us” — e.g., as fans of a prior series or a prominent actor — and yet, we demure. Such perversities suggest that we are, indeed, in a relationship (of some sort) with the shows we love, and even the ones we don’t.

## II.

The foregoing notes find canny expression in “Fagan” (s4:e5), an episode that begins with archival television footage of news anchor Richard Threlkeld reporting, played at fullscreen, and faded in from black: “Finally, from London, under the heading, ‘Is Nobody Safe Anymore?’ a royal ruckus has started over the man who has had an audience with Queen Elizabeth, uninvited and unannounced, in the Queen’s bedroom in the middle of the night.” Cut to a BBC News report that includes the salacious claim of “blood stains on the Queen’s bed.” Then a third report with a helicopter flying over Buckingham Palace. A fourth report shifts to the cover of the *Daily Mail*, but this

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14. Cavell, “The Fact of Television,” 252.

time with a photograph of the actor, Tom Brooke, who plays the thirty-year old Michael Fagan, including a cut-in close-up of his face. Switch to additional unaltered, time-of documentary footage. The montage continues with yet more news, more newspapers, and then the insertion of faux documentary footage of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, that is, as played by Gillian Anderson. Finally, our camera begins to pan out from the convex glass television set to reveal the Queen (that is, Olivia Colman) in profile watching television, her TV set, set to Channel One. A reverse shot gives us a clearer picture of the Queen's face as she watches the news coverage, which, of course is mainly about her ("For ten minutes, he sat talking six feet from the Queen." "The Queen has carried on performing her duties seemingly unperturbed, despite the unprecedented and severe level of threat that the intruder posed.") A final shot — before the opening credit sequence — a slow zoom-in on the photograph of Tom Brooke (as Michael Fagan) on the Queen's TV screen. When the episode resumes, we are given a lower third: "Three months earlier."

Part of Michael Fagan's sad prehistory to his encounter with the Queen is a televised reprimand of any-and-all such "Fagans" from Margaret Thatcher (again, Anderson, this time in voiceover, as stock footage plays on Fagan's TV set).<sup>15</sup> In the aftermath of the break-in, it will be Thatcher who will be watching TV too, and listening with concern and awkward silence as she and the Home Secretary are themselves reprimanded for their "unprecedented failure" in accounting for the security breach.<sup>16</sup> The episode concludes with the Queen watching TV alone — archival footage of soldiers mixed with Anderson-as-Thatcher waving to the victory parade in the wake of the Falkland Islands War.<sup>17</sup> When Philip enters the room, the TV volume sufficiently audible to be heard below their conversation, Elizabeth offers a take on Thatcher:

ELIZABETH: I think that woman's getting ahead of herself, and now all this increased security.

PHILIP: Well, she's trying to protect you.

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15. *The Crown*, "Fagan" (s4, e5), 00:12:14. A few years prior to *The Crown*, a Thatcher insertion was made at the outset of *Pride* (2014, dir., Matthew Warchus), where archival television footage of the prime minister is used to illustrate her antagonism to the characters in the diegetic space.

16. *Ibid.*, 00:43:40. The events that inspired the episode "Fagan" also inform the Playhouse Presents (2012-15) episode "Walking the Dogs" (s1, e8), in which Emma Thompson plays the Queen and Eddie Marsan plays "the intruder."

17. *The Crown*, "Fagan," 00:47:15.

ELIZABETH: From what?

PHILIP: From lunatics.

ELIZABETH: Normal people. My subjects.

PHILIP: Come on. That man was clearly a lunatic. And a fool.

ELIZABETH: Yes, but in the best sense, like Lear's fool.

PHILIP: Don't get all . . . Shakespearean with me.

