



“An Occasionally True Story”: Biofiction, Authenticity and Fictionality in *The Great* (2020)

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When the American streaming service Hulu released the television series *The Great*, a darkly comedic take on the early life of Empress Catherine the Great of Russia, the marketing materials described the series as “anti-historical” (Onion, 2020, n.p.) and one snarky reviewer commented that the series’ creator Tony McNamara

had jotted down some names, relationships and a few historical bullet points, torn up the paper, and started writing. And so must the viewer abandon himself to what’s on the plate without a care to learning anything useful or even true about Russia or any of the real people represented here. (Lloyd, 2020, n.p.)

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B. Schirrmacher, N. Mousavi (eds.), *Truth Claims Across Media*,
Palgrave Studies in Intermediality,

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-42064-1_9

The accusation falls flat, because teaching its audience about Russia was never an aspiration that the series seemed to have. *The Great* proudly signals its anti-historical and anachronistic agenda from the get-go, and its title card tellingly reads “The Great: an occasionally true story”. In the finale of the second season the creators follow the path to total and self-referential historical inaccuracy even further by tweaking the subtitle to “The Great: an almost entirely untrue story”.

In this article I am going to explore how *The Great* handles its historical subject matter and analyse the series’ creators’ claims of anti-historicity, looking at *The Great* against the backdrop of genres to which it belongs, notably the biographical film, and in particular the “queen pic”—a type of a biographical film portraying the life of a female royal, and also in the context of the literary concept of biofiction. I will address the issue of expectations of truthfulness tied to each genre and analyse the effect that these expectations have on *The Great*. Before I start my analysis of the series itself, I will offer an overview of two overlapping generic categories into which *The Great* falls, that of a “biopic” (a biographical film/tv series) and that of screen biofiction.

9.1 BETWEEN ANTI-HISTORICITY AND BIOGRAPHY

In today’s crowded TV landscape, *The Great*, a biographical series about the youth of Russia’s Empress Catherine the Great, might excusably be confused with a plethora of other television projects about young queens, such as *Reign* (2013–2017, focused on young Mary, Queen of Scots), *The White Queen* (2013, whose subject is King Edward IV’s consort Elizabeth Woodville), *The Spanish Princess* (2019, Catherine of Aragon), and *Victoria* (2016–2019). What sets it apart, however, is its black comedy tone and knowing anachronisms.

In fact, anti-historicity becomes *The Great*’s unique selling point, and in an oblique way, the series calls on reviewers and audiences to re-examine their expectations related to the amount of creative license which is “allowed” in costume drama, and especially in biographical projects. In the recent *Narrative Factualty: A Handbook* (ed. Monika Fludernik and Marie-Laure Ryan, 2020), Ryan tackles the issues of fictionality and audience expectations in the following manner:

Fiction is a use of signs meant by the producer to invite the user to imagine, without believing them, states of affairs obtaining in a world that differ in

some respect from the actual world. These uses of signs are typically framed by external devices so that users know they are dealing with fiction, not with failed factual representation (i.e. errors and lies), but within the frame, the irreality of these represented states of affairs is not overtly marked, though it may be suggested by so-called “signposts of fictionality”. (Cohn, 1990) (Ryan, 2020, 78)

The notion of “signposts of fictionality”, which Ryan borrows from the narratologist Dorrit Cohn, was introduced in the latter’s *The Distinction of Fiction* (1990) and expounded more fully in her eponymous “Signposts of Fictionality: A Narratological Perspective” (2000). In the latter text, Cohn posits that in historical fiction, the usual bi-level narratological model of story/discourse should be expanded to include the historical reference (2000, 779).

The construction of historical narrative from the traces of past events (the referential level) [which is variously called] “configurational act” (Mink, 1978), “emplotment” (White, 1978), *mise en intrigue* (Ricoeur). All of these terms essentially signify an activity that transforms pre-existing material, endows it with meaning, makes it into “the intelligible whole that governs the succession of events in any story” (Ricoeur, 1980, 171). These same theorists also stress the decisive role played by selection in any historical text, what it includes and what it excludes, with its all-important temporal corollary: Where it begins and where it ends. (Cohn, 2000, 781)

When it comes to signposting *The Great’s* fictionality, the above-mentioned title card (“An occasionally true story”) serves both as content warning, which spells out that the audiences should not look to the series for historical accuracy, and as a tongue-in-cheek subversion of the viewers’ expectations. Settling to watch an opulent costume series about the life of a historical royal, the audience members would expect a more reverent approach to facts, so that a card reading “based on a true story” or “inspired by a true story” would be the standard. According to the series’ creator Tony McNamara, this prior warning was also a consciously selected strategy of deflecting possible backlash.

