

SHOOTING THE PRESIDENT:

THE DEPICTION OF THE AMERICAN PRESIDENCY ON FILM AND TELEVISION FROM JOHN F. KENNEDY TO JOSIAH BARTLET

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Abstract

This thesis – *Shooting the President: Screen Depictions of the American Presidency from John F. Kennedy to Josiah Bartlet* – examines the depiction of the presidency in American film and television from 1960 until the present day.

In this study I explore the relationships between the presidency and Hollywood, particularly in the context of genre structures. I examine the constructions of specific presidential mythologies based on the real presidencies of Kennedy, Nixon and Clinton and the construction of fictional presidencies in the television series *The West Wing*. In four sets of case studies, I will chart the changing significance of each president through different genres, looking particularly at how each presidential mythology is affected by the anxieties and fashions of the contemporary political and social world. I also examine the ways in which the appearance of presidentiality is created within each text by various means including set design, the choice of actor, the use of dialogue and the framing of particular characters.

The aims of my thesis are to demonstrate how a telegenic style of politics formed during and after the Kennedy presidency can be seen to be both represented and enhanced in genre films and television series. I chart the relationship of this new mediated style of presidency through my case studies as it faces challenges such as Watergate, Clinton's sex scandals and the terrorist attacks of September 11 2001. Finally, I aim to demonstrate through a close reading of the latter seasons of *The West Wing* how the American public can be seen to be prepared by its popular media for the success of the first black president, Barack Obama.

Acknowledgements

This thesis took eight years to complete. I began working on it the day before the World Trade Centre towers were attacked and destroyed in September 2001. George W. Bush had only just been elected, Clinton's biography was three years away, the second season of *The West Wing* had just come to an end, and Barack Obama was in the middle of serving a second term in the Illinois Senate. Whilst I have been working on my PhD, I've got married, bought a house, bought a different house and acquired a rabbit.

No one could focus on such a rapidly evolving subject as this without monumental support, advice and assistance.

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Introduction

On 26 September 1960, a major shift occurred in the relationship between the presidency and the screen media as John F Kennedy and Richard Nixon met for the first ever televised presidential debate. The debate was significant in several respects. It was the first real demonstration of the style and media skills of Kennedy, especially compared with Nixon's corresponding inadequacies: Rick Perlstein describes the implications of the debate on the public perceptions of Kennedy and Nixon as follows:

Kennedy styled himself the very incarnation of youth: of action, of charisma, of passion, risk-taking, stylishness and idealism and even heedlessness. Nixon, so recently the fair-haired boy of postwar politics – only four years older than Kennedy! – had let himself become the race's rumped old man. At the ballot box it was almost a tie. On television, in retrospect, it looked as if John F. Kennedy had won in a landslide.¹

Nixon refused make-up before appearing on television despite having recently spent time in hospital and as such, regardless of the policies and initiatives he was debating, appeared the less vital of the two candidates. By contrast Kennedy, recognising that on television his appearance was of equal, if not greater, importance than his debating skill to his success, used make-up. Before the debate, Kennedy was six points behind in the polls. His success on television paved the way to his (albeit narrow) victory over Nixon.

As well as being a watershed moment in Kennedy's popularity, the first presidential debate was also an important tipping point in the relationship between the medium of television and presidential politics. In historian Iwan Morgan's words, 'the first ever presidential debate on 26 September marked the coming of age of television in American politics.'² The debate was not the first time the worlds of television and presidential politics had met, however. In 1952, Nixon famously appeared on television to defend himself against accusations of financial irregularities. This appearance was notorious in the ways he used his family life as emotional ballast to his speech. The 1960 debate, in contrast, is important in the way that it displays two different approaches to the presidency in competition with one another. Nixon favoured, as he did in 1952, an emotional, textual approach to the debate while Kennedy favoured an

approach focused on physical appearance. Stella Bruzzi suggests that the difference between Kennedy and Nixon's approaches to the debate had a wider, historical impact on the perception of the presidency for decades after:

The president's image is an effective metaphor for the state of the presidency within public consciousness, and the Kennedy-Nixon binary that has come to dominate the representation of American political history exemplifies the essential opposition. Whereas Kennedy's image symbolises cohesion and stability, Nixon's more ambivalent image symbolises disunity and instability.³

The contest between Kennedy and Nixon highlights a major shift from the politician as a policy debater to the politician as screen icon, and, in the words of John Hellmann, 'like a film star, Kennedy became a mirror image of the citizen's desire, an idealized reflection.'⁴

The televised meeting between Kennedy and Nixon in 1960 was, therefore, a moment that defined a new set of priorities in the sphere of politics, a style of leadership that prioritises image and personality over policy and debate. As Bruzzi notes, the differences between Kennedy and Nixon had a far-reaching historical impact on the national perception of the presidency. Indeed, I argue that particular themes and tensions arising from the contrasts between the two candidates affect screen depictions of the presidency into the 1990s and beyond. The 1960 debate is important in the context of my thesis as it establishes a chronological starting point for a series of themes that recur throughout my analysis of the depictions of the presidency on screen. These themes include the tensions between the public and private worlds of the president, an increasing national desire for the exposure of the details of the presidency, the blurring of the aesthetics of Washington and Hollywood and the effects of fictional reproductions of the presidency on the reality of the political world. The debate and the Kennedy presidency that followed, were important moments that signalled the transition from an old to a new style of presidency. Since the Kennedy presidency, the physical appearance of the president has become an increasingly significant issue. In his analysis of the Kennedy presidential myth, John Hellmann assesses the Kennedy/Nixon debate:

How did Kennedy win the debate with Nixon? Again, commentators have agreed on the essential points. First, Kennedy addressed the audience, taking his central campaign theme to the viewer, while Nixon addressed Kennedy, responding “me too” to Kennedy’s central theme before rebutting Kennedy’s specific claims in standard debate fashion. Second, Kennedy simply looked better. He appeared crisp, confident, handsome, earnest and sincere, where Nixon appeared bland, worried, sallow, distracted, and untrustworthy.⁵

Hellmann’s analysis reveals the importance of the visual image in the success of the Kennedy presidency but also points towards the failure of Nixon in the same context. A frequently repeated comment concerning the 1960 debate is that while Kennedy won in polls taken of the television audience, those who heard the debate on the radio or later read the transcript judged Nixon the winner.⁶ This view highlights Kennedy’s greater success in managing his appearance, but is also suggestive of the difference between an old and new approach to the presidency. Nixon’s success on radio and his focus on political substance over surface images may be seen as reminiscent of earlier presidencies, particularly Franklin D. Roosevelt’s regular radio addresses. Nixon was, in effect, running for the presidency using the conventions of the media of the 1940s and 1950s, while Kennedy was more alert to the importance of being telegenic, as Myron A. Levine states:

John Kennedy was the first presidential master of the new medium of television. TV offered the president new opportunities to communicate directly with the public, bypassing reporters. Presidents no longer had to suffer the risks of being too available to the press. Presidential press conferences became less frequent: they also became less a means of providing hard answers to the questions of the press and more a stage from which the president could reach the American public directly.⁷

The effects of this new, image-led style of presidency conducted on television inspire a set of important debates that runs through my study of the presidency on screen. A major aim of my thesis is to chart this televised, telegenic presidency through big and small screen depictions of Kennedy, Nixon and Clinton. I follow this style and its representation in screen presidencies from Kennedy to Clinton, and finally assess how the character of President Bartlet in *The West Wing* (1999-2006) offers an end of the millennium critique of the style. My argument is that this new style can be seen in retrospective depictions of the different presidencies, such as Oliver Stone’s *JFK* or Alan Pakula’s *All the President’s Men* (1976),

and is part of a wider, persistent set of presidential mythologies. In *The Kennedy Obsession*, John Hellmann looks for the source of the myth of Kennedy. In his words:

the popular hero known as John F. Kennedy as a product, an image designed to both express and elicit desire. This object was constructed through a series of hero tales that, told and retold, produced a politician as the hero of an unfolding mythology.⁸

Hellmann charts the source and trajectory of this myth from Kennedy's childhood to his assassination. The Kennedy myth, Hellmann argues, was inseparable from the developing mass media culture during the 20th century, and that by the time of the 1960 presidential campaign, the ubiquity of television and the blurring of the distinctions between the glamour of Hollywood and Washington in magazines such as *Time* and *Life*, meant that Kennedy may be seen as the first President for whom the commodity of image was intertwined with his politics. The 1960 debate between Nixon and Kennedy highlights this as Hellmann suggests:

The importance of this debate to the 1960 election can hardly be exaggerated. Kennedy went into it the underdog, an unproven leader facing the heir apparent of a highly popular administration; he emerged the favourite.⁹

But it also highlighted the differences between the old and the new style politics where image and the construction of a public persona, in Hellmann's terms a 'mythology' becomes an essential tool in the campaigning for, and the conducting of, a presidency. Hellmann's introduction to the Kennedy myth is expanded and advanced by John Henggeler in his book *The Kennedy Persuasion*.¹⁰ Henggeler traces the use of the Kennedy image through the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s by different presidents and presidential candidates. Henggeler suggests that 'the function of the Kennedy myth enables us to see how the American presidency has evolved' and in his study, the Kennedy myth becomes a mobile signifier, flexing to suit the ideological purposes of both Democrats and Republicans.¹¹

Hellmann's description of the 1960 presidential debate describing a 'confident, handsome, earnest and sincere' Kennedy versus a 'bland, worried, sallow, distracted, and untrustworthy' Nixon is indicative of a wider set of studies that compare the success of the Kennedy myth with the failure of the Nixon myth.¹² Mark Feeney's examination of the relationship between

the Nixon presidency and Hollywood cinema, *Nixon at the Movies* offers an interesting series of contrasts with Hellman and Henggeler's studies of the Kennedy myth.¹³ While Hellmann and Henggeler focus on the public construction of the Kennedy myth using the President's relationship and similarity with Hollywood celebrity as a part of this process, Feeney examines the indirect, private relationship between Nixon and the movies. In short, Feeney focuses on Nixon's reputed fascination with the cinema of Hollywood, studying both the films he watched and the films in which he either appeared or was depicted. Just as Hellmann considers the role of Kennedy in his own mythic construction, Feeney considers the desire of Nixon to emulate this, in his words:

To his dying day, he was a work in progress, a flesh-and-blood story arc, forever in search of an uplifting ending and never finding one. There were all those "new Nixons" so arduously emerging from a man who kept trying to reinvent himself.¹⁴