Yes, Philip, that is precisely what the Queen does: she gets Shakespearean, and in the best sense. And while she is not merely being Shakespearean in her awareness of such a figure as “Lear's fool” (a figure fit for a King, or a Queen, who stands in need of being told hard truths by those willing to risk punishment — “whipped for speaking true,”<sup>18</sup> or who stand in such a shadow so as to evade it), the show is also creating a scenario for us to consider the Shakespeareanness of the Queen's royal predicament. Indeed, the television is Elizabeth's fool (“the boob tube”): it speaks to her of the common man; from her solitary space with the set (invaded time and again by husband, family, and servants), she is recurrently, from episode to episode, presented with a country, kingdom, and commonwealth over which she exists as sovereign. More precisely, in the context of Cavell's clever taxonomy, we have in Elizabeth a figure not just built for monitoring (like we all are), but also faced with being monitored (such as she is, as Queen). Given the temporal sweep of her reign, coming into being at the dawn of television and persisting in the aftermath of Philip's death at ninety-nine, nearly seventy-years later, in the age of Twitter, Twitch, and TikTok, one can wonder if she was not among the most consistently monitored — surveyed — humans in the history of *homo sapiens*.

The Queen's emotional perceptiveness — her depth of empathy (as acknowledged and playfully mocked by Philip) — arrives in part from her tuitions *by* television, i.e., her education by the medium, the cumulative force of what she has seen and heard of the world she reigns over and monitors from the privacy of her citadel. Given our temporal proximity to a recent global pandemic that required our own sequestration, we may now better recognize that the Queen has been in quarantine

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18. William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. S. Wells (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), act I, scene IV.

since the 1950s, a cautious person who makes only occasional, socially-distant forays into the world of others. As a technology of intimacy — a means of, or mode for, bringing near sights and sounds that lie far away — “tele-vision” as well as “tele-hearing” proved a godsend for the Queen’s “contact” with humanity, her sense of her subjects, and, not incidentally, her appreciation of her effect on them (on this last measure, consider the outsized impact of her televised tear in the wake of the Aberfan tragedy [s3:e3]).

And turned the other way, as the years pass, she exhibited her proclivity as an increasingly savvy student of media; she had a knack (not a natural one like Philip’s, but a deliberately practiced skill) for shaping how she (and her family) were seen (or not seen) by the world (recall again her demand that after its initial airing on television, the documentary, *Royal Family* [1969], a home movie of sorts, should never be broadcast again). Watching “Aberfan” with Morgan’s *The Queen* (2006, dir. Stephen Frears), one can appreciate how the film is an extended study in how there is always something new to learn about television, even after decades of tutelage; the difficulty of the medium often offers up — even to the most experienced viewers, and to those who appear viewed on those same screens — another meaning for the “mystery of existence” that television presents to us all: not just how to watch it (in our own homes) but how to be watched by it, monitored, as when one is a global celebrity, or even a figure of international renown, said to be imbued by and sanctioned with divine power.

### III.

When Cavell speaks of “our continued attraction by events, our will to understand our lives, or to take interest in them, from their dramas rather than from their stability, from the incident and the accident rather than from the resident, from their themes rather than from their structures — to theatricalize ourselves,”<sup>19</sup> we may recognize a description of how form and content interact in *The Crown*, namely, how the formal nature of the show as television provides what television can provide (e.g., attraction by events, dramas, incident, accident, themes, theatricalization of the self, etc.), and

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19. Cavell, “The Fact of Television,” 262.

that the series, as assigned to covering the sweep of the Royal Family's history from roughly the reign of King Edward VIII to something like the contemporary era, offers a condition less and less familiar to our up-to-the-minute present (with its social media churn, race and gender reckonings, contested elections, Capitol insurrection, pandemic, climate change, wars, and so on), namely, the *other side* of Cavell's comparison: the stability, the resident, the structures. The "television time" of *The Crown* affords the duration needed to account for "the interminable everyday, passages and abysses of the routine."<sup>20</sup> Again, we are given by Peter Morgan a rare practicum in the comparison of "film time" and "television time," namely, *The Queen* in relation to *The Crown*, in which the former obeys the narrative shape of a dramatic feature film (as it were, contained in its running time), whereas the latter *expects* that its serialization will couple the everyday *and* the eventful, that the eventful is necessary to interrupt the ordinary.

