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Evaluating A Royal Affair · Cinematic Enlightenment · Agnes Scott's Enlightenment Salon

7-9 minutes



A Royal Affair

In the sections “Cinema as a Historical Resource” and “Historical Context” I have provided complementary material for my evaluation of Nikolaj Arcel’s film *A Royal Affair*. Although I have already provided a brief

synopsis of *A Royal Affair*, this section will evaluate the historical authenticity of the film by drawing on Robert A. Rosenstone's methodology for the analysis of historical films in *History on Film/ Film on History*, philosophical texts by Rousseau, and Stella Tillyard's book *A Royal Affair: George III and His Scandalous Siblings*.

As previously mentioned in the "Cinema as a Historical Resource" section, there are three stages to evaluate historical films; the genesis, synopsis, and judgment. Unfortunately very little scholarship has been written about Nikolaj Arcel's *A Royal Affair*. As a result, I will make some generalized statements about the genesis of the film before addressing my evaluation. Nikolaj Arcel is a prominent Danish film director who has worked on films such as *King's Game* (2004), *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2009), and of course *A Royal Affair* (2012). In an interview, Arcel stated that he became interested in directing *A Royal Affair* because

"It's a well-known story in Denmark. It's one of the great true stories that everybody knows about but it hadn't been made into a film. I didn't really know why so I was trying to figure it out. I was going into researching the whole story, and then I caught the bug to do the film, and I spent for years on it. I wrote the script, and I spent many, many years financing it and trying to get it off the ground. Then finally, we were lucky enough to have it happen" (Nikolaj Arcel)

As an independent film the project was low budget and Arcel only had forty days to film it. However, Arcel ultimately created a polished work that used innovative film technique within a compelling narrative. Accordingly, the film was nominated for the Academy Award for "Best Foreign Film" in 2012.

Now that I have provided some general information concerning the 'genesis' of the film I can evaluate the film's historical authenticity. Given that the film is about actual historical figures, it is crucial to evaluate how well the film reconstructs their identities for the screen. Historian Stella Tillyard's text *A Royal Affair: George III and His Scandalous Siblings* was an invaluable resource for my research because it provided bios on Princess Caroline Mathilde of Britain, Dr. Johann Struensee, and King

Christian VII of Denmark, in addition to recounting the illicit affair that is adapted for the film. Overall, Arcel's film follows the general framework of Tillyard's account of the narrative and biographies. However, certain elements are embellished for the sake of the filmic medium. While Arcel's adaptation mirrors Tillyard's descriptions of the historical figures, he dramatizes and romanticizes Johann Struensee and Caroline Mathilde's affair. Additionally, the film develops Johann Struensee's political and philosophical beliefs further than Tillyard's analysis. Tillyard asserts that even though we have lists of the reforms that Johann Struensee passed and the philosophical debates that he would have been familiar with, we do not have concrete information about his personal beliefs. Consequently, the film expands on the information we have concerning Struensee's ideology. For instance, there is a sequence within the film where King Christian VII's court discusses Struensee's clandestine writings that address his,

"Thoughts on the rights of peasants, a proposal to cut peasants' mandatory work hours in half. A proposal to revoke proprietors rights to corporally punish their peasants, A fundamental questioning of the idea of ownership of peasants, including serfdom....outlawing torture in interrogation of prisoners and criminals. Limitation of church influence on public matters. Speculations about the stultifying nature of religion....The king is letting himself be directed by a man of the Enlightenment"

Additionally, the film lists several of the reforms that Tillyard states Struensee passed; "Dissolution of State Council" "General Inoculation" "Abolition of Corporeal Punishment of Prisoners" "Access to University for all Citizens" "General License to Publish" "Home for Orphaned Children Established in Copenhagen" "Abolition of Censorship."

As I briefly mentioned in the synopsis for *A Royal Affair*, Johann Struensee and Caroline Mathilde bonded over their love of Enlightenment philosophy. To establish the progression of Struensee and Caroline Mathilde's relationship from friendship to romance, Arcel films several scenes in which the two discuss philosophical beliefs. This is where Rousseau's works come into play for my evaluation. For instance, the

moment in which Caroline Mathilde realizes that Struensee is a man of the Enlightenment is when she comes across his hidden copies of Rousseau, Voltaire, and Locke. In this sequence, she pulls out his copy of Rousseau's *The Social Contract* and reads the first lines "man is born free, and everywhere he is in shackles" before borrowing it. After this pivotal sequence, Arcel films several sequences in which the two discuss Rousseau's ideology further. For example in a pivotal dialogue Caroline Mathilde comments that Rousseau's notion of abandoning civilization and living in tress is rather extreme. Struensee replies that Rousseau does not think that mankind can return to this animalistic state, but that society's structure has made it difficult for mankind to live their lives freely with institutions such as religion, and marriage. This conversation is then interrupted as they come across a slave who was tortured to death. Struensee frees the man from his bondage before commenting on the cruelty of torture and slavery. By filming this sequence, Arcel is alluding to some of the major elements of Rousseau's theories on freedom and human rights. Embodying Rousseau's notions in the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* and *The Social Contract*, Struensee opposes slavery and serfdom, torture, censorship, the oppression of religion, and other institutions that remove natural individualized freedom.

Now that I have addressed how the film reconstructs and deviates from history, I can evaluate the film's historical value. By and large the film effectively addresses major intellectual debate topics from the Enlightenment such as the religious oppression, slavery, freedom, torture, censorship, and general inoculation for the masses. Additionally, Arcel follows Tillyard's account closely in regards to her descriptions of Princess Caroline Mathilde of Britain, Dr. Johann Struensee, and King Christian VII of Denmark, but embellishes their relationships for audiences. With these factors in mind, I believe that the film has historical value in the sense that it approaches a lesser known history topic while maintaining the core structure of the event. To make *A Royal Affair* more historically valuable, Arcel could have spent more time focusing on the political impact of Johann Struensee and Caroline Mathilde's affair rather than the romantic impact.

To read Nikolaj Arcel's complete interview, click the link below.

<http://collider.com/nikolaj-arcel-a-royal-affair-interview/>