In October of 1940, the year that director Stephen Frears was born, fourteen-year-old Princess Elizabeth comforted an agonized nation on a radio broadcast of “The Children’s Hour,” assuring her youthful public of the compassion and empathy of the Royal Family: “Thousands of you in this country have had to leave your homes and be separated from your fathers and mothers. My sister Margaret Rose and I feel so much for you, as we know from experience what it means to be away from those we love most of all.” A little more than a decade later, in 1953, the year of Queen Elizabeth’s formal coronation (she had acceded to the throne a year earlier upon her father King George’s death), future Prime Minister Tony Blair came into the world, the only Prime Minister ever to have been born during her reign. These facts, while never explicitly referenced in Frears’s majestic, multifaceted, and surprisingly funny epic, The Queen, are nonetheless essential to the brilliant and complex interweaving of myth, media, politics, and power that forms the core of this eminently human film.

As everyone knows by now (even those who have seen only the ads), The Queen is a film about the people of Great Britain in the week following the tragic and unexpected death of Princess Diana in a car crash in Paris; more significantly, it is about the Royal family coming to terms with a new media-driven definition of monarchy and the political challenge invoked by newly-elected, image-savvy Labor Prime Minister Tony Blair. One aspect of the film’s complexity involves its dual focus on both the monarchy and the government, illustrated by the relationship between the Queen and the Prime Minister, a strategy that prevents the film from being a conventional biopic with Masterpiece Theater trappings. While the film provides a very human dimension to the Queen as a person, it both maintains the political challenge invoked by newly-elected, image-savvy Labor Prime Minister Tony Blair (disarmingly eager, like a friendly puppy, as played by Michael Sheen) at Buckingham Palace, trace a transformation in their relationship sparked by the events of the week after Diana’s death. Both the Queen and her tenth Prime Minister—themselves—in contemporary terms. As for Elizabeth II herself, we will feel, through the course of the film, as if we’ve come to know this Royal icon as a complex, vulnerable, empathetic, and supremely intelligent human being, and conversely, we will be made to understand the incredible demands of sovereignty that so exceed the mere individual. Director Frears sums it up quite succinctly, with the wry humor that abounds in the film: “While the institution is idiotic and inappropriate, the woman is extraordinary.” And it is this dialectic of affection for the Queen and skepticism toward the monarchy that leads Frears to further comment that the film tells “a symbolic story, because it says a lot about my country, which is divided between tradition and modernity.” He points out that it “speaks of a conflict that brings the two worlds face to face, as well as a tradition that is both the country’s strength and weakness.”

But even before the film’s title appears on the screen, we are given two elements that transcend the material time frame and remind us of eternity. The words, “Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown” (Henry IV, Part 2) invoke the Shakespearean atmosphere that permeates the film. The Queen is sitting for a formal portrait, as a television report showing enthusiastic Labor posters just prior to the election sparks a conversation between the Queen and her portraitist. Elizabeth says she would like the experience of casting a vote, just once, “for the sheer joy of being partial,” while the painter replies, “Well Ma’am, it is your government”—an exchange that initiates the film’s ‘official’ beginning. A musical flourish from Alexander Desplat’s magnificent soundtrack accompanies an upward pan of the Queen seated in formal regalia. As the film’s title, ‘The Queen,’ appears on the black screen behind her, Elizabeth turns in full close-up and looks directly at the camera (and thus the spectators). And this, in fact, provides the controlling metaphor of the film: this
image will come to life, will address us on an intimate level, and will make us experience the complicated human realities and contradictions involved in being both public image and private person. It also reminds us, right from the start, that portrayal in our time is less a matter of paint than of celluloid.

One way the film reveals these realities and contradictions is through its behind-the-scenes account of activities in two competing corridors of power—the vibrantly modernizing maneuvers of a hugely popular Baby Boomer Prime Minister and the centuries-old traditions of established regal protocol and custom—each attempting to deal with the unprecedented public grief evoked by Diana’s death. While we are given numerous examples of Blair’s uncanny ability to capture and mediate the national sentiment through the appropriate technology, the bulk of the conflict is played across the person of the Queen in her most haunting private moments and inner struggles.

In order to achieve what must ultimately be a fictional account of actual events, screenwriter Peter Morgan (cowriter also of The Last King of Scotland) drew from extensive research, media publications, interviews (both on and off the record), actual public figures and private assessments, news footage, and other sources to interweave the imagined and the real into a believable texture of history. He was intrigued by what he calls “this global sharing moment through television,” which was at once unflinchingly public and devastatingly personal, and for this reason the film gives television a central role. We are constantly reminded of the mediated nature of what we take for reality, as the repeated intercutting of footage from BBC World News, CNN, ITV, GMTV, and global news organizations relays to the Royal family, the Blairs, advisors on both sides, the depicted public, and, of course to us, the viewers, the tumultuous history (in familiar, iconic images) leading up to the crash and the halting but inevitable progress toward an appropriate and respectful homage to the Princess of Wales.