The portrait of Nixon painted by Feeney is that of a man preoccupied by movies and by his own lack of celebrity image. Crucially, this depiction of Nixon emphasises his role as spectator of films, a film fan, compared with the direct relationship of Kennedy with Hollywood. *Nixon at the Movies* thus highlights the differences between Nixon and Kennedy and, importantly, the fact that Nixon was unable to construct a stable public image for himself. This inconsistency of image, Feeney argues, made Nixon an ideal candidate for depiction on film:

The very traits that made Nixon so ill suited to politics – the sense of inauthenticity, the personal uncomfortableness – endow him with even more possibilities onscreen than off¹⁵

In the context of my thesis, this view of Nixon is an important one. The difference between the screen depictions of Kennedy and Nixon is not just a binary opposition of Kennedy-good, Nixon-bad. As Feeney argues, the myth of Nixon is such that his depiction in film is notable by the variety of genre films in which he becomes a central character, as evidenced by my thesis, from biopic to teen-movie comedy. In his article *The King's Two Bodies: Lincoln, Wilson, Nixon and Presidential Self Sacrifice*, Michael Rogin expands on this depiction of Nixon as a president searching for a stable image by examining his preoccupations with past

presidencies such as Lincoln's and its effect on the imperial organisation of his own presidency.¹⁶ Like Feeney, Rogin exposes how Nixon fails as president, but whereas Feeney relates Nixon's failure as president to his failure to find an attractive public image, Rogin examines the conflicts between the private and public face of Nixon. In Rogin's words:

Like a bad actor too preoccupied with his audience, Nixon imitated only the external signs of the character he had chosen to play. He could not play the role from within. That is why Nixon seemed self-consciously to manipulate his appearances before others and at the same time to be driven by irrational forces ("the heart") beyond his control.¹⁷

Both Feeney and Rogin agree that Nixon, unlike Kennedy, was a failure in his attempts to manage his public persona. Feeney relates Nixon's failure to his constant desire to fashion a mythology and relates it to his relationship with the movies while Rogin finds a source for it in the tensions between the shifting nature of Nixon's public persona with attempts to retain the privacy of the presidency, particularly through the Watergate scandal.

Following Hellmann and Henggeler's studies it becomes clear that the Kennedy presidency signalled a major shift in the way in which the presidency was perceived by the public and stage-managed by the politicians. I would suggest that the debate occurred at a point in American history when a boom in the importance of television in American culture converged with a recognition of the need for politicians to be telegenic in order to gain popularity. This convergence continued to be a major factor in the political and cultural terrain of America through the decades following the debate, and continues to influence the ways in which the presidency is contested and conducted. In my thesis, I want to investigate this new style and the effect it has had on screen depictions of the presidency across a range of different genres. I want to expand on Hellmann and Henggeler's work, to look at how these new, image led presidency mythologies are represented on screen.

Critic Michael Coyne states:

The presidency itself and the entire presidential election process are part of America's popular, as well as political, culture. Presidents, especially in our telegenic, telecentric age, are as much purveyors as they are consumers of US popular culture. Little wonder that the presidency, America's greatest gift to

any citizen, has enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with Hollywood movies – America’s greatest gift to the world.¹⁸

My aim in this thesis is to explore this symbiotic relationship through the decades following the Kennedy presidency. To this end, I examine the relationship between the depictions of real presidencies and the contemporary political world in a series of film or television productions. I look at how this new telecentric style of presidency is represented and criticised in films from the late 1970s, 1980s, 1990s and in the television series *The West Wing*. In doing so I engage in a variety of related and interconnected debates: my thesis seeks to contribute towards a body of work that straddles a number of different areas of criticism including film studies, historical studies, and political theory. By analysing key films and television series that depict both real and imaginary presidents, I aim to achieve the following: firstly, to assess how the range of screen presidents have their basis in the image-preoccupied culture suggested by the Kennedy/Nixon debate and expanded by the increasing importance of appearance and telegenic appeal in the presidency. Secondly, I aim to examine the ways in which a range of different genres affect and build upon particular presidential myths and, crucially, anchor these myths in contemporary cultural anxieties and preoccupations. Thirdly, I aim to examine how the concept of ‘presidentiality’ evolves through screen depictions, and to examine the various ways this quality might be recreated or fabricated, particularly through the choice of actor for the presidential role. Before I unpack these aims, it may be useful to examine the critical landscape that focuses on the depiction of the presidency on screen.

Critical Landscape of Film and Television Depictions of the Presidency

The 1990s cycle of films depicting the presidency that includes *Dave* (1993), *The American President* (1995), *Independence Day* (1996) and *Air Force One* (1997) inspired a corresponding cycle of critical literature including monographs, collections of essays, conferences and journal articles. These debates examined the depiction of American politics in the Hollywood cinema from a variety of critical perspectives, time scales and films. Firstly I want to look at two important examples of this analytical cycle that give an overview of the

genre of the political film: *American Politics in Hollywood Film* by Ian Scott published in 2000 and, more recently, *Hollywood Goes to Washington* by Michael Coyne published in 2008.

Scott's monograph examines the broad depiction of the American political establishment on film from two distinct perspectives. The first might be described as the way that particular films reflect the democratic ideology, in his words, 'the themes, beliefs and values that are part of the American creed.'¹⁹ The second perspective is the role that the political film plays in the creation of a mythological simplification of the complexities of American politics, which, he argues:

Create[s] symbolic imprints and allow American politics to be considered relative and relevant to its citizenry, even though its processes and laws are often far more complex and abstract, certainly than some Hollywood depictions would have its audience believe.²⁰

Scott suggests that these particular Hollywood films are responsible for both representing and even, by popularising idealised visions of Washington, shaping many of the principles of American politics. Within these two perspectives, Scott examines the relationships between Hollywood and Washington, in particular charting the chronological progression of the political film from the classic studio era of the 1930s and 1940s, to the cycle of films in the 1990s. To this end, he divides the films he considers into what he describes as 'their proper generic form' thereby suggesting that the political film is too broad a category to be a genre in itself. Scott's second and last chapters bookend his analysis, comparing the relationship between Hollywood and politics in the 1930s and 1940s, and the 1990s. In the intervening chapters, Scott defines what he considers the key generic categories for the political film: the campaign film, the thriller and the biopic. In these chapters, he groups films from a range of periods demonstrating the evolution of each genre and the chronological developments of the political relationships between the generic forms and the political content of the films. For example, in the chapter that focuses on political biography, Scott traces the history of the relationship between the biopic and the political film, concluding that films ranging from

Birth of a Nation (1915) to *Nixon* (1995) encourage a connection between the individual and the office. To this end, Scott argues that within the narrative preoccupations of the biopic, the focus on the personal ambitions of the central character and his or her need for public acceptance is inseparable from the ideological construction of leadership. In his words, in the political biopic, 'the need is always to drive political and ideological discourse through the archways of ambition and character and the attention given to the self.'²¹ The fact that the biopic genre is an ideal forum to make the connection between the personal and political lives of the President is an important one, as is Scott's demonstration of how this connection can be seen to be repeated through the history of cinema. In terms of Scott's thesis, it is clear that the political biopic serves as both a representation and as a shaping of political ideologies: the genre centralises those in political power whilst simultaneously narrating that power as a product of personality and individualism. Each of these chapters serves to examine how three subgenres of the political film in part remain constant, and in part adapt through, 'periodic political and institutional re-evaluation.'²² When considering the biopic genre, Scott focuses primarily on the relationship between the film and the historical source, on the ideological agenda behind the production of the film rather than on its formal construction. I suggest Scott's study leaves space for a closer consideration of the relationships between the depiction of the presidency and the generic structures of the films. I argue that for a comprehensive understanding of the political content of films such as *Nixon* and *JFK* (1991), a more extensive consideration of specific generic conventions is important: Scott's decision to focus his study on only three generic forms means that while his choice of films is historically broad, he necessarily places restrictions on the number of films he considers and the depth to which each is examined. For example, his analysis of *JFK* takes place in a chapter on comparing the conspiracy thriller genre with 1970s paranoia films such as *The Parallax View* (1974) and *All the President's Men*. While it is certainly the case that *JFK* may be considered an early major factor in the 1990s cycle of conspiracy films and television series that included *Absolute Power* (1997), *Murder at 1600* (1997), *Shadow Conspiracy* (1997) and *The X-Files* (1993-2002), it is equally true that an understanding of the uses of biopic conventions in *JFK*

is also crucial when considering Stone's later film, *Nixon*. Scott, therefore provides a background and the inspiration for a more specific consideration of this cycle of films, one which focuses more closely on the individual generic influences and relates them to the shape of the screen presidency.

In his 2008 study of American politics on screen, *Hollywood Goes to Washington*, Michael Coyne also approaches his subject through an examination of genre. Coyne acknowledges the complications caused by over-simplifying the generic backgrounds of the political film stating:

The political film is a genre by virtue of content rather than form. Like the thriller, which might disparately contain elements of police procedure, detective story, robbery, murder, gangster saga, film noir, 'whodunnit' or any one of a dozen 'crime movie' scenarios, the political film is essentially fluid. The genre is keenly attuned to the temper of the times, effortlessly absorbing contemporary political themes and issues, but, crucially, it is also *trans-generic*, and it crosses the borders of various Hollywood genres.²³

Coyne convincingly argues that the political film as a genre generally requires other generic forms, such as the conspiracy thriller or the comedy drama, to give the film a narrative shape. Coyne posits an alternative organisational structure to that of Scott, suggesting a set of six 'phases' in the genre based on collections of films that respond to historical periods of political change or upheaval:

1. The Mythic/Idealistic Phase: FDR, Celebration of Democracy, Threats of Fascism
2. The Pragmatic Phase: 'Tough Liberalism' in the 'Camelot' Era, Kennedy and Johnson
3. The Paranoiac Phase: Vietnam, Nixon, Watergate and its aftermath
4. The Nostalgic Phase: Reagan, Bush I and the Early Clinton Years
5. The Schizophrenic Phase: Movies in the Age of Oklahoma City and Whitewater
6. The Apocalyptic Phase: Bush II, 9/11, Iraq and the Patriot Act.²⁴

