

9

Lies about Real People

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There's not much new to say about dramadocs, except that there seem to be more of them about these days, and they seem to be more popular than ever before. They've even invaded the wide screen. *Apollo 13*, *Ed Wood*, *JFK*, *Nixon*, and even the bizarre *Forrest Gump* are only the latest productions to have shown how popular this kind of visual history can be. I should lay my cards on the table and say straightaway that, since all such productions tell lies about real people, the current popularity of dramadocs means that more lies are told about more real people than ever before.

I'd better explain what I mean by a dramadoc, and I'd better explain what I mean by "lie." Dramadocs come in many forms; though they are marked by certain family resemblances. It would be nice to be able to say that in their "pure" form they contain distinguishing features, but there is no "pure" form. One of the very earliest was *L'Assassinat du Duc de Guise*, made in 1907 by the Paris company Films D'Art. The film was "based," as we would say nowadays, "on a true story of an episode from French history." Acting styles have changed, so we see the playlet as an over-the-top melodrama—although it was praised at the time for the sobriety of its performances—and we see it without dialogue, too, although its score was written by Camille Saint-Saëns. The

scene, as filmed, shows actors pretending to be other people—identifiable other people; in other words, impersonators. The conspirator who plunged the knife, the false friends who lured the duke to his rendezvous, there they all are, gloating over their deed.

That's one kind of dramadoc: a mute representation of a well-known historical episode. This assassination creates serious problems, incidentally, for anyone trying to reproduce it faithfully. After all, we know only that the duke was stabbed, not where or how many times. But that is the one thing the camera cannot avoid showing unless cutaways are used (but they hadn't been invented yet) or unless the assassin masked his deed with his body (but for him to have done that, he would have had to mask the heinousness of his crime).

Georges Méliès's 1902 *Le Couronnement du Roi Edouard VII* is not an imaginative reconstruction of events in the distant past like the assassination of the duke. *The Coronation of Edward VII* is a meticulous reconstruction of a contemporaneous event. Today we would call it a collection of "edited highlights." Méliès took the best advice—Lord Esher's. The lord chamberlain, himself explained the finer points of the ceremony (although the king's indisposition forced the ceremony to be foreshortened—not for the first time life refused to imitate art). The scene was so contemporary, in fact, the program was made *before* the event took place so that it could be first shown the evening of the coronation, and its publicity carefully called attention to the fact that it was not the real thing. Here is what Méliès and his English collaborator Charles Urban said:

Since the lighting inside the Abbey does not permit moving pictures to be made, and in order to give audiences the opportunity to have an idea of what this imposing ceremony was like, exactly as it was at Westminster Abbey, we have produced at great expense: Number 6815 Special: Reconstruction of the rehearsal of the Coronation of their Majesties King Edward VII and Queen Alexandria. Produced under the direction of C. Urban, London, and G. Méliès, Paris.

Here again, no sounds—apart from music—accompanied the images. Even so, the production exhibited many features common to dramadocs. Like *Apollo 13*, its producers boasted of their lavish budget. Like *Nixon*, they sought out the best technical advice; again, like *Apollo 13*, they apologized for their inability to film on location. Like everyone, their film was made for mass audiences. And like everyone, they got it wrong. The king saw the film, with the scenes omitted because of his illness, a few weeks later in the company of the

producers. "What a wonderful machine the cinematograph is, Monsieur Méliès," he said. "It can even show things that aren't there."

Yet another kind of dramadoc features protagonists in real-life activities reenacting roles. Some years ago when a British television company, Granada, was concerned about human rights behind the Iron Curtain, it took up the case of the Sling family, one of the victims of the 1951 purge trials, which led to the death of Rudolf Slansky, the Czechoslovakian foreign minister, and of Otto Sling.