The film has availed itself of a team eminently qualified to tell this story. Producers Christine Langan and Andy Harries, along with director Frears and screenwriter Morgan, who had already made The Deal, a 2003 Channel 4 British television drama that provided a revealing look at Tony Blair’s assumption of leadership of the Labor Party that led to his landslide election as Prime Minister. A gifted filmmaker uncannily attuned to the often invisible nuances of human experience (his credits include Dirty Pretty Things, Dangerous Liaisons, My Beautiful Laundrette, Mrs. Henderson Presents, The Grifters, Prick Up Your Ears), Frears teamed up with Morgan when Langan and Harries approached him with a second project about another British institution, the Royal Family. They turned to Diana’s death, which, according to Langan “was an obvious choice... Diana had been a great cause of

The man with the cheshire-cat grin:

Michael Sheen as Tony Blair in The Queen.
especially for her devotion to her two boys,” further stating that “there are lessons to be drawn from her life and from the extraordinary and moving reaction to her death...” The Queen’s acknowledgment of her respect for Diana is highly significant. Unable to either obtain the footage or reconstruct it, Frears has expressed regret about not including the unprecedented moment when the Queen actually bowed to the passing coffin, which he found to be “very, very moving...so dignified and graceful.”

While many of the critics (and even some of those involved directly with its production) seem to feel that the film is at least partly about the Queen’s struggle to adapt to a new media-saturated age that confounds her, Elizabeth II has been uncannily adept at utilizing all forms of media even before her reign, as her youthful radio addresses attest. It was the twenty-seven-year-old Elizabeth who agreed, “after much heart-searching,” that the Coronation ceremony in Westminster Abbey could be broadcast on television. In 1969 the Queen invited the cameras into her home for the first television film about the royal family, which was made to coincide with the investiture of the Prince of Wales. In the film, Prince Charles is portrayed sympathetically by Alex Jennings, who is able to evoke all the conflict, despair, and ambivalent confusion experienced by the real Prince Charles upon learning of Diana’s death. And in 1977, the Queen’s Silver Jubilee was declared “an unalloyed triumph” in the words of The Evening Standard, as millions of her subjects came out to greet her in the streets, “showing a depth of feeling few realized existed.” In light of this particular history, then, what The Queen does demonstrate, in fact, is the Monarch’s carefully considered efforts—in the face of the crass and tragic frenzy that the media had become—to bring her own media savvy into the new era with the respect and dignity that her position deserves.

Another misconception that the film unwittingly delates centers on Balmoral, the Queen’s summer residence in Scotland, that critics repeatedly referred to as a kind of fortress to which the Windsors retreated as a way of avoiding the responsibility of public mourning. In fact, the Scottish castle has existed “for centuries of tradition and with whom she identifies. It is only later, as she is finally preparing to meet her grieving public, when she learns the stag has been killed; the trophy belongs to an investment banker, out for sport on a neighboring estate. When she momentarily delays her journey to see the spoils for herself, she notices that the stag had only been wounded; she is told he had to be followed for miles before he was finally killed. “Let’s hope he didn’t suffer too much,” she sighs.

The parallels are obvious; Diana, the most hunted woman in the world, stalked as prey by image-hungry photographers and finally killed, is described as such by her brother immediately after he hears the news of her death and then subsequently in his eulogy, greeted with the unprecedented applause that was the explosion of collective grief. As if to reinforce this subtext of the hunt, the film precedes the car crash that kills the Princess of Wales and Dodi Al Fayed with a brilliantly-orchestrated montage of racing motorcycles, the Mercedes, Paris monuments, and archival footage of paparazzi pursuing Diana through the years. This culminates in the famous footage of Diana’s hand covering an intrusive camera lens in Switzerland, where she pleads with the press to leave her children alone, and then a shocking black screen is punctuated by a loudly ringing telephone. This is the pursuit from the stag’s point of view, recast in the vocabulary of modern media and the woman’s image.

The Queen makes her peace with the stag in the name of centuries of tradition, recognizing that the antlers, symbol of the kill, have adorned royal hallways since the monarchy began. Diana and Queen Elizabeth are shown as linked through a deep devotion to the public and a compassionate understanding of the people as well as the duties of royalty. Portraits of both Elizabeth and Diana bracket the film—Elizabeth’s in the image that opens the film and Diana’s in the image of her smiling face, winking out from her brimmed hat, that ends the funeral sequence and the week that has led up to it. Diana and Queen Elizabeth are the only two Royals who seem to have expressed, understood, and publicly displayed a sense of the respect and dignity that the monarchy requires.

Another larger framing device involves the meetings between the Queen and Tony Blair. During her meeting with Blair that closes the film Elizabeth observes: “You’re afraid that some day, quite suddenly without warning [the loss of public confidence] can happen to you. And it will.” Tony Blair’s lesson in impending vulnerability teaches him humility, as his ambition is now tempered by a recognition of the hard choices that make popularity ephemeral (witness Blair’s disastrous decision to align with George Bush over Iraq). At the film’s end, this is what the Queen’s sunny walk with Blair in the garden amid the yapping corgis signifies. The distance traced between the film’s bookend meetings of the Monarch and her Prime Minister articulates a necessarily modern and self-aware vision of monarchy in the age of democracy, while reminding us of the awesome power of the popular will.

—Sandy Flitterman-Lewis