Coyne defines these phases as follows: the first phase groups films from 1930 to 1960 and includes films that reflect an optimism in the 1930s following FDR's election, that react to the

threat of fascism in the 1940s before and after World War II and to the threat of Communism during the McCarthy witch-hunts in the 1950s. The second phase constitutes films from the 1960s that demonstrate a movement from what Coyne calls “procedural” melodramas’ such as *Advise and Consent* (1962) to apocalyptic paranoia thrillers such as *Seven Days in May* (1964) or *Fail Safe* (1964), films in which an honourable President is shown as being under threat from the military or the breakdown of technology.²⁵ It is with the third phase of films onwards that my thesis is primarily concerned. In the third phase of films, from 1970-1980, Coyne suggests that paranoia had become the ‘dominant trend’ within the genre. Put simply, the films from this period demonstrate a thematic shift from a threatened to a threatening leadership. Films such as *The Conversation* (1974), *Three Days of the Condor* (1975) and *All the President’s Men* (1976) repositioned the source of the paranoia from the top down, from corruption in corporations, from the intelligence services or, crucially, from the presidency itself. This shift, Coyne suggests, may be seen as a result of socially and politically traumatic events including the escalation of the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal. The fourth phase of films demonstrates a move away from the trauma of Watergate and Vietnam, reflecting instead the nostalgic, mythic narratives of the Reagan presidency. Coyne suggests that during the Reagan era, these nostalgic depictions of the presidency on screen moved from the cinema to the television in miniseries such as *Kennedy* (1983), *North and South* (1985) and *War and Remembrance* (1988). Opposing this Reagan-inspired nostalgia for the past, Oliver Stone began to make films that either explicitly criticised the Reagan presidency such as *Salvador* (1986) and *Wall Street* (1987), or that recalled the previous phase of films depicting the corruption of the Vietnam War in *Platoon* (1986) and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) or the corruption of authority in *JFK*.²⁶ The first term of Bill Clinton’s presidency saw a return of the nostalgic political film to the cinema in comedies such as *Dave*, *The American President* and *My Fellow Americans* (1996). The fifth phase of films covers the period between the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 and the election of George W. Bush. Coyne suggests that the films in this phase reflect a fracturing of the public perception of politics caused by Clinton’s role in the Whitewater and the Monica Lewinsky scandals. Hence

in this period, films which lionise the figure of the President such as *Independence Day* and *Air Force One* are produced at the same time as films which offer a depiction of a corrupt or morally ambiguous presidency such as *Wag the Dog* (1997) and *Primary Colors* (1998). Finally, Coyne brings his study up-to-date with his sixth phase, a period he describes as being from 2001 onwards. Coyne's justification for this phase focuses on the trauma and massive shift in popular culture following the September 11 2001 terrorist attacks, the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the consequent effect on the public perception of the presidency. Coyne includes in this phase such films as Michael Moore's documentaries *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) and *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) and remakes of earlier films, *The Manchurian Candidate* (2004) and *All the King's Men* (2006).

The rest of Coyne's study generally follows this thematic structure as opposed to adopting a generic break-down of the political film: the second chapter examines the depictions of presidents before Kennedy, the third focuses on Kennedy and Nixon. Coyne also digresses from this chronological structure to examine what he considers important moments or conflicts within the history of the genre, such as the specific effect of the fears of extreme left or right wing American groups on the political film or the history of the conspiracy thriller and its relationship with the political genre. Coyne locates films both within the contemporary political world and in the context of the history of the genre. For example, when considering *The American President* and *The West Wing* both written by Aaron Sorkin, Coyne suggests that the two texts are influenced by a fusion of an idealistic interpretation of the contemporary Clinton presidency (the fifth phase) with a nostalgic return to the films of the early 1960s such as *Advise and Consent* and *The Best Man* (1964), films from the second phase that, in Coyne's words, 'tempered idealism with pragmatism.'²⁷ Coyne's use of this phase structure allows him to contextualise each film and television series within a broad political and historical framework. The methodology is useful as it acknowledges the scale and thematic complexity of the genre and, like Scott, Coyne provides a background to a more detailed examination of the presidential film. I would suggest that, expanding on Scott's study, Coyne

acknowledges the complexity of the political film genre, and like Scott, provides space for further study into the ways different generic structures have on the presentation of the political figures.

Both Coyne's and Scott's analyses of the political film genre are persuasive and useful. Scott's work on individual genres such as the political biopic and the campaign movies give an idea of the range and population of particular narrative variations of the political film, while Coyne's phase structure offers an overview of the political film genre that accommodates a trans-generic analysis of films such as *JFK* or *Nixon*. Crucially, they both suggest the importance of genre in the framing of the presidential figure, and both allow room for more detailed, specific analyses of individual films.

The 1990s cycle of presidential films and the debut in 1999 of the television series *The West Wing* also inspired two collections of essays edited by Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor. The first collection, *Hollywood's White House: The American Presidency in Film and Television*²⁸ is divided into three sections that acknowledge a split between those films that depict real presidents and those that depict fictional ones. The first section contains essays that examine early examples of the presidency on screen, from *Birth of a Nation* to *Wilson* (1944). The second section considers the development of the fictional presidency. Essays of note from this second section are 'Who's in Charge Here? Technology and the Presidency in *Fail-Safe* (1964) and *Colossus* (1970)' by Robert E. Hunter, 'The 100 Million\$ Men: Presidential Action/Adventure Heroes of *Independence Day* (1996) and *Air Force One* (1997)' by John Shelton Lawrence, and 'A Man of His Word: Aaron Sorkin's American Presidents' by Loren P. Quiring.²⁹ The first two of these essays follow a similar methodology to my thesis. Hunter examines the impact of the Cold War thriller genre on the presidential movies, while Lawrence does the same with the action thriller genre. Each uses the relationship between film genre and subject matter to contemporise the depiction of the presidency, the former in

the 1960s and early 1970s, and the latter in the 1990s. They both approach the subject of the depiction of the presidency using an analysis of genre structures.

This methodology is continued in the third part of the collection. These essays focus on the most recent examples of the screen presidency from the 1990s. These again follow the methodology of my thesis, analysing the presidency across a range of generic forms including the teen comedy, the biopic, the campaign movie and the satirical television series. Where these essays expand upon the ones in the previous section is in their consideration of the relationship between the screen presidencies and post-Kennedy presidential mythologies. Luc Herman's article 'Bestowing Knighthood: The Visual Aspects of Bill Clinton's Camelot Legacy'³⁰ examines the connection between the Clinton and Kennedy eras, focusing particularly on the development of the image-led presidential style. Like Henggeler, Herman is concerned with the commodification of the Kennedy myth or, in his terms, the 'Camelot metaphor.'³¹ He focuses on the use of the myth during Clinton's first campaign for the presidency and notes how the image of Kennedy was used throughout Clinton's attempt to position himself as a figurehead of a new generation. Herman argues that the popularity of Stone's *JFK* and the effect of that film in the resurgence of interest in Kennedy, encouraged Clinton to use a photograph of himself as a schoolboy meeting Kennedy in his campaign. This visual connection, coupled with the popularising groundwork performed by Stone's movie is suggestive not just of the malleability of the Kennedy myth, but also of the reliance of the myth on image and iconography. Using a similar methodology but to different ends, David Haven Blake's essay on the comedic depiction of the presidency, 'Hollywood, Impersonation and Presidential Celebrity in the 1990s' examines the relationship in the 1990s between the presidential image and the development of presidency celebrity.³² Blake suggests that the screen depictions of the president in films such as *The American President*, *Dave* and *My Fellow Americans* reflect a growing preoccupation, also demonstrated on television in *Saturday Night Live* (1975-ongoing), with the impersonation of the president and with the transformation of the presidency into a visual, as opposed to political, signifier:

The Oval Office becomes a familiar, comfortable, and synthetically realistic place. As Hollywood's impersonation of American democracy at work, the president emerges from these comedies as just another "idol of consumption," to borrow Leo Lowenthal's famous phrase, a figure who expects nothing but to be observed and admired as part of the show.³³

This collection of essays leaves room for a development of the connections between the new style of post-Kennedy presidency and the depiction of the presidency on screen. The range of different genres studied in this section of Rollins and O'Connor's collection again highlights the importance of genre in the construction and perpetuation of the presidential mythologies of, particularly, Kennedy, Nixon and Clinton. Another strand of critical literature that builds upon similar themes to Coyne, Scott and O'Connor and Rollins' collection is a consideration of the fictionalisation of the presidency on television. Rollins and O'Connor continued their analysis of the depiction of the presidency after the critical and commercial success of *The West Wing* created another cycle of critical literature.

Rollins and O'Connor's second collection of essays, *The West Wing: the American Presidency as Television Drama* continues their study of screen presidencies, but instead of a range of screen presidencies, the essays focus on just one, President Bartlet in *The West Wing*.³⁴ This collection contributes to the debates contained in the earlier book, but shifts the analysis towards the construction of a fictional presidency. *The West Wing* is important as the inspiration for a new cycle of critical literature connected to the studies of film representations of the presidency. An important example of this cycle, *The West Wing: the American Presidency as Television Drama*, was published in 2003 and covers the first two seasons of the series while Melissa Crawley's *Mr. Sorkin Goes to Washington* and Trevor and Shawn Parry-Giles' *The Prime-Time Presidency*, both published in 2006 cover the first four.³⁵ To date, the final three seasons remain under-researched, though considering the return of the series to the public consciousness following revelations of its prophetic anticipation of Barack Obama's victory in 2008, one assumes that further analysis will follow. Crawley investigates the way that the fictional Bartlet presidency is created by imitating the iconography of the real presidency, but also examines the effect *The West Wing* and other screen depictions of the

presidency have on the ways the American public learn about and perceive their president. In other words, Crawley's argument is that *The West Wing* both reflects and affects the political establishment. She first examines how the presidency is initially viewed by children and how this view often remains in adulthood. Her argument is that generally the presidency is perceived in emotional as opposed to political terms. She suggests that the ways in which the presidency is taught to children frames political authority as an extension of the family fused with a sense of national patriotism. Crawley draws a line connecting this psychosocial view of the presidency with Aaron Sorkin's romanticised depiction of Bartlet by observing the role the media has in shaping and perpetuating what she describes as 'presidential schemas.'³⁶ Of particular interest in her monograph are two chapters; the first examines the relationships between the fictional world of *The West Wing* and the real world. She comments on Aaron Sorkin's intentions and on his denial of a particular party bias. She then looks at how the series prioritises the 'essence' of presidency over the reality and how, through set design and lighting, *The West Wing* creates a White House that has an intimate, domestic feel.³⁷ She continues this argument by highlighting the familial relationships between the staff of the White House and how the scripts often meld emotional, personal storylines with political narratives. In this way, Crawley argues, *The West Wing* is able to present a realistic White House that feels authentic by appealing to the emotive feelings of the viewer towards the presidency. In short, *The West Wing* succeeds in faking a presidency by using the basic emotions that are used to teach children about the real presidency. In the following chapter, Crawley expands upon these ideas by looking specifically at the construction and development of the character of Bartlet through the first four seasons. She suggests that Sorkin highlights particular qualities in the character of Bartlet to, in her words, construct 'a fictional president who both recalls and satisfies the American viewer's most basic conceptions of the real president.'³⁸ These qualities, Crawley suggests, are Bartlet as father, Bartlet as intellectual and Bartlet as moral leader. In the chapter, Crawley examines each and concludes that the different aspects of Bartlet allow Sorkin to both develop emotional relationships between his characters and also to engage in a range of real debates surrounding

the nature of the ideal president. Crawley's book is useful in understanding the formation of the character of Bartlet, and essential in understanding the relationships between the narratives of *The West Wing* and the real political world. By engaging in a set of psychosocial debates concerned with how the American public perceives and reacts to the presidency, Crawley is able to develop a theory that points to the success of the series in the depiction of Bartlet as a realistic and ideal president. Critics writing in Rollins and O'Connor's collection of essays engage in a similar debate to Crawley.