Morgan's brand of metatelevision illuminates the form/content relationship in more than just a recurrent focus on (the) media (e.g., in the familiar shape of the TV set/screen and its living presence among the characters; the allusion to, or inclusion of, archival or fictive television broadcasts, and so on). His historically-minded treatment of narrative also heightens our perception of the show's jostling between an invocation of the (1) Queen as a historical figure and the (2) evocation of the Queen by an actor (in our case, serial inhabitants of the role: Claire Foy, Olivia Colman, and Imelda Staunton, and serial correlates in other roles). Such doubleness or duplicate status points up the familiar and fraught fiction/nonfiction divide,<sup>21</sup> not least because it applies pressure to the (3) historical specificity of the *actor*: in part because of the historical referent Elizabeth II, the embodied presence of these actors is also at issue (much in the spirit of Jacques Rivette's notion that "every film is a documentary of its own making"<sup>22</sup>). Indeed, these valences — viz., of Queen-as-historical-figure, Actor-as-Queen, and Actor-as-historical-figure — are complicated by the need to recognize a fourth propitious, if familiar, category: (4) the Queen-as-fictional-character that can be "played" by a multi-

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20. *Ibid.*, 263.

21. See Carl Plantinga, "The Limits of Appropriation: Subjectivist Accounts of the Fiction/Nonfiction Film Distinction," in *The Philosophy of Documentary Film: Image, Sound, Fiction, Truth*, ed. D. LaRocca (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), 113-24.

22. See Dennis Lim, "It's Actual Life. No, It's Drama. No It's Both," *The New York Times*, August 20, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/22/movies/22hybrid.html>.

tude of actors (not just those featured in *The Crown*). Diana, Princess of Wales, has her share of iterations as well: *Diana* (played by Naomi Watts, 2013, dir. Oliver Hirschbiegel), *Spencer* (played by Kristen Stewart, 2021, dir. Pablo Larraín), and so on. Still more, the evolving taxonomy invites us to consider yet a fifth incarnation: (5) the historical-Queen-as-character. As expected, a heady *mise en abîme* prevails. Thus, we count (1) Elizabeth Alexandra Mary, b. 1926; (2) Foy/Colman/Staunton in their roles as the character named the Queen; (3) Foy/Colman/Staunton as actors themselves historically situated; (4) Elizabeth II as a type or character to be played by many actors; and (5) a return to the historical Queen while imagining that, in fact, her role is *also* a performance, and yet another kind of character to consider. In a clever bit of identity collapse, Elizabeth chose the name Elizabeth for her royal moniker — her given name as stage name — and so we may have lost touch with the duality, layering, or sense of “ascension” that customarily abide appointments via profound nomination (as when David becomes King Edward VIII). In this respect, Prince Charles followed her model by retaining his Christian when anointed King Charles III.

With film in mind, Cavell has spoken about the uncanny ways that a film actor (or, better, star) predominates over “the kind of character an author creates.”<sup>23</sup> “An exemplary screen performance is one in which, at a given time, a star is born.”<sup>24</sup> We have been asking, then, how this relationship plays out on television, or at least in *The Crown*, and whether its metatextual and metatelevisual attributes affect our sensibility for what may or may not be a cinematic difference. For instance, when we have spent two seasons — that is, twenty episodes, or roughly twenty hours — with *The Crown*, whom do we feel we have spent time with? The Queen or Claire Foy, or the tertium quid, Foy-as-the-Queen? The fourth category — the historical-Queen-as-character — adds further richness (and some measure of disorientation) to the order of operations, and indeed, to our sensibility for who and what we watch. Consider that having different actors play different ages is not novel, and yet the shift in this case may *reinforce* (not diminish) the actor’s prominence over character that Cavell identifies in film. By substituting who plays the Queen after twenty hours, we are forced to contend with the reality of the serially deployed actors — namely, that *they*

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23. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 29.

