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Place and Space in TV Fiction on Margaret Thatcher

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Introduction

Among consensual TV productions are docudramas that combine History and the biography of important figures, that is to say historic figures. These programmes are closely associated with the project of public service broadcasting, even though they are not necessarily broadcast on state channels and correspond to information combined with the reprocessing of what is called mainstream popular culture. Famous politicians and political figures in particular are seen as elements of cohesion, likely to generate national unity. Many prominent politicians have, to some degree, been used to this end. The idea is to get people to apprehend the notion of nation as one of family, so as to envisage the figure of the leader as a father figure that would unite the population, as a figure to be praised or murdered.

Among such prominent figures there is, of course, Margaret Thatcher, who has been the subject of many filmic productions of different genres. Those chosen for this study are *The Falklands Play*[1] and *Thatcher: the Final Days*[2] mainly because they both belong to the docudrama genre and as such were originally designed for television.[3] *The Falklands Play* focuses on the Falkland's crisis and the several talks held between the British war cabinet and the US Administration as to whether to negotiate or go to war. *Thatcher: the Final Days* focuses on the description of the Prime Minister's last days as Premier as well as on her relationships with members of the Conservative Party, some of whom were then plotting for her defeat.

From a theoretical point of view, these fiction films will be approached from the notion of space and the impact it has on perception. The aesthetics of drama needs to be tackled since it implies closeness and identification, processes that raise questions when dealing with a divisive personality like Margaret Thatcher.

Locating drama

Docudrama compounds forms of empathy. The first is of course due to its filmic and fictional dimensions as explained by Christian Metz in *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*: "The ordinary framings are finally felt to be non-framings: I espouse the film-maker's look (without which no cinema would be possible), but my consciousness is not aware of it".[4] The second corresponds to the use of documentary features which are designed to bear out the credentials and so make it easier for viewers to feel empathy since what is presented is supposed to be true.

Places are essential to achieve credence. Unlike literature which does not need to provide much information on space so as to focus either on dialogue or on psychology, films abound with information on space. In filmic representations place is obtrusive; it is unavoidable and even in the case of close-ups the information provided can almost be indefinite. Whatever objects a film offers viewers, the units selected can always be split and divided into smaller units, especially in documentaries where the setting abounds in details which the filmmaker cannot completely control. This is particularly true of extreme long shots which are a very good example of the capacity of films to provide an indefinite amount of information. Yet in fiction films, unlike in documentaries, all the elements provided are meaningful. The choice and the arrangement of elements are significant and all combine to help the viewer understand the message the filmmaker wants to convey. The diegetic space is built on mental constructions which the viewer is led to decipher when watching the film.

The very first images of docudramas are often of great importance and they provide information about the outcome of the narrative. In docudramas these images

are deeply anchored to existing environments, the strong impact of which creates the referential illusion, that is to say the confusion between the referent and the signified.[5]

The use of existing places and settings right from the very beginning is a current trope of docudramas, a feature that is designed to anchor fiction to the real world. The realistic dimension of these images serves to create the filmic illusion. The involvement of the viewer is all the more important as the places chosen are realistic, the plot plausible and likely to be true, even though, as time progresses the importance of realism gradually vanishes and the filmic illusion carries the viewer away, so that eventually one begins to believe in very unrealistic and improbable developments. Both coherence and cohesion prove useful to achieve a sense of realism.[6]

Recreating original places so as to stage historic events is part and parcel of the process of re-enactment, which is typical of docudrama. Re-enactment relies on coherence more than on authenticity and the staging of past events, rather than the use of authentic documents, is designed to achieve fictional coherence. Using authentic documents like archival footage may break the suspension of disbelief required by cohesion. Yet, imitation is verisimilitude; it is not authenticity which, for some, can be problematic when dealing with a type of work that purports to tell what really happened.

Places greatly help in the creation of a myth though it is the interaction between places and characters that contributes to the construction of historic figures. Places imbue the historic-figure-to-be with a stature. In docudramas, the realistic dimension of the place is designed to objectify what is said and also to be evocative; the purpose is to enable viewers to recognize the place itself and have in mind all the values connected with it (beauty, power, etc.). The analysis of the various places in which the drama unfolds must be carried out with the characters themselves in mind: the ecology of the docudrama gradually settles, involving both places and characters.