Patrick Finn's essay '*The West Wing's* Textual President' investigates the complexity of Sorkin's dialogue and the distinctive visual direction of the series. Essentially Finn relates the series' use of textuality, of the Constitution, The Bible and of Sorkin's dialogue to the construction of, what he calls 'the textual domesticity' of the presidency of Bartlet. In this way, like Crawley, Finn relates the key aspects of Bartlet's character, his paternalism, his faith and his intelligence, to the series' fetishizing of text and history, and questions how this contributes towards the appeal of the series.³⁹

In his essay '*From The American President to The West Wing*', Jason Vest explores the differences between the presidents depicted in *The West Wing* and Aaron Sorkin's earlier film *The American President*.⁴⁰ Vest particularly focuses on the introduction of Bartlet in the pilot episode of the series, suggesting that by delaying his entrance (he appears only in the last scene) Sorkin prioritises the character construction of his entire cast while simultaneously allowing Bartlet to be characterised through the actions and dialogue of his staff members. Vest's important contribution to the debates surrounding *The West Wing*, one that distinguishes him from Crawley, is his discussion of the development of Bartlet's character with the story arcs allowed by ongoing television series. The malleability of the character of Bartlet is a crucial one as it allows the scriptwriters to adapt to real world situations. As I explore in my case studies using Vest's critical template, I am able to explore how *The West Wing* provides a complex commentary on the changing nature of presidency after major

events such as the Lewinsky scandal, the 2000 election and the 9/11 terrorist attacks. These essays add to the debate outlined by Crawley and are enhanced by other essays in the collection by critics such as Myron A. Levine who charts the relationships between, in her words ‘*The West Wing* (NBC) and *The West Wing* (D.C.)’, Pamela Ezell who looks specifically at the illusion of sincerity created by Sorkin in the series, and Heather Richardson Hayton, who applies the medieval socio-political theory of the ‘King’s two bodies’ to the depiction of Bartlet.⁴¹

The debate is also continued in J Elizabeth Clark’s essay ‘The Bartlet Administration and Contemporary Populism in NBC’s *The West Wing*.’⁴² Clark examines the popularity of the series from the perspective of the changing role of Bartlet through the series. Like Vest, she observes how the character of Bartlet adjusts to suit a changing perception of an ideal president in the real world. Clark also observes how the scriptwriters introduce flaws in the character of Bartlet to create a fictional presidency that is, in her words, ‘more human than demagogue, more tangible than idol, more fallible than omnipotent.’⁴³ The overarching theme in all these articles is the distinction between the fictional and real worlds of Washington. The debates all, to varying degrees, repeat Crawley’s central theory of the success of the character of Bartlet being due to an emotional rather than political recreation of the presidency. Another monograph I use throughout my examination of *The West Wing* is Trevor and Shawn Parry-Giles’ *The Prime-Time Presidency*.⁴⁴ Like Crawley’s book, this examines episodes from the first four seasons of the series. Unlike Crawley’s study of the ways in which the series both recreated and attempted to shape the ideal presidency, Trevor and Shawn Parry-Giles focus primarily on the ways in which the series presents and promotes American nationalism. Their analysis, like Crawley’s, begins by observing the ways in which, in the first season, *The West Wing* creates the Bartlet presidency through a fusion of personal and national crises. They then observe how the presentation of this nationalism is influenced through the series by storylines that focus on questions of gender and racial politics. Finally they look closely at how the military is depicted throughout the series and how the non-military background of

Bartlet helps to, in effect, demilitarise the ideal president. It may be said that Trevor and Shawn Parry-Giles perform a similar analysis to Crawley, but rather than observing the domestic construction of the presidency, they focus on the role of the president as an international figure. Where their analysis is most interesting and, in the context of my thesis, useful, is in their close reading of key episodes that appear to position Bartlet's reaction to international crises as an alternative to the reaction of the real presidency. For example, their section focusing on *The West Wing's* reaction to 9/11 opens up a whole new area of debate centred around how series like *The West Wing* can both react to and commentate on a national tragedy such as the terrorist attacks.

The methodology and critical outcomes of these books and articles on *The West Wing* provide an important background to my thesis. The work of Crawley and the essays in Rollins and O'Connor's book in particular focus on a particular area of debate that the more general studies of the screen depictions of the presidency only occasionally allude to. This area, the concept of the recreation of 'presidentiality' in a fictional context is an idea that I build upon not only in my study of *the West Wing*, but also in my examination of the relationship between the actor and the role of the president. In the next two sections, I want to expand upon two important objectives of my thesis, each related to the post-Kennedy style of presidency: firstly the relationship between the presidential myth and genre, and secondly the concept of 'presidentiality' and the choice of actor.

The Presidential Myth and Genre

In my thesis, I follow Hellmann and Hengeller's model of presidential mythology, but I expand it beyond Kennedy. Furthermore, by considering the cultural implications of the presidential myth, I expand the two critics' debate by applying theories of genre and star persona to it. I argue that as well as being a political phenomenon, the new style of presidency has a major cultural impact. My thesis aims to connect this notion of the presidential myth with particular aspects of film and television criticism. It is no accident that two major studies

of the depiction of the presidency on screen, *American Politics in Hollywood Film* by Ian Scott and *Hollywood Goes to Washington* by Michael Coyne, use the genres of the different films as a structure for the criticism. I suggest that the choice of genre for the screen depiction of the presidency, be it biopic, courtroom drama or action thriller, is an important factor in the construction of the presidential myth as defined by Hellman and Henggeler. The structures and audience expectations of the different genres shape the depicted presidential figure in particular ways and with varying results. Furthermore, the shifting popularity of particular genres, for example, the cycles of paranoid thriller films in the 1970s and 1990s, and the teen movie genre in the 1990s, means that the shaping of the presidential myth through the formal structure of the genres is also an important part of the contemporising of the myth. For example, in my thesis I follow the shifting cultural depictions of Nixon from the paranoid thriller *All the President's Men*, through biopic *Nixon* to the teen comedy *Dick*. This range of different genre presentations of Nixon reflects the public and media's attitude towards him in the 1970s, 1990s and 2000s. In this way, throughout my thesis, I connect the formal characteristics of a range of genres and examine how they interact with the depiction of the presidential figure. To do this, I follow the genre analyses of a variety of critics. My definition of genre is catholic – I consider genre forms that are grouped on the basis of narrative characteristics (such as the biopic), production type (such as the television miniseries), critical reaction (such as Jim Collins' 'new sincerity' genre) and socio-political timing (such as the Cold War thriller). With each case study, I assess the fundamental nature of the genre, I justify why the film or television series might be placed within that genre, and finally I examine the effect of that genre on the depiction of the presidency and the construction and perpetuation of the specific presidential myth. I argue that genre cycles reflect political and social preoccupations and anxieties, so by examining them, I use the structures and characteristics of each genre form to illustrate a connection between the time the film or television series is made and the type of president it depicts.

As Coyne suggests, films depicting the presidency tend to be 'trans-generic'. This means that the range of genres I analyse throughout my thesis is broad. While I do not interact with a wide debate on the theories of genre, my thesis is influenced by a number of key critical analyses of specific genre types, and it may be worth at this point outlining them, and suggesting how their content might be built upon.

In *Projecting Paranoia*, Ray Pratt considers the path of the genre of paranoia beginning with film noir in the 1940s, moving to the cold war thrillers of the 1960s, the conspiracy thrillers of the 1970s and finally the new wave of paranoia thrillers of the 1990s.⁴⁵ Pratt examines the intersections between the paranoid thriller and the crime thriller and in so doing provides a detailed survey of the narrative and structural characteristics of the genre that focuses on a broad range of films, both those that focus on politics and those that do not. His chapter on the 1970s conspiracy thriller examines the genre in the context of the developing cynicism towards the political establishment and towards the US Intelligence organisations following the Vietnam War and Watergate. In a series of case studies, Pratt observes how the genre of paranoia was formed through the 1970s in films such as *The Conversation*, *The Parallax View*, *Three Days of the Condor*, *All the President's Men* and *Capricorn One* (1978). Each of these films demonstrates a development in the genre that reflects an increasing cynicism towards politics and a decreasing trust of institutions within America. Stephen Paul Miller develops this by comparing the paranoid thrillers of the 1970s with the cold war thrillers of the 1960s.⁴⁶ In his book *The Seventies Now: Culture as Surveillance*, he observes the shift from a preoccupation with international to domestic affairs and, in his own words, 'a movement from external to internal surveillance.'⁴⁷ In a broad study that includes diverse cultural phenomena, Miller connects this movement with a range of socio-political traumas including Vietnam and economic stagnation, of which Watergate and the resignation of Nixon were only a part. This argument is useful as it offers a definition of the 1970s that codifies a particular set of sociological and political anxieties through a detailed investigation of the literature, art and politics of the decade. As such, Miller offers an analysis of the 1970s that

helps in the connection of the genre of paranoia and conspiracy with that particular period of American history. In essence, Miller's thesis is an important foundation in understanding films such as *All the President's Men*, the screen depictions of Watergate and Nixon in the 1990s and beyond. The debates that Miller and Pratt engage with are useful in the ways they relate the form of a particular genre to changing social and political anxieties through the 1960s, 1970s and 1990s. My thesis aims to emulate and expand on their work by observing the depictions of the presidencies of Kennedy, Nixon and Clinton within the context of their assessments of the genre of paranoia and conspiracy. In the same way, I follow the analysis of critics of individual, narrative based film genres such as George Custen, whose book *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* unpacks the narrative structure of the biopic genre.⁴⁸ My consideration of the depiction of the presidency on television, particularly in the miniseries *Kennedy* and the long running *The West Wing*, follows a different model of genre criticism. In the case of the miniseries, I follow the criticism of John Thornton Caldwell and Glen Creeber observing how *Kennedy* rewrites the Kennedy story for the Reagan era by combining the status and quality of the miniseries with the preoccupations with style and class of soap-operas such as *Dallas* (1978-1991) and *Dynasty* (1981-1989).⁴⁹ In the case of *The West Wing*, I observe the construction of a fictional presidency over the course of an episodic, open-ended television series. In each case, I observe how the forms of the two productions aid or constrain the fabrication of presidential mythologies. Finally, a third type of genre I consider is formed purely through critical reactions to the film. In his article 'Genericity in the Nineties', Jim Collins posits the existence of two distinct genres based around the film's depiction of history, 'eclectic irony' and 'new sincerity'. This debate that is added to by Paul Grainge in his book *Monochrome Memories*, and uses the earlier criticism of Liam Kennedy in his article 'Alien Nation: White Male Paranoia and Imperial Culture in the United States.'⁵⁰ In this case, I engage in a wider debate concerning the treatment of history in the film, using Collins' genre breakdowns as my template for a consideration of the presidential mythology.