“When we made *The Great*, there was someone who questioned some of the big mistakes that I was making with history.... And I was like, ‘They *have* to be big.’ People have to know we’re making mistakes on purpose, rather than ‘we’ve made a few changes,’ [and] then it’s poor history professors tearing

their hair out. At least with ours, the history professors can go: ‘They don’t know what they’re doing!’” (Marsh, 2021, n.p.)

Indeed, in terms of energy and atmosphere, *The Great* shares more artistic DNA with such HBO shows as *Veep* (2012–2019), a biting satire of contemporary American politics, or with *The House of the Dragon* (2022–), a medieval fantasy series fixated on the theme of royal succession, than it does with sedate royal biographical series in the vein of ITV’s *Victoria* (2016–2019). *The Great* follows just the broadest outline of Catherine’s biography, crossing certain well-known facts off the list. It is true that Catherine was originally a minor Prussian princess, who came to Russia as a prospective bride, that her marriage to the future Peter III had a rocky start, and that she eventually deposed her him in a military coup (S1E10). She was something of a *femme savante*, well versed in fashionable French philosophy, and cultivated progressive ideas about female education (S1E1). She was a proponent of modern medical ideas, including small pox inoculation (S1E7). She also waged a successful war against Turkey (S2E9–10). However, many crucial facts are changed to serve the needs of the plot: Catherine did not instigate the coup against her husband until 1762 (seventeen years after their wedding), and when she married Peter, he was not a ruling monarch but the heir to the throne. Even more crucially, the show’s Emperor Peter is a conflation of Catherine’s real husband Peter III and his father Peter II. In the series, much is made of the fact that Peter suffers an inferiority complex comparing himself to his father Peter the Great, whereas the historical Peter III was Peter the Great’s grandson and not his son.¹ Other historical inaccuracies, great and small, are too numerous to mention.

On the other hand, there is no denying that, as a series that portrays the life of a historical figure, *The Great* falls within the broad category of biographical television. A long established film and television genre, the biopic (to use the ubiquitous abbreviation) is a convenient umbrella term that refers to a vast array of possibilities: Primarily it refers to film and television projects portraying the lives of famous people, living or dead, but it can also shed light on subjects who had hitherto been unknown to the general public (e.g. *Erin Brockovich* (2000) or *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013)). Apart from portraying a broad spectrum of protagonists, biopics

¹The short overview of Catherine and Peter’s biography and reign is based on John T. Alexander’s *Catherine The Great: Life and Legend* (Oxford University Press, 1988).

also differ with reference to their scope. They can either focus on a pivotal period of the subject’s live (e.g. the Winston Churchill biopic *Darkest Hour* (2017)) or adopt the more traditional cradle-to-grave approach (e.g. *Ray* (2004) the Ray Charles biopic starring Jamie Foxx.)

By its very nature the biopic, which tells the life story of its subject, is a form of adaptation. When it comes to its treatment of the source material, there is also a wide range of possible approaches, which vary with respect to the selection of sources (a biopic can be based on a single (auto)biography of its subject or on multiple texts) and with respect to the end product (faithfulness to the source vs. artistic freedom). While the two perspectives (biopic as an account of a real person’s life vs. biopic as an adaptation of a biographical or autobiographical text) differ subtly in their implied claims about their degree of facticity, both will be governed by basic principles of screenwriting. The above-quoted passage from Cohn highlights the role of “emplotment”, i.e. the creative act of transforming pre-existing material into a viable plot. While Cohn refers to historical fiction, so to text-to-text adaptation, her remarks can also be applied to text-to-screen adaptation and to the process of creation of a biographical film or television series. The most important creative decisions that would need to be taken relate to the scope of the project (in Cohn’s words, “where to begin and where to finish”), to introducing causality and showing the protagonist’s agency, and to the selection of events from the subject’s life.