The film it made was called *Full Circle*, and the family, which had since taken refuge in the West, was persuaded to act out how they had been arrested. This too caused difficulties. Marian was alive, but Otto Sling was of course dead, and their two children had grown up. The secret police who arrested them came from Central Casting, and the jail to which they were taken was on the outskirts of London not Prague. Marian Sling herself had grown older in the meantime of course, but she was the same Sling—up to a point. She could no longer feign incredulity when the knock came at the door and could not have undone all that had been done to her in the intervening years, but given those restrictions she was the "same" Sling. Those who have seen the film might agree that she did not perform very well: she spoke English but rather woodenly, unlike her "husband," Otto, who was a professional actor. This might seem bizarre, unless we accept that what convinces us about performances is not what convinces us about real life. In other words, she was an inadequate performer of her own role; she could not convince us of her own ability to play herself with any conviction. The Sling phenomenon was true of those who had walk-on parts as well as those whose performances were the center of the drama, but this should not surprise us. Actors and actresses are prized for their skill at providing simulacra of real people, but a simulacrum is not the thing itself. It wouldn't make any difference, by the way, if Marian Sling were shoehorned into a "real" 1952 Prague townscape, with its shabby decor and its carefully preserved postwar Tatras and Skodas into which the victims were bundled. Authentic backgrounds, however carefully constructed, cannot help here, any more than they can in *Forrest Gump*, not because the decor is false but because the people are. Gump is a creature of the producer's imagination, just as Marian Sling is, twenty-five years after the event.

Is this judgment too harsh? Does Marian Sling have nothing in common with her own past? Nothing that's visible at any rate. She is like Forrest Gump, or rather Tom Hanks, only less skilled. The real-life baggage she carries is irrelevant to the "story" she has to tell. Like Anthony Hopkins in the role of Richard Nixon, she isn't even a very convincing look-alike. At least had

cameras been around to record her being taken into custody in 1950 she would have looked the part, which is something Mr. Hopkins, for all of his skills as an actor, could never manage when asked to play Richard Nixon.

Falseness of gesture and falseness of appearance drive authenticity from docudramas. This is why those who admire these forms of dramatic life find the most trivial touches of verisimilitude so entrancing. *The Fall of Berlin*, a Soviet film of 1949, is monumental in its tackiness. It shows Adolf Hitler ostentatiously limping as a result of the July bomb plot the previous year, Joseph Goebbels ostentatiously limping too (as a result of his club foot), and Winston Churchill ostentatiously sporting a very large cigar, as if they all made up for the grotesque episode in which Joseph Stalin flies to Berlin to bless the union of Alexei and Natasha, the young hero and heroine. Anthony Hopkins has been praised for his portrayal of Nixon on the strength of his ability to mimic Nixon's tics and mannerisms, but reproducing mannerisms is only part of the story. Any professional impersonator can do that, although even they get it wrong. Not even Charlie Chaplin got Hitler right.

One of the areas where dramadocs fail most lamentably is in their treatment of dialogue. Solecisms, anachronisms, cultural idiocies of all sorts point to broader and more intractable difficulties. Since modern dramadocs rely on the *absence* of sound cameras capable of recording "original" events in the first place, you would think it would be vital to hear what was uttered as well as what was shown. But scripts are poor guides to what has been uttered. They do not show intonation or rhythm, nor do they show pauses or false starts. And when the language is not even that of the protagonists, as in the story of the Sling family, who spoke Czech, falsities are compounded. So the overwhelming proportion of dramadocs contain invented dialogue. I would prefer to call it *fanciful*. We're not left with much: actors who can't get it right even when the actors are themselves the protagonists; dialogues that don't get it right either, because they lack verisimilitude; decors that fail to convince because they're inevitably out of period. Yet despite these handicaps, dramadocs have never been more popular.

Perhaps it is not despite but because of these defects. Remember that dramadocs are stories based on real events but crippled by their lack of reality. They can never portray real events because, if they did, there would be no need for them. But if there were no dramadocs, what would be left? Just real events; in other words, fly-on-the-wall documentaries. This would lead straight to the conventions that have governed this kind of filmmaking since the days of Jean Rouch, the Maysles brothers, Roger Graef, and Frederick Wiseman. I say "conventions" because the fly on the wall is like a real fly, an irritating distraction—more likely to falsify whatever its ostensible subject may be than to en-

hance it. And anyhow, such shows are very unlikely to contain the dramatic punch that dramadocs need—the beginning, middle, and end so indispensable to their pace. Processes are not as lively as episodes. A further difficulty arises when the significance of episodes only reveals itself after the event. The Slings' arrest was a case in point: only their subsequent treatment by the Czech secret police and their flight to the West (and their continued faith in communism) made them worthy of Granada's interest.