Using these varying forms of genre criticism, I aim to build on Hellmann and Henggeler's vision of a presidential mythology to contextualise each depiction of the presidency within the framework of the genre, and to use this contextualisation to provide a commentary on how the mythologies have been contemporised. The relationship between the genre of the film or television series and the presidential mythology is important. By relating the work of Hellmann, Henggeler and Feeney to the works of genre critics I argue that there is a similarity in the narrative and formal characteristics of a genre and in the construction of a presidential mythology. Each responds to the expectation of the recipient, in the case of a film the audience, in the case of the presidency, the voter. So by analysing each case study in the context of their generic influences, I also intend to assess how the narrative of the film or television series frames the presidency and develops the presidential mythology.

Presidentiality

A second aim of my thesis is a reaction to Melissa Crawley's discussion of the use of 'presidential schemas' in screen depictions of the presidency. This discussion is related to what Ian Scott outlines in his introduction to *American Politics in Hollywood Film*. Scott describes an iconography of democracy; a use of landscape and imagery on screen that romanticises the American political system and creates a nostalgic aura to surround the depiction of the presidency.⁵¹ Part of this can be found in films such as *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* when James Stewart's character is shown touring the monuments of Washington. This act physically but also politically and ideologically locates him in the context of the idealised, historical political system. In the context of the screen depiction of the presidency, this relates to aspects of the film or television series including the choice of actor to play the president, and the use of the White House as a setting. I would suggest that this quality of presidentiality in a screen presidency is different from the construction and manipulation of the presidential myth. While the myth relates to the narrative setting of the presidency, the quality of presidentiality relates instead to the spectacle of the presidency. Crawley suggests that this is designed on screen to replicate an emotional response in the viewer that recalls

their formative recognition of the presidency. In short, while the construction of the presidential myth through genre narratives could be described as a construction requiring an active, intellectual engagement on behalf of the viewer, I would argue that the construction of presidentiality feeds a more emotional, intuitive response. An aim of my thesis is to observe the formation of presidentiality through my range of case studies. As well as examining the narrative based, genre relationships in the films as highlighted earlier, I also intend to analyse the visual framing of the presidency. To this end, I look at various aspects of the production. I question how the choice of actor, the use of sets and locations and the use of monochrome and colour, can be seen to build and enhance the presidential depictions.

My consideration of the relationship between the actor and the role of the president is an important aspect of my thesis. In each of my case studies I consider the choice of actor for the role of the president. I assess the screen persona of the actor, the previous roles he or she has been in and is known for and the qualities that the association with these previous role might have on the playing of the president or presidential staff member. It is clear that the choice of actor for president is an important one. This is highlighted by the number of actors who appear repeatedly in presidential films. For example Martin Sheen, the actor who played President Josiah Bartlet for seven years in *The West Wing* has appeared in a number of films that I cite throughout my thesis. He played Bobby Kennedy in the miniseries *The Missiles of October* (1974), Jack Kennedy in the miniseries *Kennedy* and the corrupt President Greg Stillson in *The Dead Zone* both in 1983. He narrated the introduction of Oliver Stone's *JFK* and played chief of staff to Michael Douglas's President Andrew Shepherd in the 1995 film *The American President*. Similarly, Kevin Costner appeared in both *JFK* and *Thirteen Days* (2000), two films that revolve around the Kennedy presidency. In these cases, I question why particular actors are chosen repeatedly for presidential films. Conversely, in the case of Michael Douglas I ask what effect of the role of the president has on the assumed screen persona of an actor. I examine how the role of Shepherd can be seen as an act of contrition after the venality and moral corruption of his previous roles in films such as *Wall Street*

(1987), *Fatal Attraction* (1987), *Basic Instinct* (1992) and *Falling Down* (1993). In short, I examine both how the choice of actor can encourage and change the formation of presidentiality in a film, and how this presidentiality can change the audiences' perception of an actor's screen persona.

My consideration of the relationship between the sets and location of the film and television depictions of the presidency and the quality of presidentiality encompasses a range of different aspects of the production. Focussing for the most part on the rooms of the White House, I discuss the choice of where particular scenes are filmed, the authenticity of sets, and the ways in which the characters are framed or move about within them. This is a particular issue, for example, when I examine the opening scenes of *Thirteen Days* in which Kenny O'Donnell, a presidential aide to Kennedy played by Kevin Costner journeys to work. In this case, the White House is presented as a labyrinthine series of rooms that O'Donnell negotiates on his way to Kennedy, the political centre of power. The journey through the White House becomes a psychological reflection of the power of O'Donnell's character but also an idealised depiction of Kennedy at the centre of O'Donnell's life and of the American political establishment. In a similar way, I examine the effect of the characteristic way of shooting *The West Wing*, scenes without cuts showing characters walking and talking around the offices of the White House. The use of the iconography of the White House, and the depiction of the ways in which characters move and react to the location are important ways of establishing and enhancing the presidential character. In a number of the films and television series I examine, presidentiality is constructed using authentic-seeming sets and by filling those sets with appropriately reverential staff.

Finally, my consideration of the use of monochrome applies the work of Paul Grainge to the presidential film. Grainge argues that the use of monochrome in films from the 1980s and 1990s to create what he calls a 'nostalgic mode', an aura of authenticity that gives the film not a connection with the past, but a feeling of 'pastness'⁵², a feeling rooted in a national memory

of the past as opposed to historical studies. Grainge links this mode with a cultural and social preoccupation concerning the way in which the past was perceived in the 1990s. In my thesis, I apply Grainge's theories to the subject of the presidential film in several ways. Grainge, contributing to Jim Collins' theories regarding the 1990s 'new sincerity' genre, argues that the use of monochrome is important in the formation of the new genre's nostalgic and authentic aesthetic. I engage with this debate when examining a number of films, primarily *Thirteen Days*, a film that attaches itself to Collins' 'new sincerity' genre in several ways, from the casting of Kevin Costner to the occasional use of black and white scenes. By acknowledging Collins' critical genres, Grainge's work becomes the bridge that connects the genre constructions of the presidential myth with the visual evocations of presidentiality. In the context of the presidential film, the use of monochrome can recall important archival moments of a presidency: for example iconic photographs of Kennedy from *Life* magazine or dramatic, televised addresses during the Cuban Missile crisis. I suggest that, like the casting and staging of the films, the use of monochrome is a way of evoking presidentiality. As my thesis will argue, these methods help create a depiction of a presidency that is both authentic-seeming and nostalgically laden. The result is to encourage an emotional response from the audience that combines memories of the mediation of the presidency with an actor's screen persona that develops a general quality of presidentiality through the film and television depictions.

In order to fully develop these themes, I have divided my thesis into four chapters, each focussing on a different president and each tackling a set of case studies of varying forms and genres. The first two chapters are closely linked and examine depictions of Kennedy and Nixon through the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s and into the new millennium. The third chapter examines three different representations of the Clinton presidency in the 1990s. The final chapter examines the television series *The West Wing* from its start in 1999 to its final season in 2006.

My first chapter analyses three productions concerned with the Kennedy presidency: the 1983 television miniseries *Kennedy*, Oliver Stone's film *JFK* (1991) and *Thirteen Days* (2000). Through these case studies I explore a range of different interpretations of the Kennedy presidency from Reagan-era dynastic epic to conspiracy thriller to idealised 'new sincerity' historical drama. I observe how each production frames the Kennedy presidency and how each encourages a variation on Hellmann and Henggeler's Kennedy myth. Following my methodology, I examine a variety of different aspects of the productions, for example the characteristics of the television miniseries genre, the complex structure of *JFK*, the casting of Kevin Costner in *JFK* and *Thirteen Days*. During my analyses, I repeatedly return to the question of how the presidency is framed in the productions, and how the Kennedy mythology is expanded and adapted through the 1980s and 1990s. My choice of films and television series for this chapter owes a great deal to their significance at the time of their production. *Kennedy* marked the twentieth anniversary of the Kennedy assassination and was part of a trend in the 1970s and 80s that used the medium of television to depict literal or analogous versions of Kennedy. These television series included *The Missiles of October* (1974), *Captains and the Kings* (1976), a series that Coyne suggests 'transposed the Kennedy family saga to the nineteenth century,'⁵³ *King* (1978), *The Greek Tycoon* (1978) and *Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy* (1981). Before *Kennedy*, television series that depict Kennedy directly, either focussed on specific events during his presidency, such as the Cuban Missile Crisis, or on characters other than Kennedy himself, such as Jackie Kennedy or Martin Luther King. As the first series to focus on the entirety of the Kennedy presidency, the 1983 miniseries is an important introduction to understanding how the mythology of Kennedy was, and continues to be shaped to suit particular political ideologies. The importance of *JFK* was that it was commercially popular, initiated a massive amount of critical attention and created a new fascination with the Kennedy presidency and assassination in time for the 1992 election.⁵⁴ *Thirteen Days*, a film offers an intimate account of events in the White House during the Cuban Missile Crisis, is a depiction of the Kennedy presidency at the end of the 1990s cycle of films that generally favour fictional presidents. Indeed, the film was produced

when *The West Wing* was at its peak of popularity. The film is important partially because of the presence of Kevin Costner, encouraging a reading of the film that observes not only the shift in the Kennedy myth, but also charts the career popularity of an actor. The film also offers a depiction of Kennedy that, post-*JFK*, focuses on an incident other than the assassination, reflecting a movement from anxieties concerning internal conspiracies in the 1990s, towards a Cold War thriller reminiscent of the 1960s. This shift in genre, I argue, creates an important corresponding shift in the direction of the Kennedy mythology.