24. *Ibid.*, 28.

change rather than one of them “ages” (e.g., by means of prosthetics<sup>25</sup>). Thus, despite so much time spent with say, Foy-as-the-Queen, we are — at the cleave point of s3:e1 — reminded of the “actor-as” structure of *The Crown*, indeed, of all historically-based, biographically-informed cinema and television. And doubtless, the “actor-as” structure leaks off the frame to have us fathom the dramatic role Elizabeth II played since the early 1950s. The role of a lifetime became a lifetime role.

Given the state of prosthetics and VFX, it is conceivable that Morgan could have retained Foy for the full run of the show — for all six seasons — and doctored her appearance via latex and digital effects to achieve phases of aging. Let me suggest, then, that his choice to cast three actors as he does — e.g., to have them appear serially, in sequence, in equal measure, twenty episodes a piece — is another valence of metatelevision in so far as we are called, yet again, to reflect on form and content, and in this specific case, how the very nature of our embodied actors informs the creation of a fictional presence on screen, the personage we grow used to calling, first with Foy, then with Colman, and lastly with Staunton, “Her Majesty, the Queen.” And because of that seriality — that surreality? — we can say that each of them is the Queen, and without being clever but simply beholden to our experience, none of them is the Queen. That tension between faith and doubt, between immersion and alienation, seems very much a piece of a metatelevisual enterprise. Morgan is there to entertain *and* to estrange, to give us a world boldly realized (e.g., the world of Queen Elizabeth II), and also, as if to remind us of the show’s aesthetic achievements, to be sure we are aware that it is, at last, art.<sup>26</sup>

Like many films and television series that present themselves as historical fiction or docudrama, the divide or divisions between historical person, actor, and character, are regularly limned, crossed, teased, and otherwise contended with. In the present case, we can say that *The Crown* is a television show purportedly about real people and real events (and related boilerplate one hears about such postulations). But it is first art, of course, and so everything I have been saying about Elizabeth, born in 1926 (just a few months before Stanley Cavell was born in Atlanta), I should

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25. See my “The Performance of Plasticity: Method Acting, Prosthetics, and the Virtuosity of Embodied Transformation,” in *Plastics, Environment, Culture, and the Politics of Waste*, ed. T. Konrad (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 216-37.

26. See my “Dueling Conceptions of History,” in *Hamilton and Philosophy: Revolutionary Thinking*, ed. A. Rabinowitz and R. Arp (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2017), 217-25.

also attribute to the diegetic character — and her figuration — in the show known as *The Crown*. More especially, I should like to underscore the extent to which Morgan's creative decision to make metatelevision his *modus operandi* gives shape to my claims here, including those that draw on and from Cavell. In short, we can neither establish the extent nor the specifics of how the Queen's reign — and her personal life — were, in fact, informed by the presence of television in her life (e.g., as personal company and as a technology of professional display), though we can say with confidence that, as a tool of his particular work of art, Morgan has deftly used the presence and representation of TV to masterful effect in his television series, that is, to offer a *speculative* history that draws the media (and thus the show) into a persistently reflexive realm, to lavish the *mise-en-scène* with an unapologetic fascination in the recursion made by possible by obsessively featuring television on television.<sup>27</sup> *The Crown* is interested in the Queen — and her experience of and with television — and *The Crown* is also interested in itself as television, that is, as fiction.

While the epistemology of such metatelevision limits us to claims about the role of television in the Queen's life as known to us by *The Crown* (and hence places the show closer to historiography than history), we can nevertheless draw salient lessons from the way the series is predicated on a sense of television's broader, historical presence and influence beyond this fictitious rendering. The *fabula* of *The Crown* (and to a large extent also its TV-centric *syuzhet*), thus, above all, acknowledges the importance of television as a global technological and social phenomenon of supreme cultural importance since at least the early 1950s. In this respect, Morgan and company do not merely represent possible (or even probable) occasions in the life of Elizabeth II and her family, but artistically implicate us — the viewers — in our own habits of relationship to and with the medium known as television. Indeed, we are all — including Her Majesty — subjects with respect to television.

