



UNIVERSIDAD DE SALAMANCA

FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA

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Trabajo de Fin de Grado

A Critical Approach to *The Crown's*
Portrayal of Princess Diana's 1995 BBC
Interview

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Supervisor: Marta Bernabéu Lorenzo

Signature

I would like to dedicate my thesis to my grandmother: wherever you are, I hope you look upon me with pride. Every step I take will always be dedicated to you.

To my parents, for your unwavering support and encouragement which have enabled me to fulfill my dreams. Thank you from the depths of my heart.

To Marta, for your constant help and dedication. This journey would not have been possible without you.

And finally, to my university friends, because of the great support we have been for each other during these years. You are my chosen family.

Abstract

The present work aims to show, by exploring Diana's role in her famous 1995 BBC interview and its depiction in the series, how *The Crown* has influenced the cultural narratives created around the British royal family nowadays. After a brief examination of the BBC's history in connection to the royal family, the subsequent discussion delves into reporter Martin Bashir's way of obtaining the so-called "revenge interview", of which, thanks to recent investigations such as the Dyson Report, new information has been released, such as the fact that he forged bank statements and lied to the Princess of Wales. In order to critically approach Diana's interview and its place in the popular imaginary, episode 8 of season 5 of *The Crown* will be tackled, serving as a departing point for analysing not only Diana's role in the interview, but also her portrayal in the entire series, and to determine the extent to which viewers' opinions are influenced by the fictional dramatisation of events and characters.

Keywords: *The Crown*, Princess Diana, British Monarchy, Cultural Studies, Television.

Resumen

El presente trabajo tiene como objetivo mostrar, mediante un estudio del papel de Diana en la entrevista y la representación en la serie, cómo *The Crown* influye en las narrativas culturales creadas sobre la familia real británica en la actualidad. Una vez examinada brevemente la historia de la BBC en relación con la monarquía, el trabajo profundiza en la forma en que el reportero Martin Bashir obtuvo la conocida “entrevista de la venganza”. De hecho, gracias a investigaciones recientes como el Informe Dyson, se ha difundido nueva información, sabiendo ahora que falsificó extractos bancarios y mintió a la Princesa de Gales. Con el fin de abordar críticamente la entrevista de Diana y su lugar en el imaginario popular, se abordará el episodio 8 de la quinta temporada de la serie *The Crown*, que servirá como punto de partida para analizar no sólo el papel de Diana en la entrevista, sino también su representación en la toda la serie, y determinar en qué medida las opiniones de la audiencia se ven influenciadas por la dramatización ficticia de acontecimientos y personajes.

Palabras clave: *The Crown*, Princesa Diana, Monarquía Británica, Estudios Culturales, Televisión.

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1. Introduction

The nineties in the United Kingdom began with the resignation of Margaret Thatcher (1979-1990), who gave way to John Major's government until 1997, when Tony Blair won the elections. In 1991, the Internet reached the public, and a technological revolution began, as well as a musical one, with artists such as The Spice Girls or Radiohead, belonging to the so-called "Britpop". Nonetheless, it was not all joy: the 1990s were years of social and political unrest, "show[ing] that many of the policies put in place during the 1990s laid the groundwork for increasingly unequal societies and, in turn, the political explosions of the 2010s that rocked Britain, America and the globe." (Thorp)

Concerning the monarchy, the nineties were undoubtedly the most difficult years for Queen Elizabeth II. In her annual Christmas message, she herself declared the year 1992 as "annus horribilis", as she had to face the divorce of three of her children: firstly, the divorce of Prince Andrew and Sarah Ferguson, then, Princess Anne and Captain Mark Philips', and finally that of Prince Charles with Lady Diana Spencer. To make matters worse, Windsor Palace caught fire days before her 50th wedding anniversary; and in 1997 the royal family had to deal with Diana's death, which was the most viewed televised event in the history of the United Kingdom. As Kathryn Powley claims, "for perhaps the first time in her life, the masses were not on the Queen's side" (Powley). Despite the adversities, the Queen's popularity managed to overcome this tumultuous period, renewing herself with the entry of the 2000s.