My second chapter is concerned with depictions of the presidency of Richard Nixon. As in my first chapter, I present my choice of case studies in chronological order starting with Alan Pakula's *All the President's Men* (1976), continuing with Oliver Stone's *Nixon* (1995), and ending with the teen movie *Dick* (1999). Again I use a methodology that focuses on the relationships between the depiction of the presidential myth of Nixon and genre while examining the effect the casting and framing of Nixon has on the quality of presidentiality in the films. This chapter, as would be expected, is a companion piece to the previous one. This means that I chart the Nixon myth in the context of the Kennedy myth, comparing each film with its Kennedy counterpart. The Nixon myth is however more than just the antithesis of the Kennedy myth; my second aim in this chapter is to demonstrate how the Nixon presidency has been approached by film makers and how these approaches reflect social and political anxieties through the 1970s and 1990. My reasons for selecting these particular films for my case studies are again as they represent both a chronological and generic spread. *All the President's Men* is a timely reaction to the Watergate scandal and an important film in a cycle of 1970s conspiracy thrillers. *Nixon* is often seen as Oliver Stone's sequel to *JFK*, but also perfectly reflects the liberal opinion of Nixon just before his death. *Dick*, whilst not as well known as the other films, is an interesting case study as it retells the Nixon mythology within the unlikely narrative confines of the teen movie, and again this retelling is very much of its time.

My third chapter focuses on the Clinton presidency. This chapter serves partially as a continuation of the previous two, the reaction to Clinton being a mixture of positive comparisons to Kennedy and negative comparisons to Nixon. My choice of subjects for case studies reflects this. The first is *Primary Colors* directed in 1998 by Mike Nichols, the second is *Wag the Dog* (1997) and the final film is *The American President* written by Aaron Sorkin in 1995. These choices serve two purposes. Firstly they represent a divided reaction to the Clinton presidency between an idealistic nostalgia towards the Kennedy presidency and moral anxieties reminiscent of the Nixon presidency. My choices also represent three important genre templates for the depiction of the presidency, namely the campaign movie, the political satire and the romantic comedy. Unlike the previous chapters, my choice of films are all from one decade, the 1990s and, crucially, were all produced whilst Clinton was still in office. My third chapter provides a snapshot of vastly differing reactions to a presidency, rather than presenting a chronological progression of a presidential myth. By focussing on films from the 1990s, I am able to fully engage with the resurgence of the presidential film at that time.

My final chapter moves away from the screen depictions of real presidents and from the three film structure of the earlier chapters. After focussing on *The American President* in the third chapter, I take the opportunity to follow Sorkin's idealised remodelling of the presidency through his long running television series *The West Wing*. This chapter examines the formation and development of the character of President Josiah Bartlet, played by Martin Sheen, possibly the most complete and intricately presented of any fictional president. My analysis breaks the series into three periods that I believe demonstrate distinct formal characteristics: seasons one and two, seasons three and four and seasons five, six and seven. In the first section, I examine the formation of the character of Bartlet. I look at how Aaron Sorkin and director Thomas Schlamme's distinctive technique and style for the series creates both presidentiality and lays the foundation for a Bartlet presidential mythology. In the second section I examine the ongoing development of the character of Bartlet through the third and fourth seasons of the series. In particular, I consider the reaction of the series to the

election of George W. Bush and the events of 9/11. I examine the effects that the new Republican presidency and the terrorist attacks have on the character of Bartlet. In doing so, I compare *The West Wing* with the depiction of the presidency in *24* (2001-ongoing), a television series heavily influenced by the rise in international terrorism following 9/11. Furthermore I use the critical work of Ian Scott and Pamela Ezel to analyse how the series uses the backdrop of an election campaign to present a critical perspective on Bush and to demonstrate how a liberal candidate might succeed where Al Gore failed.⁵⁵ Finally, I examine the last three seasons of the series. In this section, I consider the trajectory of the characterisation of Bartlet and efforts by the production team to improve the ratings of the programme in the face of competition from other similar television series such as *Commander in Chief* (2005). These tactics, I suggest include a change in format and an introduction of new characters, and the transmission of a live episode. I observe how these efforts affect the characterisation of Bartlet, particularly with the introduction of his potential replacements, Republican Arnold Vinick and Democrat Matthew Santos. I look at how these two characters are developed, each politically different but each a potential replacement for the idealised Bartlet.

It is my intention through these chapters to give an idea of how the depiction of the presidency, the presidential myth and the notion of presidentiality adapts to different times and genre forms. It is also my intention to examine through the films and television series the relationships between the three major presidential mythologies. I would suggest that by selecting three out of the four two-term presidencies of the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and 1990s my thesis covers the most important figures for case studies. Indeed, given the relative paucity of screen depictions of Lyndon Johnson, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter and George H. W. Bush, the impact of Kennedy, Nixon and Clinton becomes clear. This raises an obvious question, however – why do I not include two-term President Ronald Reagan in my list. It may be worth outlining my approach towards Reagan’s presidency, and my reasons for not focusing on him as I have on Kennedy, Nixon or Clinton.

The Reagan presidency had a unique relationship with Hollywood. Reagan moved from a career as film star to a career as president and, as such, his presidency was perhaps the ultimate fusion of performer and politician. It is curious, therefore, that the Reagan era, in the words of Ian Scott, 'saw Hollywood increasingly shy away from virtually any kind of political discourse.'⁵⁶ Films depicting the presidency during the Reagan era were particularly scarce, the 1980s lying between two important cycles of the presidential film genre - from the conspiracy thrillers of the Nixon era to what Michael Coyne calls the 'schizophrenic phase' of the Clinton years.⁵⁷ Coyne suggests that this fallow period in the presidential film might be because Reagan somehow 'filled the bill, and the cultural need, comprehensively.'⁵⁸ Reagan's time in office was peppered with allusions to Hollywood and, particularly to his own film roles, in Michael Rogin's words, 'Reagan merged his on- and offscreen identities [and this] confusion between life and film produced *Ronald Reagan*, the image that has fixed our gaze.'⁵⁹ Because the discourse and mythology of Reagan's presidency was already preoccupied with Hollywood tropes and imagery, the need to present a fictional or past president on screen was mitigated. Susan Jeffords takes a more detailed approach to the subject of the influence of Reagan politics on Hollywood cinema. In her book, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*, she suggests that the themes and ideologies of the Reagan presidency were depicted on screen in action thrillers. In short Jeffords argues that the hard body actions films of the 1980s, including *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985) and *Robocop* (1987), offered a model of heroism that matched Reagan's 'hard' presidential style. In her words:

Ronald Reagan, like Robocop, touted himself as the defender of the average citizen who needed a break from too much government. In his 1981 inaugural address, he told the American people, "Our government has no power except that granted by its people. It is time to check and reverse the growth of government which shown signs of having grown beyond the consent of the governed." But, like the heroes of hard-body films, he went on to say: "It is not my intention to do away with government. It is rather to make it work – work with us, not over us; to stand by our side, not to ride our backs."⁶⁰

The implication of Jeffords' argument on the presidential film is clear. Screen heroism in the Reagan era tended towards physical characters like Rambo acting as a proxy to Reagan's own personality. There was simply no place for the cerebral heroics or Washington based conspiratorial narratives of films from the previous two decades such as *Fail Safe* (1964) or *All the President's Men* (1976). The consequence of this was that screen depictions of the presidency in the Reagan era were either confined to miniseries such as *Kennedy* (1983), *The Winds of War* (1983) or *George Washington* (1984) while films that were explicitly critical of US policy were produced, as Michael Coyne notes, mainly by foreign filmmakers or by the controversial and highly individual Oliver Stone.⁶¹ The absence of direct screen versions of Reagan does not mean that the Reagan era fails to impact on my thesis. Reagan's appearances as a character on screen are confined to cameos in television series or in recent miniseries such as *The Day Reagan was Shot* (2001) and *The Reagans* (2003). While there are very few screen depictions of Reagan, the influence of Reagan ideology and politics on miniseries such as *Kennedy*, and on the work of Oliver Stone, is an important area for discussion when considering the screen depictions of presidency through the 1980s and early 1990s. Just as in Jeffords' study of action thrillers where Reagan is represented by hard-bodied heroes, in several of the case studies I examine in my thesis Reagan is represented through depictions of Kennedy skewed towards particular aspects of Reaganite ideology, through the polemic work of Stone and, crucially, through the characteristics of the miniseries form itself. I would argue that while Reagan is clearly an important figure in the relationship between the presidency and Hollywood, unlike Kennedy, Nixon or Clinton his absence from the screen suggests that his mythology operates behind the scenes. I would suggest that the influence of Reagan is to change the national perception of the presidency, so that by the start of the 1990s cycle of presidential films, the figure of Clinton becomes the first president to be routinely parodied and referenced whilst still in office.

This thesis will provide an analysis of screen depictions of three real and one fictional presidency. It will engage with debates concerning film genre and celebrity culture, seeking

connections between film theory and the public perception of the presidency. It will examine the development of a two-way relationship between Hollywood and Washington within the context of society and culture from the 1960s until the present day, following the new style of telegenic, celebrity/presidency that is indicated by the success of Kennedy, the failure of Nixon, the unstable presidency of Clinton and the idealistic construction of the character of Josiah Bartlet.

¹ Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland* (New York: Scribner, 2008) 58.

² Iwan Morgan, *Nixon* (London: Arnold, 2002) 61.

³ Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary (Second Edition)* (London: Routledge, 2000) 161- 2.

⁴ John Hellmann, *The Kennedy Obsession* (New York: Columbia UP, 1997) 96.

⁵ Hellmann 126.

⁶ Morgan 60

⁷ Myron A. Levine, "The Transformed Presidency," *Hollywood's White House*, eds. Peter Rollins and John E. O'Connor (Kentucky: Kentucky UP, 2003) 355.

⁸ Hellmann ix.

⁹ Hellmann 126.

¹⁰ Paul R. Henggeler, *The Kennedy Persuasion* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1995).

¹¹ Henggeler 8.

¹² Hellmann 126.

¹³ Mark Feeney, *Nixon at the Movies* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2004).

¹⁴ Feeney 327

¹⁵ Feeney 327.

¹⁶ Michael Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, the Movie and other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Los Angeles: California UP, 1987) 81-114.

¹⁷ Rogin 112.

¹⁸ Michael Coyne, *Hollywood Goes to Washington* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008) 41.

¹⁹ Ian Scott, *American Politics in Hollywood Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2000) 5.

²⁰ Scott 6.

²¹ Scott 149.

²² Scott 3.

²³ Coyne 9.

²⁴ Coyne 19.

²⁵ Coyne 26-9.

²⁶ Coyne 34.

²⁷ Coyne 151.

²⁸ Rollins and O'Connor, (eds.) *Hollywood's White House*.