Place vs space

In *Thatcher: the Final Days*, the very first seconds of the first sequence show the protagonist, the character of Margaret Thatcher, seated in the back of an official car and being driven to a supposed 10 Downing St. Private and public spheres overlap in this scene: she is trapped in a confined space and is no longer in control of the situation. Conversely, in *The Falklands Play*[7], she is portrayed as a leader who knows how and where to steer the country and she is going to rally all the parties involved in the talks around her. Her first appearance on screen is anticipated: the sound of strutting feet is heard which is immediately followed by the entrance of an authoritative figure, barging into an official room where a member of her Cabinet is waiting for her. This behavioural approach focuses on psychological traits which combine to present an authoritative figure.

For André Gardies, there is more to place than "the three dimensional environment in which objects are" and from his point of view this definition fails to differentiate space from place. In order to achieve this distinction, André Gardies borrows from Ferdinand de Saussure's distinction between langue and parole[8] by deciding that "place" is the textual manifestation of a latent order which is that of "space" or, to borrow David B. Clarke's statement "space confronts place like the virtual to the actual".[9]

In the selected films, institutions are referred to through images of old and precious items of furniture that represent, for instance, the enduring nature of democracy. These remain on the premises of 10 Downing St., while Prime Ministers come and go. Likewise, docudramas are anchored in existing and easily identified loci, the purpose of which is to provide credit to the narrative. Places like 10 Downing St. and the British parliament have more than a dramatic function: they act as evidential elements. Whenever the filmmaker refers to them, his purpose is for the fiction film to be endowed with a documentary dimension which, in turn, gives credit to the narrative. The divide between fiction and reality tends to become blurred and what is fake, or fiction, is used to unveil the reality of what politics was

like at the time. It is also an opportunity to underscore the filmmaker's point of view on the way politics was conducted in those days.

For André Gardies, "space" is textual, that is to say a self-contained system which emerges from a specific film itself. He extends his opposition to cognition and perception, space being cognition, while place is perception. Adopting this approach, the viewer knows the places referred to and everybody knows a little about 10 Downing St. and the British Parliament, yet what is at stake in these films is not so much the places themselves but what is going on there as the loci where politics unfolds.

Space and time

Yet, in films there is more to both place and space, neither being meaningful without time. In fiction films there is space-time continuity, continuity resulting from editing which effaces the pro-filmic. From Dai Vaughan's point of view, film is "the projection of a hermetic reality, a closed diegetic world defined only by the narrative which it calls into being". The film diegesis claims to represent the pro-filmic world, though it does not because it rests on an assemblage of fragments. Fiction films combine the realistic and the evocative dimensions of places, their realistic dimension being designed to objectify what is said while the evocative dimension being designed to remind viewers of all the values connected with it.

Though place is essential in defining meaning in filmic representation, it does not suffice and meaning is achieved by the heuristic confrontation between space, speech, characters and also editing. Like filmic time, which corresponds to the condensation of an indefinite amount of time into a span of approximately ninety minutes, filmic place is composed of symbolic elements the assemblage of which is only designed to foster meaning about the characters.

Concerning fiction films with a strong documentary intentionality, like docudramas, or fiction films which have equal status both as fiction and documentary, attention should be drawn to the twofold nature of the cinematographic place: on the one hand that which is shown in the shots and on the

other hand that which the viewer knows to exist outside the diegesis. André Gardies discriminates between the "here", or that which is visible on the screen, from the "there", or that which is contiguous to the screen and the elsewhere: the space that is neither visible nor contiguous to the screen but that is suggested by a character or evoked through sound and dialogue. This demonstration is backed by Serge Daney who declares that "cinema is not the art of images, but the act of showing", an idea that André Gardiès approves of when he states that films are the result of a narrative form combining four different levels: the filmic, the diegetic, the narrative and finally the level of the viewer's perception.

