

Elvis & Nixon, A Hologram for the King: Trivializing culture, history

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Elvis & Nixon, directed by Liza Johnson, screenplay by Joey Sagal, Hanala Sagal and Cary Elwes; *A Hologram for the King*, written and directed by Tom Tykwer, based on the 2012 novel by Dave Eggers.

There is no shortage of extraordinary goings-on in the present day. Human life has hardly become less fascinating or complex in the new century. And, in many cases, artists, novelists and filmmakers possess sufficient intuition or instinct to identify some of those circumstances.

But all too frequently, the narrowness and self-absorption of the artists' outlook on life—and the influence of gender, sexual and racial politics here is especially noxious—tend to drain the most profound drama and contradictions out of their works, leaving only the secondary or tertiary elements behind.

Two cases in point...

Elvis & Nixon

The impetus for the film *Elvis & Nixon*, directed by Liza Johnson, was the well-known photograph of rock 'n' roll icon Elvis Presley and President Richard Nixon shaking hands in the White House on December 21, 1970.

The attempt to construct a nearly 90-minute movie from this one peculiar episode is questionable, at least without providing a good deal of social and cultural context. Labeling it a comedy, the filmmakers, sadly, have created a trite piece that is neither particularly comedic nor illuminating.

The fictionalized account of the meeting begins with Presley (Michael Shannon) writing a six-page letter to Nixon (Kevin Spacey). Elvis is seeking to obtain a badge that would bestow on him the title "Federal Agent-at-Large" for the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs. The singer, at a low point in his career, supposedly wants to offer his services to the president, who is under siege from the population, in the war against drugs, the Black Panthers, hippies and other "anti-American" phenomena.

Much of the film concerns itself with the lead-up to the White House encounter. Presley's childhood friend, Jerry Shilling (Alex Pettyfer), is asserting his independence from the "King," and Shilling's preoccupations weigh the movie down.

In *Elvis & Nixon's* only genuinely poignant scene, the superstar,

in the course of donning his ridiculous get-up (gold jewelry and belt, black cape, aviator sunglasses and a plethora of fancy handguns), tells Jerry that, shrouded in his paraphernalia, he becomes "a thing, an object like a bottle of Coke." The real human being has been lost, suppressed. This distressing, telling sequence is never followed up on.

Nixon's aides Egil Krogh (Colin Hanks) and Dwight Chapin (Evan Peters) propose the rendezvous with Presley to their recalcitrant boss. Nixon's 22-year-old daughter Julie presses the issue. The singer and his entourage make their way from Los Angeles to Washington, D.C., running into a few Elvis impersonators along the way. After obsequiously bowing to every Secret Service agent in the White House, Presley finally sits down with Nixon, and the mundane piles on top of the frivolous.

If there is one semi-bright spot in *Elvis & Nixon*, it is Spacey's rather amusing take on "Tricky Dick." Unfortunately, Shannon—a fine actor—is forced by a very poor script to rely on garb and gimmicks. Neither Hanks nor Johnny Knoxville contribute much, but Tracy Letts as the head of the narcotics bureau is a plus. All in all, the rambling movie is mostly memorable for what it omits and for what it is not.

In the National Archive documents pertaining to the meeting, there is a memorandum from Krogh, explaining that "Presley indicated that he thought the Beatles had been a real force for anti-American spirit...The president nodded in agreement...then indicated that those who use drugs are also those in the vanguard of anti-American protest. Violence, drug usage, dissent, protest, all seem to merge in generally the same group of young people..."

"[Presley] also mentioned that he is studying Communist brainwashing and the drug culture for over ten years." [sic]

The irony, of course, is that while Presley was seeking to procure an undercover narcotics agent's badge, he was addicted to a combination of drugs that would lead to his untimely death in 1977 at the age of 42. "The narc badge represented some kind of ultimate power to him," wife Priscilla Presley wrote in her memoir, *Elvis and Me*. "With the federal narcotics badge, he [believed he] could legally enter any country both wearing guns and carrying any drugs he wished." This is not really the stuff of comedy.

The American entertainment business grinds up and generally throws away talents as part of its doing business. The example of Prince is only the most recent. The greater the success, the generally more fatal the process of being ground up.