Netflix's *The Crown* (2016-2023), while inspired by real events, is a "fictional dramatization [that] tells the story of Queen Elizabeth II and the political and personal events that shaped her reign" (Morgan). The series extends the life of Queen Elizabeth II over six seasons, the last being released in 2023. Season five stands out for examining the nineties from the point of view of the monarchy in the years which the Queen "has been grappling with a rapidly changing culture, a challenging daughter-in-law and a restless husband" (Vivinetto). This season also tackles Princess Diana's *Panorama* interview and the impact it had on British society and the royal family. The interview, broadcasted in 1995 and titled "An Interview with HRH The Princess of Wales," forever changed the relationship between the monarchy and the tabloids, as well as the perception of the British monarchy.

The main aim of this work is to show the extent to which the series portrayal of the interview has been influenced and influences the cultural narratives around the royal

family and its role in British society. Moreover, the subsequent analysis will also determine the depiction of Diana's role in both the interview and the series, with the aim of examining the public perception of her character. To do so, the present paper will be organised in three main sections. The discussion will firstly examine the BBC's history in connection to the British monarchy in order to explore the relationship and influence between both institutions. Secondly, it will delve into the mysteries and the reality behind the *Panorama* Interview (1995), studying the different investigations carried out to discover how reporter Martin Bashir got the interview. Lastly, it will examine how the interview is portrayed in *The Crown*, providing a reflection on the influence the series has had in changing or upholding views of the British monarchy in our time.

2. BBC's History

On October 18, 1922, an Italian electronic engineer called Guglielmo Marconi, together with a group of amateur entrepreneurs, created the first public broadcast that would be called British Broadcasting Company, aimed to be an independent broadcast able "to educate, inform and entertain the whole nation, free from political interference and commercial pressure" ("The BBC Story"). The monarchy's first appearance on the BBC starred King George V in 1924 for the British Empire Exhibition. Three years later, in 1927, the British Broadcasting Company became the British Broadcasting Corporation thanks to a royal charter that is still maintained today. During the 1930s, the BBC expanded around the world with the creation of the Empire Service, in which King George V offered the first speech given by a monarch to the Empire on Christmas Day in 1932. In 1929, experiments with television led by John Logie Baird began, which culminated in the first TV program on high-definition television on November 2, 1936 on the BBC. This fact made it possible for viewers to watch the coronation of King George VI in 1937, although these broadcasts were only available to those who lived near London and had the resources to watch it.

In October 1940, Princesses Margaret and Elizabeth appeared for the first time on a BBC programme called *The Children's Hour*, speaking to all those children who had to leave their cities in times of war. In the 1950s, Great Britain entered the era of television thanks to an event that transformed the country and the world. The coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in June 1953 was a turning point in televised history, being the first time that audience levels surpassed those of the radio. Around 20 million people viewers tuned in

to witness the historic moment as the youthful Elizabeth was crowned at Westminster Abbey. It was also her who starred in another of the great moments of television and the monarchy, with the Queen's classic Christmas message televised for the first time in 1955. In that same year, the BBC witnessed the birth of its competition for the first time in history, with the creation of ITV (Independent Television). Although the BBC did not admit their decline, they created many new programs to curb the competition, including *Panorama* in 1953, the longest running news programme in the world.

Despite the continuous emergence of competitors, the BBC is a hallmark of British culture, as the monarchy is still considered to be. Their relationship has varied over the years, but could be characterised by a distinct sense of mutual respect between both institutions. The BBC has played a crucial role in the coverage of important events such as the coronation of Elizabeth II, royal weddings or state visits, which has contributed to reinforcing and expanding the image of the monarchy, creating a special connection with the public. What is more, the BBC showcases the UK to the world, creating also a sense of community among the British public. Therefore, it is not surprising to expect loyalty from one institution to the other. However, Diana's 1995 interview remains a point of conflict between the two, since the late Princess of Wales gave away a story that seemed to cast a negative light on the royal family.