Consequently, in films places are always only partially represented and the perception every viewer has of the place results from the dialectic juxtaposition between what is known about it, what is expected and what is really shown. Among the most relevant examples that can be found in the selected fiction films is of course the image of Margaret Thatcher as the then-new figure of Boudicca, the all-time warrior, as indicated in the very first seconds of *Thatcher: the Final Days* when her car passes by the Westminster Bridge bronze statue of the Celtic warrior-queen.[10]

The aesthetics of biopics

Given that the purpose of docudrama is to inform the widest possible audience on topical issues in a fictional way, tensions arise between the actual places and their evocative power, between their arrangement in real life and how the filmmaker chooses to represent them. This is particularly true for prominent figures who evolve in well-known places, like politicians, one such person being Margaret Thatcher as represented in *The Falklands Play* and *Thatcher: the Final Days*. What is specific about these two films, and more particularly about political docudrama as a genre, is that scenes often take place indoors. As perfect examples of the genre, these docudramas often alternate close shots on special features, especially facial ones, and medium shots designed to show the place.

The dramatic dimension in docudramas frequently gives viewers a suffocating feeling and reinforces tension already suggested by the fact that films on Margaret

Thatcher often take place in the loci of power. This is particularly accurate regarding fiction films on decisive moments, such as the days which led to the declaration of war against Argentina and also the days that led to Margaret Thatcher's political downfall. The tension that is born out of the confrontations between individuals cooped up in a single room, the difficulty for the leader of the nation to make decisions and the several hesitations and reversals that take place, all these elements contribute to the dramatic tension of the film. It is increased by the setting, an enclosed space, likely to generate a feeling of anxiety, of claustrophobia and likely to exacerbate tensions.

Another element connected to confinement, as a feature which defines drama, is the capacity of characters to be talkative, to fill space with words, a feature heightened by the propensity of docudrama to be a loquacious genre. Talking is about being convincing and Margaret Thatcher would excel at getting people to adhere to her point of view. In *Thatcher: the Final Days* and *The Falklands Play* she fills space with her presence, built on her capacity to control her interlocutors and steer the course of conversations. *The Falklands Play* provides several examples in which she initiates the conversation, interrupts ministers and US envoys alike so as to redirect the conversation. An apt instance of this is when, during the talks on the future of the Falklands, she starts behaving as if she were a schoolmistress. She fills the room with terror: she gives the ones around her the feeling that she is surrounded by children whom she chides for being too afraid to speak their mind. Similarly, in *Thatcher the Final Days* the stress is put on Sir Geoffrey Howe's frustration: being too often bullied and contradicted he eventually decides to resign.

When confronted with a character of Margaret Thatcher's stature, places, whether small or big, do not matter and her capacity to force attention and enforce respect, if not agreement, is at work even in a commodious place like the House of Parliament. No place is too spacious for her. Unlike other speakers who speak to deliver a message only, she gives her audience more than just sound and meaning. She provides them with a presence and her words are emphasized by moments of silence that she carefully underlines. Her speeches are punctuated as if they were

rhymed songs and even a huge building like the House of Parliament reverberates with her words. She always steals the show and is able to fill small and large places with her presence. This is very unusual with docudramas which, on average, stage actions in domestic environments. The second part of *The Project*, for instance, Peter Kosminsky's 2002 docudrama about the New Labour, stages scenes in large official buildings where official investigations are held or scenes where official decisions are discussed by the public. Yet, on no occasion, are any of these scenes centred on one person only, someone who, like Margaret Thatcher, has a monopoly over speech and the capacity to fill space with her own presence only.

The other point that is touched upon whenever references are made to official buildings or buildings that can easily be identified is the association that is made in the viewers' mind with official speeches. The words uttered by Margaret Thatcher in *Thatcher: the Final Days*, when she is described as being isolated within her own party by her position on Europe, are official ones. It is a speech she delivered in the House of Parliament on October 30th, 1990; a key moment in recent history that can easily be found on the internet[11]. Envisaged from the point of view of docudrama, what is at stake in such a scene is the testimonial, though fictional, dimension of these images that aim to testify on recent issues, which is the purpose of political docudramas.