Like us, the Queen uses television to process her experience, including the reality of the outside world, what lies beyond the palace gates, and including, when those gates are opened (or illegally breached) and the world's reality enters of its own accord. TV is a medium, a monitor, and a mediator. Admittedly, we may be unlike the

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27. For more on reflexivity in a cinematic context, see David LaRocca, ed., *Metacinema: The Form and Content of Filmic Reference and Reflexivity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).



Queen in our viewing by being more prone to make television viewing count as personal experience — to employ it as a proxy; thus, as we sketch our private journal entries, embodied, in-person events are placed on par with the viewing of specific episodes and seasons.<sup>28</sup> In turn, and by logical extension, when we meet with friends, family, and even professional colleagues, we are repeatedly reminded that “what we watch” has become a respectable domain of shared, elaborate, indeed, serious social investigation. We move from personal memory to memory of television in a single breath, again letting that weave remain unremarked upon, or even tightening the braid so the distinction is lost altogether (in short, so that TV experience become claimable as one’s own genuine experience, however impersonal and indifferent the medium remains to individuals: that a show “feels made for me” is part of TV’s special talent, perhaps along with a few shrewd algorithms). Still more, in an age of political fragmentation and polarizing cultural tumult, television shows may be among the few media territories we wish to explore together — not just as a *lingua franca* but also as a *terra firma*. Contested, for sure, but not incontestable.

In a further association that links to Cavell’s remarks, television provides the Queen with company — not just the “fool’s” commentary that any sovereign should be glad to have at court, but the comfort of being acknowledged and of having an opportunity to acknowledge others; to alternate productively, that is, between response and responsibility. She is, in effect, like all of us, *addressed* — talked to (by the television); in our screening of her watching, we see that she herself is often invoked (by contrast, something exceedingly rare for the plebian); and for her own part, admitting her power, she is also uniquely able to respond, on her own terms, to the way she is monitored by television; as invoked here for good reason, Morgan’s *The Queen* should be considered a feature-length meditation on the interaction between Elizabeth and her television audience (“Normal people. My subjects.”). For a person walled off on fifty-one acres in the centre of London since the days when Winston Churchill inhabited 10 Downing Street, the television-as-companion is a not an incidental feature of the second Elizabethan consciousness. Cavell speaks to the signifi-

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28. I have written of a similar phenomenon with respect to war films, namely, that for many, experience of war films amounts to one’s (only) experience of war. See “War Films and the Ineffability of War,” in *The Philosophy of War Films*, ed. D. LaRocca (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), 1-77. See also my comments in the documentary film, *War Movie: The American Battle in Cinema* (2023, dir. Steven Summers).

cance of the medium for such purposes. For someone who is said to have or receive “an audience” as among the most vaunted aspects of her inherited duties, Cavell’s remarks resonate deeply:

A notable feature of this list [of the formats, or serializations, of television] is the amount of talk that runs across the forms. This is an important reason, no doubt, for the frequent description of television as providing “company.” But what does this talk signify, how does it in particular signify that one is not alone, or anyway that being alone is not unbearable?<sup>29</sup>

Again, our recent pandemic lifestyles may provide a fuller reply than at any previous era in our lives — that is, a phase of the world in which more television content was available than ever before in history *and* had more reach than at any prior historical juncture. Still more, many people had or made more time to watch, leaving us to wonder how much TV watching is ideal, or even advisable (some accounts claim that retirees in the United States average fifty hours per week — something like a typical work week pre-retirement). But again, as *The Crown* would have it, the Queen appears to have held close to the television set from the earliest days of her reign, whether alone or in company. As Cavell continues with his own answer to the above question, one informed by lessons from the ontology of television — and its differences from the ontology of cinema:

Partly, of course, this is a function of the simultaneity of the medium — or of the fact that at any time it might be live and that there is no sensuous distinction between the live and the repeat, or the replay: the others are *there*, if not shut in this room, still caught at this time. One is receiving or monitoring them, like callers; and receiving or monitoring, unlike screening and projection, does not come between their presence to the camera and their presentness to us.<sup>30</sup>

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29. Cavell, “The Fact of Television,” 253.

30. *Ibid.*, 253.