3. Disentangling the Interview

On November 20, 1995, Queen Elizabeth, loyal to the BBC, turned on the television, although this time the scenario was different. On screen was Diana being interviewed by Martin Bashir, telling the British public about her experiences within the royal family. It was the first time that a woman belonging to the monarchy spoke for herself, shocking more than 23 million viewers by making public what was her private life. The days after the interview were flooded with newspapers, magazines and news programmes talking about the event. Among other issues, the Princess admitted her affair with James Hewitt, spoke about mental health and her experience with postpartum depression, and stated that there were three in her marriage, confirming what was already evident: the infidelity of Prince Charles with Camilla Parker-Bowles. It was known as the "revenge interview" because it is believed that she may have been motivated to give it in response to an interview that Prince Charles gave to Jonathan Dimbleby, reassuring his fidelity and loyalty to Diana, which, as it later turned out, was false.

In this context, Martin Bashir was a little-known BBC reporter, and that is why no one saw him capable of getting an interview with Princess Diana. The public was suspicious of Bashir's ways of getting that interview, since Diana was one of the most popular royals and about whom any information was most valued. That was the reason for the BBC television network to open an investigation in the year after the interview, 1996, concluding that Martin Bashir had falsified documents to frighten the Princess and secure the interview. However, "the interview...secured for Bashir a lucrative twenty-year career as a star reporter on ITV and several American television networks" (Hendy 563).

The days after the interview, contrary to her expectations, the most popular news was her affair with Hewitt. Not only her main message seemed to be vanished, but when she stated that the last outcome she wanted was to get divorced – due to the possible impact on the custody of her children –, she, along with Charles, received a letter from Elizabeth II requesting their divorce. In this scenario, Diana paid a high price for telling the truth. Nonetheless, her speech shocked the country and the entire world because she recounted the personal experiences that the general public could relate to, such as postpartum depression, bulimia or infidelities. Thousands of people managed to connect with her story in such a way that Diana received more than six thousand letters from women telling about their experiences and thanking her for having spoken out (McGown).

Moving on to recent history, 2020 was a crucial year for the story of this interview. The BBC reopened the investigation in the hands of a judge named Lord Dyson to investigate the methods Bashir used to obtain the interview. Diana's brother, Earl Spencer, testified that Bashir showed him documents that suggested palace workers being paid to spy on the Princess in order to gain Spencer's confidence. Bashir ended up admitting what he did, confessing that he asked Matt Wissler, a graphic designer, to forge the documents that led to the interview. Additionally, the investigation carried out by Dyson also blames the BBC for having covered up key facts in the 1996 investigation. As David Hendy puts it, "in giving Bashir the benefit of the doubt, and in not speaking to Spencer, the BBC's 1996 internal inquiry had been 'flawed and woefully ineffective.'" (564)

Despite this, the interview still stands as a transcendental moment in the history of the BBC and the British monarchy, whose relationship was strained since then. With the Dyson Report in 2020, Boris Johnson's team considered reforming the BBC, and even

some conservatives believed that it should be paid for like other platforms, due to the accusations made against the chain. The only thing that benefited the channel is that the investigation showed that “by 1995 Diana was probably willing and ready to give an interview to pretty well any respectable reporter, faked bank statements or not.” (Hendy 564)

Episode 8 of season 5 of *The Crown* begins on Guy Fawkes Night, when Martin Bashir arrived with his team in Kensington Palace to conduct the *Panorama* interview with Princess Diana. This episode shows the growing sense of suspicion that Diana developed about someone spying around her, and how Bashir used this to take advantage of her. In the episode, Diana informs Bashir that American television networks are fighting each other in order to get the interview, to which the interviewer assures her that it is only the BBC who is going to protect her (*The Crown*, Episode 8, Season 5). Bashir himself states in the episode that Diana was not doing the interview with him, but with the BBC. In addition, Diana tells the Queen the news of the interview and the episode ends with different members of the royal family and Bashir himself reacting to the programme.