²⁹ Robert E. Hunter, "Who's in Charge Here? Technology and the Presidency in *Fail-Safe* (1964) and *Colossus* (1970)" *Hollywood's White House*, eds. Peter Rollins and John E. O'Connor. 208-22; John Shelton Lawrence, "The 100 Million\$ Men: Presidential Action/Adventure Heroes of *Independence Day* (1996) and *Air Force One* (1997)" *Hollywood's White House*, eds. Peter Rollins and John E. O'Connor. 223-34; Loren P. Quiring, "A Man of His Word: Aaron Sorkin's American Presidents," *Hollywood's White House*, eds. Peter Rollins and John E. O'Connor. 234-51.

³⁰ Herman 309-19

³¹ Herman 309.

³² David Haven Blake, "Hollywood, Impersonation and Presidential Celebrity in the 1990s" *Hollywood's White House*, eds. Peter Rollins and John E. O'Connor (Kentucky: Kentucky UP, 2003) 320-333

³³ Blake 331.

³⁴ Peter C. Rollins and John E O'Connor, (eds.) *The West Wing: The American Presidency as Television Drama*. (New York: Syracuse UP, 2003)

³⁵ Peter C. Rollins and John E O'Connor, (eds.) *The West Wing: The American Presidency as Television Drama*; Melissa Crawley, *Mr Sorkin Goes to Washington* (North Carolina: McFarland and

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- Co, 2006); Trevor Parry-Giles, and Shawn J. Parry-Giles, *The Prime-Time Presidency* (Chicago: Illinois UP, 2006).
- ³⁶ Crawley 33.
- ³⁷ Crawley 110.
- ³⁸ Crawley 141.
- ³⁹ Patrick Finn, "The West Wing's Textual President" *The West Wing: The American Presidency as Television Drama*, ed. Peter Rollins and John E. O'Connor. 101-25.
- ⁴⁰ Jason P Vest, "From *The American President* to *The West Wing*: A Scriptwriters Perspective" *The West Wing: The American Presidency as Television Drama*, ed. Peter Rollins and John E. O'Connor. 136-56.
- ⁴¹ Myron A Levine. "The West Wing (NBC) and the West Wing (D.C.)" *The West Wing: The American Presidency as Television Drama*, eds. Peter Rollins and John E. O'Connor. 42-63; Pamela Ezell, "The Sincere Sorkin White House," *The West Wing: The American Presidency as Television Drama*, eds. Peter Rollins and John E. O'Connor. 159-75; Heather Richardson Hayton, "The King's Two Bodies," *The West Wing: The American Presidency as Television Drama*, eds. Peter Rollins and John E. O'Connor. 63-83.
- ⁴² J. Elizabeth Clark, "Contemporary Populism in NBC's *The West Wing*," *The Contemporary Television Series*, eds. Michael Hammond and Lucy Mazdon. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2005) 224-43.
- ⁴³ Clark 242.
- ⁴⁴ Parry-Giles.
- ⁴⁵ Ray Pratt, *Projecting Paranoia* (Kansas: Kansas UP, 2001).
- ⁴⁶ Stephen Paul Miller, *The Seventies Now: Culture as Surveillance* (Durham: Duke UP, 1999).
- ⁴⁷ Miller 1.
- ⁴⁸ George Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1992)
- ⁴⁹ John Thornton Caldwell, *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1995); Glen Creeber, *Serial Television: Big Drama on the Small Screen*. (London: BFI, 2004).
- ⁵⁰ Jim Collins, "Genericity in the Nineties" *The Film Cultures Reader*, ed. Graeme Turner (London: Routledge, 2002) 276-91; Paul Grainge, *Monochrome Memories*. (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2002); Liam Kennedy, "Alien Nation: White Male Paranoia and Imperial Culture in the United States," *Journal of American Studies*. 30. 1 (April 1996): 87-100.
- ⁵¹ Scott 8-9.
- ⁵² Grainge 6.
- ⁵³ Coyne 69.
- ⁵⁴ Herman 311.
- ⁵⁵ Pamela Ezell, "The Sincere Sorkin White House," *The West Wing: The American Presidency as Television Drama*, eds. Peter Rollins and John E. O'Connor. 159-75
- ⁵⁶ Scott 83.
- ⁵⁷ Coyne 37.
- ⁵⁸ Coyne 88.
- ⁵⁹ Rogin 3.
- ⁶⁰ Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1994) 20-1; Ronald Reagan. 'Inaugural Address', *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents* (26 January – 1 March 1981): 2.
- ⁶¹ Coyne 33-4.

Chapter One – Kennedy

In his examination of the mythic construction of the Kennedy presidency, critic John Hellmann describes the Kennedy era as a ‘modern American hero tale... perhaps even the major American mythology of our time.’¹ Despite his short time in office and his relatively low number of substantial, lasting achievements,² his political career and image has become the touchstone for the modern presidency connoting youth, energy, charisma and change. Bill Clinton, Ronald Reagan, Gary Hart, Michael Dukakis, Dan Quayle and Barack Obama have all been compared with Kennedy or evoked the Kennedy myth in their campaign. As critic James Giglio points out, the popular mystique of Kennedy ‘transcends ideology’ and is embraced and, perhaps in the case of Clinton and Obama’s competitors, feared, by both Democrats and Republicans.³ Kennedy’s popularity increased in the years following his assassination and by the 1980s his presidency was seen as an idealistic high point in American politics before the cynicism and corruption of the 1970s that culminated in the Watergate scandal. In his book *Conspiracy Culture*, Peter Knight sees the assassination of Kennedy as a watershed moment in modern American history, a ‘mythical loss of innocence.’⁴ Knight literally equates the death of Kennedy with the birth of a new style of presidency, characterised by Richard Nixon’s six years in office, in which charismatic mystique and film star parallels collapse into embarrassing scandal and exposure of corruption.⁵ John Hellmann argues that much of the enduring Kennedy myth was engineered by the man himself. The ‘Kennedy obsession’, he suggests, can be said to be rooted in the president’s childhood reading of romantic fiction and history and in the style and glamour of Hollywood culture.⁶ These preoccupations, Hellmann argues, served as the foundations for an image-based, romantic carapace of self-presentation and virtually created the modern, media conscious presidency. It was Kennedy who first recognised the effectiveness of his own image and the importance of television in the formation of a presidential character. As Robert Dallek suggests, ‘the advent of television, which captured Kennedy’s youthful appearance, good looks, charm, wit and rhetorical idealism and hope, also contributed to his ongoing

appeal.’⁷ Kennedy’s use of television, coupled with a 1960s vogue for glamorous photojournalism in magazines such as *Life*, was part of the construction of the first visually romantic presidency. As Roosevelt used the radio during the Second World War for his ‘fireside chats’ with the nation, Kennedy used television to transmit to the nation a reassurance of his sincerity but also tapped into the image-preoccupied ethos of Hollywood.

As Hellmann suggests,

Kennedy brought to television news and photojournalism the components most prevalent in the world of film: star quality and mythic story. With his telegenic looks, skills at self-presentation, heroic fantasies, and creative intelligence, Kennedy was brilliantly prepared to project a major screen persona.⁸

Hellmann extends Kennedy’s use of the imagery of Hollywood beyond a consideration of a visual study of the president. Hellmann suggests that the myth of the Kennedy presidency was to a large extent influenced both by the imagery and by the narrative of the Hollywood film with Kennedy cast as the star. Hellmann observes that key events of the Kennedy presidency such as the U.S. Steel Crisis, the Civil Rights Crisis and the Cuban Missile Crisis, were retrospectively shaped by the administration to emphasise the toughness of Kennedy and to an extent, this shaping used the motifs of film. For example, the Cuban Missile Crisis was presented as a suspense narrative, complete with heroes and antagonists, a limited time frame (thirteen days) and a climax in which the two opposing forces are described as ‘eyeball-to-eyeball.’⁹ According to Hellmann, therefore, the imagery and construction of Hollywood of Kennedy’s past saturate his presidency, and goes some way to explaining the appeal and perpetuation of the myth and the prevalence of the image of Kennedy particularly in film and television. Kennedy’s assassination both enhanced this myth by introducing the idea of the president as martyr and created a new, separate myth, the principal source of which was the Zapruder footage. The myth of Kennedy’s assassination was distinct from the myth of the Kennedy presidency in the way it concentrates on the details of the events of his death. The Zapruder film was first shown to the American public on television in 1975 and was described by David M Lubin as ‘a raw melodramatic spectacle.’¹⁰ Lubin argues that it was also a direct and indirect influence on a variety of popular cultural forms including the

political thriller. After Kennedy's death, Hellmann continues, these aspects of his presidency have generally inspired commentary that operates in three distinct ways. In line with the hagiographic mythology of Kennedy, Hellmann refers to these three directions in religious terms as the phenomena of resurrection, demonology and blasphemy,¹¹ texts that either perpetuate the myth of Kennedy, investigate the conspiracies that attempt to damage Kennedy or texts that attempt to offer an anti-myth, a revision of the Kennedy presidency. Of these three areas, the first two seem the most common in film and television and the primary motivations behind Hollywood depictions of Kennedy. In his book *The Kennedy Persuasion*, Paul R. Henggeler continues and expands on this by considering the impact and adaptation of the Kennedy myth in American politics for the four decades following his assassination. Whereas Hellmann sees the Kennedy myth as a product of the Kennedy himself, in Hellmann's terms a 'secret contributing author' of his own mystique,¹² Henggeler sees Kennedy's assassination as a prototypical moment in the popularisation of the president in his words:

The present is rendered illegitimate, lost in the belief that life would be better if only John Kennedy had lived. The future is delusional, consumed in the fantasy that the nation may resume its proper course only with the return of the rightful heir to the throne.¹³

Henggeler's book examines the legacy of Kennedy within the contexts of each presidency (apart from George H. W. Bush) and a selection of presidential races between the assassination and the election of Clinton. Throughout his book, Henggeler outlines the ways in which each president adopted or challenged the Kennedy myth within the constructs of their own presidential images and as he does this, he charts the status of the myth within popular culture. Interestingly, he suggests that following Edward Kennedy's actions at Chappaquiddick in 1969 and the gradual erosion of public confidence in the presidency during the Watergate scandal and the resignation of Nixon in 1974, the power of the Kennedy myth was beginning to wane. Henggeler suggests that the first docudrama about Kennedy, *The Missiles of October* (1974) broadcast months after Nixon's resignation indicated a resurgence of the myth, a retooling of the Kennedy mystique for a generation of Americans

with limited memories of the Kennedy presidency.¹⁴ Henggeler argues that the myth of Kennedy underwent a reformation during and after Watergate that dislocated the romantic character and imagery of the man from the politics of his presidency. This meant firstly that Jimmy Carter was able to tap into the idealism of the Kennedy presidency despite having had no historical connection with the man. Kennedy's image was further politically dislocated by Edward Kennedy's defeat by Carter during the 1980 Democratic primary and Reagan's subsequent use of the Kennedy myth in his first successful campaign.¹⁵ By the early 1980s, therefore, both the image and myth of Kennedy had become separated from their democratic roots, and had become a signifier emptied of politics, filled instead with idealism, youth and hope. Before Carter and Reagan, the Kennedy myth and the Democratic party were intertwined; after Watergate, however, the myth came to connote a broader range of tropes, adoptable and adaptable by Democrats and Republicans alike.