Most of Nixon's years in office (1969-74) were consumed by crisis. The United States would suffer a major defeat in Vietnam during his administrations. Nixon faced enormous unrest, from the labor movement, from students, from African Americans. Only six months or so before the Presley/Nixon encounter, the Ohio National Guard killed four students and wounded nine, firing 67 rounds in 13 seconds, and setting off a virtual general strike of college students. The Watergate scandal ultimately drove Nixon out of office in disgrace.

The postscript of *Elvis & Nixon* notes that Krogh, head of the "Special Investigation Unit" in the White House, known as the "Plumbers," went to jail briefly for his part in the 1971 break-in at the offices of war opponent Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist, and that Chapin was jailed for his part in the Watergate affair. One would hardly gather from *Elvis & Nixon* that these "quirky characters" were part of an administration renowned for its crimes at home and abroad.

A Hologram for the King

Based on the 2012 novel by Dave Eggers, the comedy/drama *A Hologram for the King* was written and directed by German filmmaker Tom Tykwer (*Run Lola Run*, 1998, *Heaven*, 2002, *Cloud Atlas*, 2012).

Set in 2010, the movie tells the story of Alan Clay (Tom Hanks), a salesman who has lost everything—home, wife, job—to the recessionary times. He can no longer afford to send his beloved daughter to college. Now employed at an IT firm, Clay is dispatched to Saudi Arabia to pitch a holographic teleconferencing system to the Saudi monarch.

In "The King's Metropolis of Economy and Trade," Alan and his team struggle with unreliable air-conditioning and Wi-Fi. The American befriends his driver Yousef (Alexander Black), "Your guide and hero," who dispenses information, such as where beheadings take place, and "comical" insights like these: in Saudi Arabia, "we don't have unions...we have Filipinos." A giant boil on Alan's back is the physiological expression of his woes, which include chronic jet-lag and an uncooperative king-client.

Luckily for Clay, the Middle Eastern country has five-star medicine and a beautiful physician, Dr. Zahra Hakem (Sarita Choudhury), is on hand to minister to Alan's physical and spiritual needs. For the happy couple, Saudi Arabia becomes the land of milk and honey.

The film promisingly opens with a surreal sequence in which Alan lampoons the American Dream. Like a magic act, his house, car and family disappear in a cloud of purple powder, while he rides a roller coaster to nowhere. All this to the tune of the Talking Heads' "Once in a Lifetime"—("And you may ask yourself

Well...How did I get here?...Same as it ever was, same as it ever was") Unfortunately, those few seconds are the movie's best.

Metaphorically, and perhaps inadvertently, *A Hologram for the King* speaks to circumstances where declining American industry must go begging to Saudi Arabia in competition with Chinese

rivals—who offer the same technology at better prices. However, its primary message seems to be that common ground can be found between the hijab-wearing Zahra, who must submit to gender and religious repression, and Alan, the victim of a collapsing economy. (Hanks is the victim of his own blandness.)

Tykwer immerses himself in the more "spiritual" concerns of middle class layers, ignoring such petty, "humdrum" matters as war, mass uprisings, repression, oil, geopolitics and the fate of the masses of humanity. He is known for his efforts to create his own mental reality.

In a recent interview about *A Hologram for the King*, the director speaks of characters like Zahra: "So, they're just more open-minded than their societies are, and they live this kind of dual life of just waiting for the government to catch up. And they will, they say, 'We don't need a revolution, it's just going to be a mess. We just need to be patient and there's going to be more and more people like us.'" One does not know whether to laugh or cry!

As we noted in the WSWS review of Tykwer's 2002 movie, *Heaven*, his "specific contribution to international cinema seems to be his commitment to subjectivism." The filmmaker claimed that subjectivity "is the most exciting part of filmmaking. *Subjectivity, that's all what it is.* [Emphasis added] And the ability to transport subjectivity to such a high degree, and relate it to other people. I really want films to throw me into someone else's subjectivity."

The WSWS went on to state that "grasping of 'someone else's subjectivity' is of course vital for an artist, but such a comment leaves out the critical issue: is there an objective content to this subjectivity, or are we simply wandering in a maze of personal perception, where everyone's opinion is as good as everyone else's?"

In *A Hologram for the King*, Tykwer has sacrificed an accurate presentation of Saudi society to his personal sense of how affluent, "more open-minded" layers of the population can navigate their way through troubled times and conditions. Their distance from and contempt for the restive masses make Tykwer and his ilk retreat further into themselves. How else can one explain such a film as *A Hologram for the King*, with its air of condescension combined with a determined effort to invent and advance its own self-serving "narrative"?



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