Culture

Putting the boot in

One foot in fantasy, one foot in reality. Alison Jackson's latest film fleshes out the tabloid myths surrounding England's manager. Andrew Mueller gets the full picture

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Alison Jackson's new film, Sven: The Coach, The Cash & His Lovers, is either an incredibly sharp satire of our irredeemably tabloid-ised, fame-addled popular culture, or a symptom of it, or both. At one level, Sven... is a straightforward documentary about the outgoing England manager, deploying archive footage and talking-head commentary from congruent personalities, including former football players Graeme Le Saux and Les Ferdinand, and football journalists Jim White and James Richardson.

It is also, however, an exercise in imagined voyeurism, using Jackson's trademark lookalikes and grainy CCTV film stock to depict scenes we have never seen - but have been encouraged to envisage - and using interview contributions from those involved with the non-football aspects of Eriksson's life (Faria Alam, Max Clifford) as well as those who, for reasons surpassing understanding, are interested in these (like the inexplicably employed Amanda Platell, whose presence in this film it would be nice to be able to regard as a grotesque lampoon of fatuous, prurient Daily Mail variety moral self-righteousness).

Jackson's bogus set-ups in Sven: The Coach, The Cash & His Lovers include: Eriksson and his assistant Tord Grip on English road trips, reading porn and eating weird Swedish food as they struggle to find a town called Sheffield Wednesday; Eriksson being yelled at down the phone by a fishwifeish Victoria Beckham; Eriksson in the sauna swapping tales of the bedroom with David Beckham; Eriksson carefully stacking his dishwasher before seeing to Faria Alam on a kitchen bench; Eriksson fleeing a bombardment of crockery flung by an enraged Nancy Dell'Olio; Eriksson being the only man left alive who wouldn't suspect that an Arab offering large amounts of money for nebulous reasons might be a News Of The World reporter in drag; Eriksson braiding Rio Ferdinand's hair; Eriksson blowing the nose of a tearful David Seaman after England's quarter-final exit at the 2002 World Cup; Eriksson engaging in a session of mutal naked herring-smearing with fellow Swede Ulrika Jonsson.

It all amounts to a well-crafted hallucination of what Eriksson's life might be like if everything printed about it in tabloids was true. Platell's contributions in particular supplement the illusion, if inadvertently, by epitomising the absurd interest that her depressingly prevalent mindset professes to take in such matters. Of the Eriksson/Jonsson liaison, she actually remarks that "it's not very often as a journalist that you're staggered by a piece of news". This is true enough - it's just that jolting most hacks out of our ennui requires hijacked planes hitting office blocks, or similar, rather than two consenting adults having sex, with or without the involvement of fish.

This is all amusing knockabout stuff, even if the richest comedy is unintentional, like the straightfaced assertion of Faria Alam - a woman whose only claim on public attention is a willingness to sell the details of her sex life for money - that she was attracted to Eriksson because "he has this mystery about him... that's the way I am." The question is: what's the point?

"I'm depicting what exists in the public imagination," says Alison Jackson. She has done this before, of course. In her book, Private, her television series, Double Take, and previous films, The Secret Election and Not The Royal Wedding, Jackson examined the classes of people about whom we are constantly told more than we should want to know - politicians, royalty - and presented the popular myth as truth: the Queen playing with her corgis, the Blairs cavorting in the pool, David Beckham displaying an "El Becks" tattoo across his rump.

"We live our lives through screens now," continues Jackson, "whether they are televisions or our computers or our phones, and screens are hugely addictive. There is a gap between the facts, and how the media portrays stuff, and that's what these images fill. I'm especially interested in how we think we know people through imagery - it goes straight from eye to psyche, which makes it very powerful, and very seductive. It also makes it very easy to lie."

For celebrities and filmmakers both. Jackson's portrayal of Eriksson is faithful to the tabloid myth: a bespectacled Scandinavian iceberg concealing a bonfire perceived only by those who get close to him. She shows the apparently vague, disengaged, barely interested manager who nevertheless manages to rouse his players to such feats as England's splendid 5-1 tonking of Germany in 2001. She also shows the outwardly cool, wan, even henpecked man who is somehow capable of weakening the knees of attractive women decades his junior (Faria Alam is predictably excruciating on this front, reminiscing about what a "giving" lover Eriksson was). When asked if it matters how accurate any of this is, Jackson's reply is an untrumpably astute summation of modern celebrity worship.

"We know," she says, "that when we see something, we can't really believe it, but we're at a stage now where we don't care." One beneficiary of this syndrome, and a key cast member of Sven..., is Andy Harmer, who for the last eight and a half years has made a living as a David Beckham lookalike. Working with Jackson, he has been mobbed by fans from Tokyo to Madrid - whose ardour, weirdly, barely dwindles when they realise he's not the real thing.

"I think," says Harmer, "that even if they realise I'm not David Beckham, people can still take my picture and try and convince their friends they've seen him, so they play along." That, at least, is the case in Spain and Japan. In Britain, as Jackson suggests, the increasingly indiscriminate cult of celebrity has advanced to the extent that someone who looks like someone famous becomes famous in their own right. "When I started," says Harmer, "people came up to me because they thought I was David Beckham. Now, they come up to me and say, 'You're the lookalike guy.' Some even know my name, which is bizarre."

Harmer is touchingly protective of his doppelgänger, admitting to unease with some of Jackson's suggestions. "I do have reservations," he says. "I don't mind doing the tongue-in-cheek stuff, but I don't like to get into stuff to do with his [alleged] affair, I don't think it's right. Anything that gets too personal... I don't think it's on."

Jackson is a little more relaxed about the possible reactions of her principal subject. "What can I say?" she asks. "I don't want Sven to be furious about it. I wouldn't want to upset him. I haven't made the film to wind him up. And I hope he wins the World Cup." She is not alone in hoping that her film's opening sequence, showing a bathtub full of naked England players giving Sven the bumps as he brandishes the Fifa trophy, has the qualities of oracle.

"If they win it," says Andy Harmer, whose fortune could be made by a couple of well-placed free kicks this summer, "then everyone is invited to my party." Jackson describes Sven..., and her work in general, as having "one foot in fantasy and one foot in reality" and this is precisely what grants it its potence: in the area of the media she is contemplating, so does everything. All tabloid/celebrity journalism is, to a greater or lesser extent, a fraud, if a much less artful one than Alison Jackson's meticulously constructed set-ups. When the stories which are printed about the famous are utter rubbish - which they are, frequently - the media pretend they're true and the readers pretend to believe them. When the stories are actually correct - when, for example, an England football manager has sex - the media pretend it matters, and the readers pretend they care.

• Sven: The Coach, The Cash & His Lovers, Mon, 9pm, More4; Thu,10pm, C4

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