The multiplicity of applications of the term “biopic” led George F. Custen, in his foundational study of the genre, to offer a minimalist definition, and posit that a biopic is simply “a film that presents the life of a historical person, past or present” (1992, 5). For the last three decades, scholars of the genre have proposed numerous taxonomies of the biopic, trying to account for its many sub-genres and varieties. In a recent edited volume entitled *Genre and Performance: Film and Television* (Cornea, 2017), Dennis Bingham outlines a useful typology of possible biopic modes, seeing them in relation to film genres:

- The classical, celebratory form (melodrama)
- Warts-and-all (melodrama/realism)
- Critical investigation and atomization of the subject (or the *Citizen Kane* [1941] mode)

- Parody (in terms of choice of biographical subject, what screenwriters Scott Alexander and Larry Karaszewski call the anti-biopic – a movie about somebody who doesn’t deserve one (Alexander & Karaszewski, 1999, vii])...
- Minority appropriation (as in queer or feminist, African American or Third World, whereby James Whale or Janet Frame, or Malcolm X or Patrice Lumumba owns the conventional mythologizing form that once would have been used to marginalize or stigmatise them);
- Since 2000, the neo-classical biopic, which integrates elements of all or most of the above. (Bingham, 2017, 76–77)

Bingham’s typology brings attention to the fact that biopics should be analysed in the broader cultural context of established filmic and literary modes such as realism, melodrama or parody. For my discussion of *The Great* the most salient point in Bingham’s typology is the possibility of mixing the biopic with the comedic mode, and also of using the form as an ironic celebration of “somebody who doesn’t deserve it”. The latter possibility would be a good perspective to approach *The Great’s* portrayal of Catherine’s husband, Emperor Peter.

More generally, the cinematic mode within whose confines each biopic operates dictates the approach to the subject and the choice of material. This can be seen in the example of various biopics that focus on the same subject but choose a different mode. For example, one can contrast the 1938 *Marie Antoinette*, a lavish Golden Era production starring Norma Shearer and directed by W.S. Van Dyke, which is a full-on melodrama, with the lighter touch of Sofia Coppola’s *Marie Antoinette* (2006) which, though it was also ostensibly billed as “historical drama”, makes frequent use of satire and teen comedy tropes. The French queen’s love affair with Count Fersen, documented in historical sources, is played as a doomed romance in Van Dyke’s film, where the audiences’ are asked to empathise with the protagonist who faces a heart-breaking dilemma and chooses duty over love, whereas in Coppola’s film the same relationship is presented as an inconsequential fling. A similar contrast can be drawn between various biographical projects portraying Catherine the Great, such as the Marlene Dietrich vehicle *The Scarlet Empress* (1934) and the HBO 2015 series *Catherine the Great* (directed by Nigel Williams, starring Helen Mirren), which both veer towards melodrama, and the comedic and self-consciously anti-historical *The Great*.

9.2 FROM BIOPIC TO SCREEN BIOFICTION

Another theoretical concept that has bearing on the discussion of *The Great's* treatment of its biographical subject is that of biofiction. The term is applied in literary criticism to the large body of quasi-biographical texts which explore the lives of historical subjects. It has typically been used to denote works of fiction written in the twentieth or twenty-first century that present fictionalised versions of lives of historical subjects. One of the prominent theoreticians of the field of biographical fiction, Michael Lackey, goes as far as defining biofiction as “literature that names its protagonist after an actual historical figure” (Lackey, 2017, 3), suggesting that the only thing biofictions have in common with facts are the names of their protagonists. Lackey’s sparse definition of biofiction brings to mind Custen’s above-quoted and similarly minimalist definition of the biopic. The broadness and inclusiveness of Lackey’s definition can account for even the most “unfaithful” texts, which consciously (and often with relish) falsify historical facts, with Seth Grahame-Smith’s novel *Abraham Lincoln the Vampire Hunter* (2010) being one of the most blatant cases. Setting such examples aside, most biofictions are actually eager to demonstrate their historical credentials, containing and referencing well-researched information on historical lives, albeit in an awareness that all biography is a “fake authentic” (Heilmann, 2018, 16).

Similarly to the biopic, the term biofiction also covers a wide spectrum of texts, which belong to the domain of fiction, and whose protagonist is a fictionalised version of a real life person. At its tamest and most factual, literary biofiction can denote fictionalised biographies of historical personages, such as Irving Stone’s canonical books on Vincent van Gogh (*Lust for Life* (1934)) and Michelangelo (*The Agony and the Ecstasy* (1961)). On the opposite side of the spectrum are biofictional projects that are predicated on conjecture or include elements of mashup with other literary genres, such as detective fiction or horror. When it comes to the first type, Richard Flanagan’s *Wanting* (2008) is a case in point. The novel is purportedly a fictionalised biography of Mathinna, an Aboriginal child adopted by the colonial administrator John Franklin during his service as the governor of Tasmania. While Mathinna’s adoption is a historical fact, the central plot point of the novel centres around an unfounded (and unverifiable) assumption that Franklin was a sexual predator who abused his adopted daughter. *Wanting* and other similar projects capitalise on the readers’ desire to know the historical subjects’ darkest and most hidden secrets.