The message that is conveyed by these fiction films does not rest so much on the credit provided by the elements put forward as it relies on coherence. Consequently, filmic places are not designed to resemble their real-world counterparts but are meant to symbolize them so as to achieve coherence and plausibility. Places, characters and actions are archetypal and designed to stand for reality more than represent reality. While places are identified through symbolical elements, the people referred to in these fiction films are never lookalikes and Margaret Thatcher in particular has been embodied by actresses totally different from an aesthetic point of view. Whether Sylvia Sym or Patricia Hodge, they both achieve credibility as the narrative unfolds and the viewer gradually becomes accustomed to their impersonations. Figurative representation is not something that is desirable in docudramas and putting too much emphasis on resemblance would

mean focusing the viewer's attention on external features to achieve credit while actually credit rests on the coherence of the point of view that is put forward. That is the main lesson that is to be learnt from docudrama and which can be applied to most political fiction films on television. Representation is substitution with features that allow a character to be classified within a type, a type which in the case of Margaret Thatcher is, among others, one that is jingoistic.

Space and politics

Vision is division. That is particularly true for Margaret Thatcher who is described as having high conceptions of her nation and of her role. Consequently, she has a vision which she follows and which renders her very divisive. She had socially and politically divisive policies and that is what fiction films show in the way she moves and behaves and the way she occupies places. In both films studied, she often moves quickly and energetically from one end of a room to the other, she has a brisk way of moving about without taking into consideration those around her.

10 Downing St is shown to be a place both public, in so far as it is official, and private. It is public because it is associated with ministerial functions and private because it is a place where highly emotional moments are experienced, moments of happiness, of sadness and of despair. In *The Falklands Play*, Margaret Thatcher is shown having moments of despondency, and she is even shown to cry about the possible consequences of the Falklands war, or more specifically about her loneliness when it comes to making decisions.

The same is true of *Thatcher: the Final Days* with scenes in her hotel room in Paris where she learns that she has been alienated from her own party by party members, Michael Heseltine among others. Often, fiction verges on melodrama, and this is particularly true of docudrama: there is a gradual disappearance of the public in favour of the private and slowly the politician disappears to reveal the individual, the ordinary human being who is moved, and in this case upset, by what is going on.

Paris is equated with alienation and distance which are associated in these fiction films with relativity, with detachment and with the slackening of the Prime

Minister's grip over reality. In the same way, the US envoys, because they move to London to carry out diplomatic talks, become more permeable to the British Prime Minister's point of view and fail to impose their plan for reconciliation which would mean siding with the Argentinean government. Distance dissolves principles and that is why Margaret Thatcher is hardly even shown outside London and the official loci of power. She is endowed with power and with the strength of an unflinching personality which in *The Falklands Play* is an asset while in *Thatcher: the Final Days* it becomes a liability. In the former, while others around her lose sight of real issues because they evolve in different and foreign environments, she is the one who remains in the loci of power in London and never loses sight of her targets. In *Thatcher the Final Days*, on the contrary, she is more flexible and readier to listen to the advice of others, even though she still does not really listen; it is this stubbornness, this hubristic personality that leads her to her downfall, her trip to France being the opportunity for her opponents to strike the final blow.

Place and performance

Of course, whenever the character of Margaret Thatcher appears on screen it is always easily identified and her body rather than being exactly the one of the then Prime Minister bespeaks fortitude and strength of mind. In real life, her gait, her poses oozed resolution and determination, something filmmakers aptly captured and into which they tapped right from the very first images. The focus is on her steely look with her iconic hairdo always done with rigour and her bag held firmly as if it were a portfolio. The signal that is sent through these images is that people can rest assured that she is going to take care of the political and social affairs as she is taking care of her bag and its contents, for better or for worse, depending on one's political leaning.

Representation is not synonymous with similarity and representation corresponds to the capacity for actors to act out some characteristics of the model, those which are considered relevant and the most salient. These are the characteristics that are most easily identified by viewers. They can either be

linguistic, behavioural or physical. Actors are not expected to look like the characters they portray, rather their aim is to represent or embody a type as explained by Nelson Goodman: "a picture, to represent an object, must be a symbol for it, stand for it, refer to it and no degree of resemblance is sufficient to establish the requisite relationship of reference".[12]

Representation is not necessarily physical likeness and connotation stands at the core of it. This notion is central to an analysis of the relationships between signifier and signified. Two apt examples are provided by *The Falklands Play*. The first one is when she is described *in absentia*: the tone is set by the place, supposedly a room in an official building, but also and mainly by the noise of her quick steps against the floor in a way that is both very feminine but also very virile. She does not appear on screen but her presence is already conjured by the distinctive sound of her footsteps. These elements are sufficient to define her as the one who is going to lead. Her resounding footsteps suffice to indicate energy and determination. She is not only the Prime Minister, taking possession of the place over which she rules, but she is also Margaret Thatcher; the one who is going to stand firm against the opposition and the one who is going to make sure that her point of view eventually prevails. Consequently, she is more than a public figure and it is her personality that comes to light here: private and public combine and mingle to create the atmosphere.