As a matter of fact, the series has benefited from having been recorded once the “Dyson Report” came out in that they know more accurate information but, despite that, it fictionalises elements such as Bashir showing the Princess documents, when she herself stated that it did not happen (Skopeliti). There is an event especially presented in this episode that induces popular reflection: when Diana tells Queen Elizabeth II about her interview and she answers her: “The enemy you think we all are is a figment of your imagination” (*The Crown*, Episode 8, Season 5). This phrase epitomises perfectly the way in which Diana has been portrayed in the series: as if everything that happened to her in real life had been a product of her mind, and not the product of the mistreatment and rejection by the royal family.

Moreover, imagining what the life of the royals could have been like inside the palace has made viewers hooked on the series, being the monarchy thus a source of entertainment. The reality, as Hughes states, is that “the show makes us believe we know more about the royal family than we actually do and makes them seem more like celebrities” (BBC News). *The Crown* has had a great influence especially among younger generations, who are more prone to perceive events as real because of having their first contact with characters such as Prince Charles through the series. In depicting some of the most important events in the history of the British monarchy, the series has provided the

younger generation with a new perspective on royal members as well as on British history.

Notwithstanding, not all the characters have been humanised for the benefit of the series, since Diana is portrayed as “vengeful, immature, and materialistic, easily distracted by clothes and men, prone to cheap digs against Charles and inappropriately reliant on her elder son, William, for emotional support” (Hadadi). In real life, she communicated to Bashir in the interview her desire for a renewal of the monarchy through contact with the public, dedicating her life to charitable work. Despite this, the series focuses more on magnifying the figure of Charles and minimising that of Diana, painting a superficial and stereotyped image of her and her mental health. Even some friends of the Princess have assured that the series touched slightly on the interview but it did not really criticise the fraudulent strategies of Bashir. In fact, the interview is portrayed in the series as if Diana had made a big mistake telling her truth, showing the fictionalized reaction of the entire royal family in which we see the upset Queen Elizabeth and the then Prince Charles shouting at Diana. The image of Diana that the series seems to depict is that of a woman who decides to act against what is established out of rebellion and without a compelling reason.

From the first season onwards, the audience gets the same portrayal of Diana: one of frivolity and self-marginalisation towards a family that, as it is portrayed in the series, protected her like any other royal member. In fact, in this episode they show the Queen’s sister being compared to Diana for always feeling on the sidelines of royal history. In this same episode of the interview, “when the Queen says of Diana’s Panorama interview: ‘Haven’t we heard all this before — a thousand times?’, her rare bitterness feels like the series rolling its eyes at Diana’s complaints of being shut out and left to cope on my own” (Hadidi). At this point, the series uses the figure of the Queen to “hav[e] the final say and think[...] of someone other than herself, and Diana is painted with shame and regret.” (Hadidi)

Nevertheless, there are critics like Emma MacKenzie who believe the opposite, arguing that “Princess Diana is neither the villain nor the disempowered victim of the new series – and that plays a vital role in remembering her for who she was” (MacKenzie), who also claims that season five portrays Diana in its most accurate definition. On the other hand, there are those who believe that the series has harmed Diana’s public image and there are those who believe that the writers have done an accurate job. What is undeniable is that the series does not give the Princess the opportunity to bring out the most fun and carefree side of her, as it does to the rest of the characters, always keeping

Diana in a gloomy and dark environment, making young people see her as a one-sided character.

4. *The Crown's* Influence

The episode being tackled in this work, as it has been already mentioned, belongs to season 5, the most controversial season of the series. It was the first one to receive negative reviews and it was criticised for being close to a 'soap opera'. This is the reason why British politicians and critics demanded Netflix to add a disclaimer in season 5 signalling the fictionalisation of the events. Indeed, Netflix describes *The Crown* as a 'fictional dramatization' (McRady) but it defends the great job different journalists, biographers and historians made to document the events portrayed in the series. That is why they saw "no need to warn viewers that *The Crown* is a fictional drama and it has no plans to add a disclaimer to the popular series." (Bundel)