Apart from the question of degrees of authenticity and fictionality in specific projects, another often studied aspect of biofiction is the selection of subjects. The Neo-Victorian scholar Marie-Luise Kohlke offers a useful typology, dividing biofiction into three types:

- (a) Celebrity biofiction, which depicts “inner lives, secret desires, traumas and illicit pursuits of high-profile public figures, most often writers, poets and artists (Kohlke, 2013, 7).
- (b) Biofiction of marginalized subjects, which “recuperates untold stories of individuals relegated to bit parts, adjuncts or appendixes in the life-stories of subjects that mattered, while deemed of comparatively little or no matter in and of themselves” (Kohlke, 2013, 10).
- (c) Appropriated biofiction: “attributes elements of real lives to someone else entirely or uses these lives as springboards to launch into blatantly counterfactual fabrications” (Kohlke, 2013, 11), where the “blatantly counterfactual” category may include such cultural texts as Seth Graham Smith’s *Abraham Lincoln the Vampire Hunter* (the 2010 novel and its 2012 film adaptation) or Dan Simmon’s novel *Drood* (2009) in which Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins are haunted by a supernatural being.

Whereas the term “biofiction” is usually deployed in the analysis of literary works, I would like to argue that its application can be broadened beyond literature to encompass also other types of cultural texts such as films, television series and theatrical plays which share the same approach to historical characters. An overview of critically acclaimed costume films and television series produced in the last thirty years reveals that many of them possess the constitutive feature of biofiction, which is a revisionistic, fictionalising, or even blatantly counter-factual approach to their subjects. One of the early and influential examples of screen biofiction is the director Shekhar Kapur’s *Elizabeth*, a feature film portraying the early reign of Elizabeth I, written by Michael Hirst and starring Cate Blanchett in title role, released in 1998. The contemporary reviews of *Elizabeth* noted its many historical inaccuracies such as characters’ ages, as well as telescoping notable events that took place during Elizabeth’s long reign into a few years covered by the film’s timespan. “It didn’t happen like that in history, but it should have”, said Roger Ebert in his review of the film, referring to one if its many anti-historical plot developments (1998, n.p.). Ebert’s notion of “history as it should have happened” is a neat shorthand to

describe the film’s rewriting of historical facts in order to show more direct causal chains of events and to give the protagonists more psychological consistency and agency. It is often achieved by making the leads perform crucial actions which in real life were performed by others. A good case in point is a plot development in *Elizabeth*, which occasioned Ebert’s comment, and which consists of the queen’s advisor Sir Francis Walsingham personally poisoning one of her enemies, Mary of Guise (whereas historical records state that she had died of natural causes). The same tactics are employed in other notable screen biofictions such as HBO’s series *Rome* (2005–2007), Showtime’s *The Tudors* (2007–2010, also scripted by *Elizabeth*’s writer Michael Hirst), or Sofia Coppola’s above-mentioned *Marie Antoinette* (2006). All of these screen products privilege main characters’ emotional consistency and exciting plot developments over historical accuracy.

The question of accuracy—or deliberate inaccuracy—in biofiction is wrapped in a broader range of ethical issues related to rights to privacy and to misrepresentation of past lives for monetary gain. In her preface to *Neo-Victorian Biofiction* Kohlke acknowledges these concerns and links them to the myth-making potential of biofiction. Even though she writes specifically about the nineteenth century-inspired biofiction, her remarks are equally applicable to all historical periods.

Biofiction raises questions about... historical distortion that intersect with contemporary concerns about the “bare-all” culture of confession and “fake news”, as well as the insidious manipulation of public opinion by social media and other means. How actual nineteenth-century subjects and their lives are represented—and sometimes deliberately misrepresented—impacts on collective memory and on mainstream versions of the period’s history accepted as “true” by laypersons and the general public. Biofiction may thus be regarded as one of the aesthetic forms par excellence for meditating, remediating, and shaping popular perceptions of the past (Kohlke & Gutleben, 2020, 3).

Intriguingly, Kohlke makes the connection between biofiction’s defining characteristic, i.e. deliberate falsification of the historical record, with contemporary fake news culture, and with gossip-obsessed social media and celebrity culture. On the other hand, the audiences’ desire for gossipy costume drama that centres on the love lives of famous historical personages certainly pre-dates the rise of social media and fake news, as evidenced by such early blockbusters as *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933, dir. Alexander Korda).