Likewise private and public overlap in a scene of the same film to denote courage and perseverance in the face of adversity: after the first phase of discussion with the American envoys, she leads everyone to an adjacent room where a meal has been prepared for them. Before sitting down at the table, they enjoy beverages and they talk in a desultory way when, suddenly, the character of Margaret Thatcher leads Alexander Haig, the US Secretary of State, towards paintings representing Lord Nelson and the Duke of Wellington[13]: she then starts comparing the situation before the conflict in the Falklands Islands to the Napoleonic wars so directly comparing herself to Wellington. This scene may never have happened, and it may have been inspired by witnesses' accounts. It is designed to show that she would never

surrender, she would never relent and even when socialising she would harp on the necessity for the US envoys to back her positions.

In all the examples chosen, places are clearly identified through details (conference tables, paintings, doorsteps, parliamentary benches, etc.) and once again each place is meant to represent the spirit of the institution rather than being its exact replica.

Closeness and identification

Closed spaces help create the feeling of identification. Empathy is generated by the proximity to the characters, which is increased by the filmic techniques. Confined spaces and extensive dialogues, which are typical of drama, are conducive to it. Drama is also connected with secrecy, confinement, with the idea of the happy few being allowed to have access to the locus of power. This fly-on-the-wall technique provides a sensation of being there and of being one of them.

What is specific about political docudramas is that they transcend the boundaries of politics to rally a large viewership. A process of identification is started that relies on the constant movement back and forth between reality, as afforded by the documentary dimension of docudrama, and projection, as afforded by fiction, a feature explained by Elisabeth Cowie: "Objectivity opens onto subjectivity through our imaginative capacity as we slip between identification and disidentification and, perhaps, back again".[14]

One of the consequences of this feature is that, on average, filmic representations, especially fictional ones, lead to positive portraitures, the positive points being recalled and the negative ones being condoned, a phenomenon caused by empathy. For viewers, there lies a confrontation between, on the one hand, what they know and believe about the topic and the characters and, on the other hand, what they are ready to believe about unknown facts and realities. This is particularly true for political docudramas: sympathisers only, those who feel close to the political message conveyed, tend to watch this type of film and no one would go as far as forcing oneself to watch a one-and-a-half hour programme about someone they feel

averse to and that may challenge their convictions in the end. This psychological feature bears out the principle that watching a film is tantamount to accepting to have one's mind "imprinted" and so to feeling compassion for the film's protagonists.

Fiction means empathy and lessened opposition, not to say understanding and even agreement which explains why watching a film about one's opponent is very rare, as if it meant running the risk of contamination. Sylvia Syms, who portrayed Margaret Thatcher in *Thatcher: the Final Days*, declared that when she was offered the role she was not enthusiastic about it and she almost turned it down[15] while at the end of the shooting she had grown into liking her, though it remains unclear whether she had grown into liking the character of Margaret Thatcher or Margaret Thatcher herself. It is here, in this tension between fiction and reality, between facts and affects, between what is known about famous characters and what is learnt about the reasons for their behaviour, where docudrama lies.

Inevitably, fiction is elegiac because it means closeness and in docudramas, politicians are not people but archetypes, paragons. Paradoxically, the more they are archetypal, the harder identification happens and no one is really a paragon of any virtue. The more human they are, the more identification is possible. Yet, to be heroes of fiction, politicians must possess exceptional qualities that represent the reality of politics in new and original ways. The ordinary allows for identification while the divine points to sublimation and admiration.