This is when the moral dilemma arises of to what extent it is appropriate to dramatise how the interview was obtained, knowing that it was one of the causes for Diana's death. There are some critics like Elise Taylor who believes that "this episode may, in fact, do the reverse [of "exaggerating history and damaging the real-life reputations of the royal family"] - informing its vast audience of the true and previously unknown methods used to secure the questionable interview" (*British Vogue*). This, in part, can be true, since the viewer learns through the episodes how Bashir managed to get the interview. On the other hand, this can be questioned, as, when the episode was released, the Dyson Report had confirmed methods which do not appear in the series, and there is clearly a dramatisation of the royal's response to the interview as we cannot certainly know what happens inside the Palace's doors. As of today, Buckingham Palace refuses to comment on *The Crown*. However, a month after the 1995 interview, the Palace partially transferred the rights to ITN for the Queen's annual Christmas message, always delivered to date by the BBC (Rotondi).

In fact, YouGov made a survey in which it proved that a majority of GenZ individuals believe the historical events represented in the series to be real (YouGov, 2022). Not knowing these events previously and/or not double-checking them may induce the younger generation to view the series as a documentary and not as the dramatisation it is. In another survey made also by YouGov, it was demonstrated that the support for the monarchy varies in 50% between the group of 18 to 24 and the group of people over

65 years old (YouGov, 2024). This shows that the British monarchy is less popular among younger generations, and *The Crown* may have had a powerful impact on them, having sweetened the history and personality of the royal members for the benefit of their public perception.

Netflix later released *The Crown: Behind the Streams* so as to determine the extent to which the series has had a cultural and economic impact at a global level. The research stated that half of Gen Z (from 18 to 24 year-olds) “say they have been inspired to learn more about 20th century British history after watching the show” (“*The Crown: Behind the Streams*”). The series has also boosted tourism in the UK (“*The Crown: Behind the Streams*”). Throughout the sixth season, the series has brought together more than 73 million viewers around the world, making history as one of the most watched on the network as well as one of the most criticised. This may be so because when the series was launched in 2016, it focused on the 1950s, when Elizabeth began to reign, with protagonists who are no longer alive today and viewers who may not remember that narrative. The problem has come with the latest seasons, reviewing the experiences of those who still rule and live today, making it clear that “the closer *The Crown* creeps to the present, the more historical distance is lost and the more contentious it becomes” (Hogan). It may be difficult to discern where facts end and fiction begins, especially concerning a monarchy characterised by their secrecy.

The Cambridge Dictionary describes parasocial relationships as “involving or relating to a connection between a person and someone they do not know personally, for example a famous person or a character in a book” (Cambridge Dictionary). The series gives an intimacy of a family whose members, excluding Diana, have always been private and distant with the public. Creating a cultural narrative around *The Crown* is what makes people view the actual institution as it is portrayed in the series. According to Robert Maclaran, “it gave [The Queen] an emotional side that people had not seen” (Coughlan and Rosney). Accordingly, *The Crown* has even been described as ‘royalist propaganda’ (Staples), as it has done more to connect with the public than most royals have in their lifetimes.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the series’ interpretation of the 1995 *Panorama* interview makes it clear that “*The Crown* was always at its strongest when it stayed closest to the historical events

in an accurate way. When it veers off into very dramatic, invented territory, it weakens itself...it sensationalises events that are already sensational enough” (Jones qtd. In Coughlan and Rosney). The series, mixing fiction with historical facts, has been a turning point in the history of the British monarchy, which has regenerated its image for younger viewers and brought the international population closer to the personal history of each one of the members of royalty.

In critically approaching the interview from a historical and cultural studies perspective, the discussion has showed how the series lacks truthfulness in its portrayal of the late Princess of Wales, who may be seen as a cold and rebellious woman, failing to convey the message that Diana sent to thousands of women who could relate to her situation. This, added to the great influence that the series has had especially among young generations, shows how *The Crown* has helped to create a narrative around Princess Diana in which she is characterised by her frivolity and apathy towards other members of the royal family. In this sense, the series serves as a political vehicle to regenerate the old image of the monarchy in the eyes of the incipient youth that consumes it. At the cost of improving the royal family’s image, it is possible that Diana’s story will be stained in the eyes of new generations, for whom the symbol of resistance against oppression will be somehow obscured.

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