To come back to the term “biopic”, which I used above as a starting point for the exploration of the generic affiliation of *The Great*, the difference between screen biofiction and biographical film seems to be that of degree.² The biopic, as discussed above, encompasses a wide variety of possible approaches. The biopics that use a relatively cavalier approach to the established facts, or (as is often the case) are centred around a crucial lacuna in the subject’s life, employ essentially the same strategy for presenting the lives of the main characters as literary biofictions. Specifically, notwithstanding the medium shift from literature to film, they fulfil Kohlke’s requirements for “celebrity biofiction” which

speculates about the inner lives, secret desires, traumas, and illicit pursuits of high-profile public figures, most often writers, poets and artists, that may have been left out of surviving records including subjects’ own self representations. (2013, 7)

For this reason, I am going to use the term “screen biofiction” to refer to biographical films which employ biofictional strategies, and crucially, which deliberately depart from historical truth in their presentation of historical subjects, often centring the plot around secrets or conjectures. Apart from the examples mentioned above, such as Kapur’s *Elizabeth* or Coppola’s *Marie Antoinette*, this type is exemplified by projects that focus on their subjects fictional or conjectural love affairs such as John Madden’s *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) or Julian Jarrold’s *Becoming Jane* (2007).

9.3 THE GREAT AS A QUEEN PIC

While *The Great*’s balancing act between biofiction, costume drama, romance, and black comedy seems unique, there is a specific subgenre of the biopic from which it seems to draw inspiration for much of its main plot. That subgenre is the “queen pic”, or the biographical film portraying the life of a queen. In general, royal biopics have been a popular type of costume drama since the very beginning of cinema as evidenced by such

²A more in-depth discussion of the relationship between biopic and biofiction can be found in Barbara Braid and Anna Gutowska “‘Tell all the truth but tell it slant’: queer heritage and strategic humour in recent screen biofictions of Emily Dickinson” in: *Journal of Neo-Victorian Studies*, Special Issue 2021/2022 Beyond Biofiction: Writers and Writing in Neo-Victorian Media, edited by Armelle Parey and Charlotte Wadoux (<http://www.neovictorianstudies.com/>)

influential classical films as *Les Amours de la reine Élisabeth* (1912, a French short film directed by Louis Mercanton and Henri Desfontaines, starring Sarah Bernhardt), *Queen Cristina* (1933, dir. Walter Wanger, starring Greta Garbo), and the already referenced *Marie Antoinette* (1938, dir. W.S. Van Dyke, starring Norma Shearer). According to Custen, the queen pics tend to follow the same narrative template:

Often the female royal figure must choose between her heart and her “professional” commitment to the state. The mere owning up to sexual desire is often taken, by men, as a sign of weakness, so a female ruler can only show her mettle by forgoing things typically “female.” (1992, 105)

It is startling how aptly Custen’s summary, written thirty years ago, seems to describe not only the classical biopics but also a spate of more recent projects released many years after the publication of his monograph, such as the above-mentioned *Elizabeth* (1998) and its sequel *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (2007), the Danish biopic of Queen Caroline Matilda *A Royal Affair* (2012, dir. Nikolaj Arkel, starring Alicia Vikander), and the first two seasons of Netflix’s award-winning series *The Crown* (2016-), presenting the early reign of Elizabeth II with focus on the pressures that she had to overcome as a young woman in the role of a monarch.

The same trajectory, in which the female ruler has to choose duty or public affairs over love also seems to inspire the first season of *The Great*. The series opens with the arrival of young Catherine (Elle Fanning), the emperor’s “mail order bride,” at the Russian court. The first season charts her path to staging a successful coup against her husband and achieving a position of power, and the second episode of season two finally sees her crowned Empress of Russia, after finally having manoeuvred her husband into abdicating (S2E1). If there is one thing that the series’ viewers will already know about Catherine, it is that she eventually became a powerful ruler, but in the two seasons that have hitherto been released, we see Catherine before she has earned her cognomen “the Great.”

In spite of its avowed originality, the series spends much time following above-mentioned Custen’s blueprint for queen pics, and building the contrast between Catherine’s happy and wholesome love affair with Leo Voronsky (Sebastian de Sousa), and her political machinations aimed at deposing her husband. The season’s finale follows the time-honoured blueprint of royal melodrama. In a Machiavellian move, Catherine’s husband imprisons her lover and blackmails her, saying that if she will move

against him, Voronsky will be executed. The last scene of the season shows the agonised Catherine, who kisses her lover goodbye and gives orders to start the coup. The final outcome of this plotline follows the broad outlines of the historical facts (it is true Catherine deposed her husband and ruled in his stead), even though the character of Leo is fictional, as is the blackmail instituted by Catherine's husband.