The heroic stature some politicians possess gives them a sacrificial dimension which testifies to their involvement. From a filmic point of view, it means tapping into these exceptional qualities to create a hero, a positive figure who belongs to a long history of leaders with a prophetic dimension. Margaret Thatcher in *The Falklands Play* stands as the prophet of this new and victorious Britain. She stands as the embodiment of Britishness and as the modern recipient of all the values connected with it. The idea is to remember collectively positive moments of the nation and admire and copy the salient features of the heroic figure associated with them.

Conclusion

As stated by Sylvia Sym, coming closer to a character, whether for acting or to get to know them better, means closeness and empathy which inevitably leads to understanding and even approbation. This process is increased by the mechanism inherent to fiction, drama and, in particular, to biopics.

Biopics are often melodramatic which is synonymous with trivialization: famous characters, though endowed with exceptional qualities, are presented in such a way as to generate identification. All this is conducive to an acquiescent vision of the historic figure which brings in its wake commentaries that eulogize the leader. As far as dramatic representations of Margaret Thatcher are concerned, *Thatcher the Final Days* and *The Falklands Play* enable viewers to have a comprehensive understanding of the historic figure she was. They bring nuances and eschew the caricatures she was too often a victim of.

Yet, both filmmakers also eschewed the main issues connected with these moments in Margaret Thatcher's life, namely the Falklands war and her political destitution. How far was her decision to go to war wise and right, especially in the light of a now globalized world which might allow for the independence of small but wealthy territories? Even though the attack from opponents inside the Conservative Party was perfidious, was it not right in view of the Prime Minister's alienation from some of her closest allies, like Geoffrey Howe?

Docudramas have the advantage of raising such questions among a large part of the population, and on prime time television. They pave the way for other genres to explore these issues and bring answers.

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[1] *The Falklands Play* is a film by Michael Samuels, released by BBC 4 in 1987.

[2] *Thatcher: the Final Days* is film by Tim Sullivan, released by ITV in 1991.

[3] *Margaret*, James Kent's 2009 film, has been ruled out because it is considered, on many counts, as a rehash of *Thatcher: the Final Days*.

[4] Metz, p. 55.

[5] "Dès lors, en tant que signes, ces images affirment leur double statut : iconiques, en ce qu'elles me permettent de reconnaître [Madrid] (principe de ressemblance), indices, en ce qu'elles sont la trace chimico-optique d'une réalité existant par ailleurs […] les sons et les images entretiennent un rapport fondamentalement indiciel avec leur référent." [Therefore, as signs, these images assert their dual status: iconic, in that they allow one to recognize [Madrid] (by principle of resemblance), clues, in that they are chemical-optical traces of another reality [...] the sounds and images maintain a fundamental, indexed rapport with their referent. (Gardies, 1993, p. 133, my translation)].

[6] For the differences between coherence and cohesion, see Halliday, M. A. K. & Ruqaiya Hassan, *Cohesion in English*. London: Longman, 1976.

[7] *The Falklands Play* was broadcast on March 10th, 2006, 24 years after the end of the conflict on BBC 4 a channel available to households with digital equipment only, which substantially limited the impact of the film on the population. Originally, it was meant as an authentic dramadoc with, by assignment, the treatment of the Falklands conflict as a current event. However, by postponing its broadcasting until 2006, more than 20 years after Ian Curteis, the filmmaker, had suggested the idea to Alasdair Milne, the BBC director-general, the BBC chose to undermine the original intention: offering a political fiction to the widest possible audience.

[8] "Tout comme, suivant la distinction saussurienne, la parole est l'actualisation de la langue, le lieu peut être considéré comme l'actualisation de certains traits du système spatial." [Just as, according to Saussure's distinction, speech is the realisation of language, place can be considered to be the realisation of certain traits of a spatial system." (Gardies & Bessalel, p. 92, my translation)].

[9] Clarke, Crawford Pfannhauser & Doel, p. 186.

[10] In *The Falklands Play* she is compared to another warrior: Lord Wellington.

[11] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U2f8nYMCO2I, accessed on July 10th, 2014.

[12] Goodman, p. 5.

[13] She identified herself with Wellington (known as the iron Duke).

[14] Cowie, p. 91.

[15] "Acting with Facts: Performing the Real on Stage and Screen, 1990-2010", conference, Department of Film, Theatre & Television Studies, University of Reading, Reading, England, September 1st–3rd, 2010.

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