It should be clear by now why I believe that dramadocs tell lies about real people. But let me spell it out: because they do not tell the truth. To say of something that it is the case when it is the case is to tell the truth about it. To say of something that is not the case that it is the case, or to say of something that is the case when it is not the case is to lie. Harsh words. Might it not be more prudent to be softer? To say that *Nixon* and *JFK* were "economical with the truth" by omitting lines of dialogue that threw doubt on Oliver Stone's doctrines? Or to say that tones of voice can't really be said to lie, although they may mislead or prevaricate? Or to say that invented lines of dialogue, though never spoken, were nevertheless "in character"? This is not where the problems lie: they lie in that, once an episode has been recorded on film, any attempt to reproduce that experience involves its perpetrator in deceit and dishonesty—in short, in lying about it. But what if that is exactly the point? What if doing dramadocs licenses the producer, in his or her view, to get the best of both worlds? To claim the power of the moving image without accepting the serious responsibilities that go with the job of being a visual historian. Once liberated from the necessity of telling the truth, imagination and fantasy can take free rein. They are limited only by the audience's credulity. Thus where Granada, still favoring dissenters, made a dramadoc about the 1968 Czech reforming Prime Minister Duběk, the whole film was in English, except for the last scene. When the eponymous hero arrived at the opera, the "audience" sang the country's national anthem in *Czech*. Stalin could take off time from his busy schedule to fly to Berlin to review his troops and bless Alexei and Natasha. This may be uncomfortable for dramadoc producers who try awfully hard, but there is, to my mind, no fundamental difference between the lunacies of *Catherine the Great* ("You can't do that sort of thing. This is the eighteenth century") and the up-to-date inanities of *Nixon*. Earnestness of purpose is irrelevant when the difficulty is logical.

It's hard to predict what the sticking point for audiences is likely to be. They tend to be self-selecting anyhow, and their tolerance level is pretty high. Would *Ed Wood* have drawn larger audiences if it had shown the pornographic films to which he devoted his last years? Were fans of *JFK* offended by Oliver Stone's eccentric views about the president's not very ambiguous attitude toward

Vietnam? Professional historians, who make up an infinitesimal proportion of the audience for the film, weren't impressed, but they don't weigh very heavily in the scales.

It should be clear by now that the only thing that authentic moving images of representations of reality have going for them is their *authenticity*. So the only reason for preferring authentic images is that they're authentic. That clearly isn't enough for some spectators. Why should we prefer the authentic to the, well, what? Approximate? Uncertain? Mythic? I think the attraction of authentic images is, and can only be, that they are what they purport to be. Not everyone is impressed by this. Historians are interested in telling true stories about the past, and visual historians are interested in answering questions about the past with the help of moving images. Verifiable images are the bedrock on which telling the truth about the past is based. But not everyone is interested in the past or in telling true stories.

Now, there are many kinds of historians. A historian of drama may well be interested in the lives of actors and may well find Anthony Hopkins's portrayal of Nixon of interest as an example of his approach to a challenging role. But a historian of the Nixon presidency is unlikely to find anything at all of interest in Oliver Stone's cranky views, although a historian of popular culture might. But neither Hopkins nor Stone can add anything to our knowledge of the historical Nixon, Hopkins because he has nothing to say, and Stone because the source of his knowledge is Hopkins. Historians are concerned about the real Richard Nixon not about make-believe figures. This is what distinguishes real historians from those who only play at it.

We're getting at last to the heart of the problems. What is at stake is nothing less than the old, inconclusive struggle between those who are interested in history and those who are interested in fiction. Troubles begin and tempers rise when the two are confused. There is no need for this of course, but it would require a modesty on the part of fiction filmmakers that they seem unlikely to accept. All they need do is revive an ancient disclaimer: "Any resemblance between the characters portrayed in this film and any person, living or dead, is purely coincidental." That would disarm critics, including myself, but the cost would be very high. Who would go out of his or her way to see a film deal with an unnamed Southeast Asian country by explaining that an unnamed American "president" was preparing to withdraw his unnamed American advisers, when he was assassinated by a shadowy group representing powerful interests. Or flock to see a space capsule crippled by power failure. It would be honest, but I can't see it happening.