Another common feature of the queen pics, apart from the "love vs. duty" plotline is that they follow the trajectory of the coming-of-age story. Shekhar Kapur's *Elizabeth* (1998) and Jean-Marc Vallée's *The Young Victoria* (2009) are both good cases in point. Both films present the youth of their respective subjects, with their ascension to the throne and coronation happening around the middle of the movie (in script terms, they constitute "the point of no return" for the main character). The remainder of the film is subsequently spent on showing the female protagonists finding their life partners (or, in the case of *Elizabeth*, deciding, after a series of setbacks, that she will forgo romantic life altogether and will instead become "married to England.") The most distinct common feature of these royal coming of age stories is that they present the early years of their subjects as a series of tests, where the character is confronted with increasingly difficult challenges and has again and again to rise to the occasion and prove her worth, courage and determination. The "learning on the job" trajectory is supplemented with the character's relationships with various mentor figures, some of whom may eventually be revealed to be untrustworthy (e.g. Melbourne in *The Young Victoria*) or unhelpful (e.g. William Cecil in *Elizabeth*).

In a darkly comic way, *The Great* appropriates and then subverts this trope. In accordance with the blueprint, Catherine arrives in Russia, idealistic and ill-prepared for the challenges ahead of her, with naïve expectations regarding both her position as a consort and her relationship with her future husband (S1E1). However, the skillset that she needs to acquire does not involve the usual requirements presented in earlier queen pics (courage, independence, learning not to rely on advisors). In contrast, striving to survive in the cut-throat atmosphere of the Russian court, in which she is not counted as a valuable player, she has to learn ruthlessness and scheming, eventually besting her violent husband at his own game (S1E10).

The Great had a long development history, which suggests that the heady mixture of genres and tones must have been a hard sell in the generally risk-averse media landscape. The Hulu series began its life as a stage

play which premiered at the Sidney Theatre Company in 2008. It was written by the Australian playwright Tony McNamara, who later adapted it as a spec script for a feature film. The script eventually found its way to the desk of the director Yorgos Lanthimos, who at that time was starting the development of *The Favourite* (2018), another darkly comedic queen pic. Lanthimos liked the irreverent tone of *The Great* and hired McNamara to rewrite *The Favourite* and “freshen it up,” as the original script had been written in the late 1990s (see Marsh, 2021, n.p.). McNamara then received a co-writing credit for *The Favourite*, and the critical and popular success of the film meant that he was able to secure financing for his next project. The streaming platform Hulu gave season order for *The Great* in late 2019 (see White, 2019, n.p.), and the series premiered in May 2020 on the platform, and was subsequently made available internationally on HBO. On the first season, Elle Fanning is credited as one of the executive producers, whereas on the second season the list of executive producers includes both Fanning and her co-star Nicholas Hoult.

Interestingly, *The Great* was one of two television series released in the space of the last four years that depicted the life of Catherine the Great. The other, released in 2018 by HBO and simply called *Catherine the Great*, starred Helen Mirren in the title role and focused on the later years of the monarch’s life, and especially on her tumultuous relationship with her favourite Grigory Potemkin (Jason Clarke). A dutiful if somewhat lacklustre production in the tradition of heritage film, it failed to make any kind of cultural impact and is now largely forgotten. However, the mere fact that in the space of two years two big-budget English language biographical projects portraying the life of a Russian ruler were released is a testament both to the appeal of Catherine the Great’s biography, which is in line with the tastes of the contemporary audiences, and to the continuing popularity of the queen pic. Incidentally, the current context of Russia’s war against Ukraine may impact the future of any productions centring on Russian history, including the viability of the third season of *The Great*. At the time of writing this article, the third season has been announced by Hulu (Hibberd, 2022, n.p.), but is still in early stages of development.

As I have signalled before, many contemporary costume dramas share the biofictional agenda, focusing either on uncovering secrets of their historical subjects, or on presenting the periods in their lives which were hitherto considered to be blank spots, and which can be filled with conjecture. A large group of such projects, including *The Great*, focuses on the

early, pre-fame lives of their subjects, a fact which is best exemplified by the title of the Coco Chanel biopic, *Coco Before Chanel* (2009). A sizeable sub-set of these projects show a conjectural or fictional youthful love affair of the historical subject, presenting it as a stimulus for future achievements. While this is especially the case with writer biopics (e.g. the already mentioned *Shakespeare in Love* (1995) or *Becoming Jane* (2007)), this trope can also be found in queen pics. For example, Kapur's *Elizabeth* (1998) purports that Elizabeth I's thwarted love for the earl of Leicester (Joseph Fiennes) was the reason for her decision not to marry. *The Great* also seems to follow this template in season one, in its portrayal of Catherine's romance with Leo. However, Catherine's decision to sacrifice her lover's life in order to achieve her political goals (S1E10) subverts the trope in a way which is shocking for the viewer familiar with the blueprint and creates a memorable and poignant cliff-hanger at the end of season one.