The notion that one is “called upon” by visitors is an antiquated locution (as is the social structure that supported it), but the phrase splendidly captures the potential for acknowledgment (including response and reception), all in their Cavellian registers and senses of syncopation. For the Queen, “monitoring” one’s television visitors “like callers” would feel native to any sense of a job in which the choreography of your interactions with others were formalized, and indeed, monitored for the sake of an ancient nation, an inherited protocol, and the jealously inscribed histories of both. Yet, stepping back to the first sentence of this tandem (“called upon”), there is something uncanny about the observation that “there is no sensuous distinction between the live and the repeat, or the replay” — and thus, as one is “called upon” to watch, to be an audience *for* a television show, one may also call *upon* a show to visit with it — and also to revisit it (as with replay, rerun, re-view, and re-vision<sup>31</sup>). The “simultaneity of the medium” can be felt keenly when “calling up” (as we say now, “on demand,” a royal command of a sort) one or more shows from the history of the television archive.<sup>32</sup> Since “the others are *there*, if not shut in this room, still caught at this time,” we are made strangely aware of the “presentness” of these others, whether they appear in *The Golden Girls*, *Gilmore Girls*, *Gossip Girl*, *Girls*, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, or *New Girl*. One need neither be the Queen nor in quarantine to register these effects, which television makes possible.

More than just becoming yet another instance of the “simultaneity of the medium,” Morgan’s metatelevision in *The Crown* amplifies Cavell’s sense of television as monitoring the everyday (which can, of course, include the extraordinary as we find it in “the news”). Thus, as we must, we watch television in the midst of our everyday (letting it, inviting it to keep us company), while — in the case of *The Crown* — we watch people watching TV, and thereby “enter,” or join, their everyday lives, however vaunted, already in progress. The entrée into such realms is one thing when the show depicts the gritty, crass, precarious everyday of the American working class

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31. For more on the Cavellian significance of re-viewing, see Cavell on watching and rewatching in “The Advent of Videos,” *Artspace* (1988); reprinted in *Cavell on Film*, ed. W. Rothman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 167-73. See also Kate Rennebohm, “Chantal Akerman and Stanley Cavell: Viewing in *La Captive* and Reviewing in Moral Perfectionism,” in *Movies with Stanley Cavell in Mind*, ed. D. LaRocca (New York: Bloomsbury, 2021), 253-73, and her “Re-Vision: Moving Image Media, The Self, and Ethical Thought in the 20th Century” (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 2018).

32. For more on the relation of television to cinema, see Byron Davies, “The Specter of the Electronic Screen: Bruno Varela’s Reception of Stanley Cavell,” in *Movies with Stanley Cavell in Mind*, 72-90.

— as in *The Honeymooners*, *All in the Family*, *The Simpsons*, *Roseanne*, *Married with Children*, or *Kevin Can F\*\*k Himself* — shows that feature a television, or presume one to exist in the proscenium; and it is another thing when we are peering into a rarefied inner sanctum, the private halls of power (where only Royals or dignitaries and vetted staff are permitted). Depending on which scene of encounter you choose, the qualities and implications of televisual voyeurism are augmented; it matters what we monitor because it speaks to our condition. Like Michael Fagan, we are decidedly *not* where we should be; yet for the structure of metatelevision, our presence is not a threat (as Fagan’s was taken to be), but unknown or ignored (as the actor dismisses the camera in her midst), as if we were each equipped with a Ring of Gyges. How else to account for our odd (repeated) invitation to the Queen’s bedroom, and the discomfiting spectre of seeing her in her nightgown, indeed, watching her sleep? We *are* intruders, interlopers, trespassers. Yet our transgression — in a moment befitting the spiritual exercises of a moral perfectionist — turns us back upon ourselves; metatelevision becomes an aid to metacognition.<sup>33</sup>

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33. For further remarks on screen aids to reflection, see my “Contemplating the Sounds of Contemplative Cinema: Stanley Cavell and Kelly Reichardt,” in *Movies with Stanley Cavell in Mind*, 274-318.