Even more subversively, Catherine's love interest in season two is her own husband, Emperor Peter, with whom she eventually develops a warped and yet strangely fulfilling relationship, eventually forgiving his part in the execution of Leo. Peter, played by Nicholas Hoult in a vibrant and universally praised performance, is a fascinating and mercurial character, at times shockingly violent and unexpectedly kind, dim-witted and perceptive. Such a version of Peter has little to do with historical facts (see Marsh, 2021, n.p.), especially because the fictional character of Peter is a conflated version of Catherine's actual husband, Peter III and his uncle Peter II, who preceded him on the throne. The last two episodes of season two, in which Catherine and Peter talk about their bond and their mutual attraction, reach new levels of psychological insight while at the same time they retain the show's signature darkly comedic tone, and end on another cliff-hanger leaving the audiences wondering whether Catherine will order the assassination of her husband in the light of his most recent, shocking transgression (S2E10).

The Great as a series is character-centred, which is not to say that it follows the historical facts of Catherine and Peter's lives. As I have argued above, it contains certain crucial events such as the protagonists' marriage, the birth of their child, or Catherine's coup against Peter, but it also arranges them freely, without paying too much attention to chronology. McNamara clearly privileges characters' emotional consistency and building compelling causal relationships between events over historical accuracy. As Thomas Leitch argues in his seminal *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents* (2009), post-literary adaptations (i.e. biopics and other

projects that are “based on true stories”) must necessarily yield themselves into the mould of Hollywood genres (Leitch, 2009, 286). Hence, *The Great* in spite of its originality and freshness of tone is also indebted to existing generic tropes, such as the queen pic trajectory of “the growth of a leader” and the “passion vs. duty” inner conflict, the love triangle, or the televisual convention of a cliff-hanger.

In an informative section about truth claims in non-literary adaptations Leitch (2009, 287–289) furthermore discusses typical truth claims which became the focal points of marketing campaigns of well known, big budget films based on true stories, such as “truth is stranger than fiction” (perfectly exemplified by the title of *It Could Happen to You* (1994), a romantic comedy allegedly based on a newspaper headline). This category also includes such recent biographical projects as Netflix’s *Inventing Anna* (2022) or HBO’s *Landscapers* (2022)). Another category singled out by Leitch is “now it can be told” (e.g. *The Insider* (1999)), *Imitation Game* (2014) or to the recent drama portraying the journalistic investigation that led to the downfall of Harvey Weinstein (*She Said* (2022)).

I would like to posit that *The Great*, while scrupulously drawing attention to its own anti-historicity (“an occasionally true story”) also plays with audiences’ assumptions regarding the levels of cruelty and intrigue in eighteenth-century Russia. Often it capitalises on the viewers’ disorientation for darkly comedic effect, relying on the audience to wonder if a given display of violence, or a startlingly barbaric tradition could indeed be factual.

The blatant and joyful disregard for historical facts in a paradoxical way protects the series from accusations of inaccuracy. If McNamara and his writing team made less blatant mistakes, the series would no doubt find itself under more historical scrutiny. Almost exactly one decade ago, when Shekhar Kapur’s *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (2011) was released, liberties such as conflating characters or telescoping events were noted by reviewers and the filmmakers were accused of going too far (e.g. von Tunzelmann, 2011, n.p.). Similarly, Coppola’s *Marie Antoinette* (2006), which flaunted bold anachronisms in costumes and set design, dialogue and music was highly divisive, and its initial reception was largely hostile (Cheshire, 2015, 114). Going against the critical consensus of the times, Roger Ebert became one of the film’s notable early champions. His review of the film draws attention not just to the presence of anachronisms, but also to their role and function, and Ebert’s point could be equally applicable to *The Great*:

Coppola has been criticized in some circles for her use of a contemporary pop overlay—hit songs, incongruous dialogue, jarring intrusions of the Now upon the Then. But no one ever lives as Then; it is always Now. Many characters in historical films seem somehow aware that they are living in the past. Marie seems to think she is a teenager living in the present, which of course she is—and the contemporary pop references invite the audience to share her present with ours. (Ebert, 2006, n.p.)

The Great definitely takes a leaf off *Marie Antoinette*'s book, but goes even further. It is not only that the protagonists of the series “live in the Now,” but also the fresh, contemporary feel of *The Great* is amplified by the fact that it follows a presentist agenda, focusing on the problems of the past that are still relevant today. McNamara states that the contemporary parallels are what attracted him to the material:

“I like the stakes of the era, the life and death stakes of the court world.... I also like that they're dealing with stuff we're still freakin' dealing with We're still dealing with privilege, and how to give people equality, and all that kind of stuff. I'm interested in the parallels—and I'm also interested in the freedom I get.” (Marsh, 2021, n.p.)

By focusing on such social issues as class inequality or the plight of women, *The Great* proves the truth of Christian Gutleben's observation that costume drama tends to dwell on “fashionable wrongs”, tailoring the past to what today's audiences want to watch (2001, 11).

Accordingly, the first season of the series focuses on Catherine's fight for power, where the setbacks she encounters are a representation of generalised misogyny and oppression of women in eighteenth-century Russia. Apart from sexism, another recurring motif is the casual cruelty of the aristocracy against the palace servants and other working-class characters (esp. S1E7). This theme finds its fullest expression in season two in the minor subplot of an elderly servant nicknamed “Shakey”, who is casually killed by Lady Svenska (S2E5–6). The show's portrayal of grotesque violence against working class characters fulfils Kohlke's requirements for presentist historical projects, which involve “contemporary witness-bearing to historical trauma and injustice, providing symbolic commemoration and restitution to history's victims and an important source of audience's edutainment” (2018, 2).

Apart from presenting the continuing relevance of such issues as gender inequality or class inequality, *The Great* also at times makes the past look exotic. Such historical titbits as a ban on wearing beards at court under

pain of death (S1E2), or a custom that dictated that a royal woman was supposed to give birth in public, observed by court officials (S2E7) are played for laughs, and the level of casual cruelty perpetrated by Peter (e.g. executing all the palace cooks on suspicion of poisoning him (S1E6) or serving heads of slain enemy soldiers on plates for his guests during a victory banquet (S1E5)) is so grotesque that it can only be seen as black humour.

In rejecting the ponderous nostalgia of most of the earlier queen pics, which presented a harmonious and stately vision of the past (and of which HBO's *Catherine the Great* (2018) is a good benchmark), *The Great* is telling its audience: This is what the past was really like; the manicured, stately vision seen that you have seen in earlier costume films and television is not true. This tacit claim that the most outrageous version of history will in fact be the authentic one is very close to the founding assumption of biofiction which maintains that the most respectable historical personages must perforce hide scandalous secrets. Scholars of nineteenth-century literary biofiction draw attention to the fact that the authors' desire to elucidate the secrets of its historical subjects is in fact "a form of scopophilia—the desire to know forbidden secrets [of]... the dead" (Kaplan, 2007, 47). From the audience's perspective, it can be equated with voyeurism, as the audience is obsessed with recovering the historical subject's "'true' and 'authentic' self behind the mask of his/her renowned public persona" (Novak & Mayer, 2014, 25).

Today's media landscape is saturated with many different depictions of the past that appeal to the tastes of different segments of the audience. In the words of Andrew Higson, "the past becomes, in Fredric Jameson's phrase, 'a vast collection of images', designed to delight the modern-day tourist-historian" (1993, 114). In my opinion, the notion of 'tourist-historians' is an apt description of *The Great's* intended audience. The show's viewers are not invested in historical accuracy but are willing to be amused by the preposterous nature of the events and customs presented on their screens. In a paradoxical way, *The Great* also serves as "edutainment", because the shocking scenes that it often portrays have the potential of sending the audience down the rabbit hole of Google research. Did it really happen? Did Catherine the Great really stab the Turkish sultan to death with his own dagger (S2E10)? To borrow from Robert Ebert's review of Kapur's *Elizabeth*, "it didn't happen like that in history, but it should have" (1998, n.p.). All the same, *The Great* provides more than just edutainment. By proudly flaunting its anti-historical creed, it makes

audiences and critics reflect on the amount of fictionality which is involved in producing ostensibly more truthful biographical projects. At the same time, while the series proudly asserts its anti-historical credentials and subverts audiences' generic expectations linked to the biopic and the queen pic by introducing black humour, comedic depictions of violence, and knowing anachronisms, it also tacitly observes some of these genres' tropes and conventions, such as the coming of age trajectory or the love vs. duty dichotomy. This reliance on time-honoured plot devices suggests that, bold and innovative as it may be, *The Great* still has to operate within the recognisable confines of filmic and televisual genres.

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