In this chapter I intend to examine three texts: one television miniseries and two films. The first, *Kennedy* (1983), is a three episode miniseries that covers the Kennedy presidency from the late stages of his campaign to his assassination. I want to examine how Kennedy is presented in the miniseries and how this presentation connects with both the form of the miniseries and with the state of the Kennedy myth in the early 1980s.

***Kennedy* (1983)**

In this first case study I want to expand on two important aspects of *Kennedy* that I believe reflect the political and social state of the Kennedy myth in 1983. Following critics such as John Caldwell, Jane Feuer and Glen Creeber, I want to examine the effects that the miniseries form may have had on the Kennedy story, through its status as a genre that is at the same time populist and elitist: a hybrid of national and personal stories in an episodic form that may be seen as being halfway between an epic film and a melodramatic soap opera. I also intend to examine how the character of John F. Kennedy is depicted in the miniseries. In particular I

want to look at how the American public's nostalgic high regard of Kennedy is represented and maintained throughout the series, allowing an intimate depiction of the President that is at the same time distanced and respectful. I will argue that the makers of *Kennedy* perform this balancing act in two interconnected ways. Firstly, the integrity of Kennedy is protected by presenting key moments and elements of his presidency such as the assassination and his sexual infidelity from the point of view of other characters, for example Jackie Kennedy or J. Edgar Hoover. This enhances the positive aspects of the presidency whilst distancing and insulating Kennedy from the negative aspects. A similar distancing device is the repeated depiction of key speeches of Kennedy shown on a television being watched by other characters such as his father, Joseph Kennedy and Hoover. This device, the framing of Sheen's performance as Kennedy, distancing the character while simultaneously providing contrasting reactions to it, also, I will argue, introduces a pseudo-religious aspect to the depiction of Kennedy. These scenes, unusual in a series that repeatedly fabricates and fictionalises dialogue, turn Kennedy's televised speeches into exegetical moments transforming the supporting characters filmed watching them, into apostolic witnesses to the Kennedy presidency. By examining these aspects of *Kennedy*, I intend to demonstrate how the miniseries can be read as a reinterpretation of the Kennedy myth for the Reagan era. I will show how the framing of the character of Kennedy allows the producers of the series to give the viewer an intimate, hagiographic biography of his presidency without exposing or corrupting the romantic idealism of the man while prioritising Kennedy's personal qualities rather than his political attributes.

The miniseries *Kennedy* starring Martin Sheen as John F. Kennedy was transmitted on the NBC network in America over three nights, Sunday 20 November, Monday 21 November and Tuesday 22 November 1983. The last episode, dealing primarily with the assassination of Kennedy, was transmitted exactly twenty years after the actual event. The series covers the events of his presidency from the election night in November 1960 to his assassination in November 1963. Episode one examines the election of Kennedy, the selection of his

administration and the Bay of Pigs incident. Episode two depicts the civil rights protests and the relationship between Martin Luther King and the Kennedy presidency. The final episode covers the Cuban Missile crisis and ends with a recreation of the Dallas shooting and subsequent death of Kennedy. The series was part of a raft of commemorative programmes, mostly documentaries, referred to by critic Arthur Unger as ‘a virtual orgy of posthumous eulogizing.’¹⁶ Reaction to the series was mixed: writing one year after the transmission of *Kennedy*, Bruce Crowther described the series as ‘one of the most accurate reproductions of any period in American history,’¹⁷ while Tom Shales referred to it as ‘toxic waste’ that ‘squeezes itself through a keyhole for a supermarket-tabloid history of John F. Kennedy.’¹⁸ Shales’ criticism stems from the fact that the miniseries was produced by ITV, written by Reg Gadney and directed by Jim Goddard. Goddard and Gadney are both British and the lack of American influence in the series appears to be the catalyst behind Shales’ negative reaction. The contrasting reactions of Shales and Crowther, however, reflect the significance of *Kennedy* within the context of historical representations of the Kennedy presidency. The 1983 miniseries was one of the first attempts to recreate the assassination on screen and also the first to attempt to reconcile two opposing reactions to the Kennedy myth that John Hellmann called the ‘dream of resurrection’ and the ‘phenomena of blasphemy,’¹⁹ the former dwelling on the hope of a recreation of the idealism of the Kennedy presidency, the latter preoccupied with reinterpreting and denigrating it. In other words, *Kennedy* was significant because it was simultaneously reverential and prurient; it presented Kennedy in the traditional light as a hero, appealing to Crowther, but without concealing his flaws and without ignoring the more contemporary speculations about his fidelity, thus antagonising Shales. The series was also significant in the way it represented a shift in how the Kennedy myth was interpreted in the political sphere, as Henggeler suggests:

With Jimmy Carter’s successful emulation of the Kennedy image in 1976, JFK was gradually becoming accessible to politicians of all ages, ideologies and personality types. Young and old, conservative and liberal, male and female, realist and idealist, Northerner or Southerner – by 1984 almost any candidate could find something in John Kennedy to relate to his or her campaign.²⁰

I argue that *Kennedy* is significant in depiction of this ‘malleability’ of the Kennedy presidency, emphasising themes of class, dynasty and family while subordinating those of politics. In this way *Kennedy* may be seen as much preoccupied with the Reagan ideologies and with the political and cultural fashions and styles of the 1980s as with the Kennedy presidency and the 1960s.

***Kennedy* and the Miniseries**

Margaret Montgomerie defines the television miniseries as:

The miniseries, at its best, offers a unique televisual experience, often dealing with harrowing and difficult material structured into an often transformatory narrative. The time lapse between episodes allows occasion for the audience to assimilate, discuss and come to terms with the difficulties of the narrative. The extended narrative time offered by serialisation makes possible the in-depth exploration of characters, their motivations and development, the analysis of situations and events. But the conclusive narrative resolution of the series, also allows for evaluation and reflection.²¹

When considering the qualities that the miniseries format brought to the Kennedy story as opposed to a biopic or television movie, it is clear that these aspects, the episodic structuring and the ability of the miniseries to examine characters and events in a more detailed way, enhanced the formation of the character of Kennedy in *Kennedy*. Montgomerie notes that the miniseries was an ideal forum for stories that are of a harrowing nature and the Kennedy presidency, formed by a sequence of crises and ended by an assassination, can be seen to be an ideal source of material for this format. Hellmann, as I have previously noted, suggests that the crises of the Kennedy presidency, the U.S. Steel crisis, the Civil Rights crisis and the Cuban Missile Crisis were all defined as narratives complete with suspense, jeopardy and heroism. Montgomerie’s focus on the ability of the miniseries to allow for a greater development of character was also important when considering *Kennedy*. Glen Creeber takes this aspect of the miniseries and expands on it. He interprets the miniseries genre as a hybrid of the ongoing soap-opera serials with the individual television event. He writes that ‘the very length and even the “soapiness” of the serials form... ...makes it an ideal vehicle through which politics and history can be understood; not as mere “fact” or “polemic”, but as

“memory” and “experience”.²² For Creeber, the miniseries allows for the narration of large scale national events, such as the Kennedy presidency, with an emphasis on personal, emotional stories. As I will expand on later, this convergence of the national with the personal manifests itself in *Kennedy* through the telling of the Kennedy story, and the wider story of America in the early 1960s, from the points of view of characters associated with the president. Unlike the earlier, shorter *The Missiles of October* which depicted a single event in the presidency and narrated it very much from the point of view of John F. Kennedy, *Kennedy* depicted a range of events and characterised the president through his relationships with others, mostly within his family. As well as allowing for a particular form of storytelling, the miniseries format encourages particular themes and this is manifested in *Kennedy*.

By the time *Kennedy* was transmitted in 1983, the miniseries had become the principal form of quality television. Cited by Montgomerie, Francis When noted that the form was first introduced to America by the imported series *The Forsyte Saga* (1967) and reached a peak of popularity in 1977 with the transmission of *Roots*, an eight-episode series tracing the history of a group of 19th century African slaves in America. The connections between these two earlier series and with *Kennedy* are clear. All focus on the importance of family and dynasty, as Leslie Fishbein suggested, ‘in *Roots* what makes the family ‘special’ and, therefore, more worthy than its peers is its preservation of its ethnic heritage and its celebration of familial families.’²³ The miniseries format encouraged this combination of saga, family, heritage and history. The popularity of *Roots* transformed the miniseries and meant that by the early 1980s, it had become not only an important format for quality television, but also a signifier of American heritage and history. *Kennedy* inherited these significations and applied them to its subject matter. Where *Kennedy* differed from *Roots* was in its combining of the importance of family with an emphasis on inherited class and the glamour of wealth. The status and heritage of the miniseries in 1983 assisted the makers of *Kennedy* with their emphasis on the importance of family while series such as *Roots* demonstrated the suitability of the miniseries for telling stories of national importance. The focus on class and wealth in *Kennedy* can be

seen to associate the series with a social attitude prevalent in the 1980s, what Hal Himmelstein refers to as ‘the new frontier of *Dallas*’. This, he describes as:

a reflection of our social conservatism and of the “me” generation of Americans – it is the current celebration of doing one’s own thing, except that, rather than the 1960 anthem, which meant seeking personal experience, the 1980 anthem signals a search for personal wealth and status.²⁴

Series such as *Dallas* (1978-1991), *Knots Landing* (1979-1993) and *Dynasty* (1981-1989) all reflect this ‘anthem’ being defined, as John Thornton Caldwell notes, by their ‘excessive style.’²⁵ These series, Caldwell argues, differed from what had gone before in their predilection for excessive, visual spectacle and their narration of ‘conspicuous lifestyles of consumption.’²⁶ Like Creeber, Caldwell suggests that the miniseries form in particular allows for the conflation of the individual and private with the national and that this confusion is part of the excessiveness. Miniseries, in Caldwell’s words, ‘allow the viewers to extend a highly privatized realm – a psychological world of parental guilt, lust, remorse, adultery – out into the external realm of worldly power, and vice versa.’²⁷ This, he suggests, is an aspect of the miniseries that is formed by visual and narrative excesses, an emphasis on spectacle coupled with a mythic approach to history that had not been seen on television before the 1980s. A miniseries such as *Kennedy*, therefore, may be seen to combine a national narrative, such as the Kennedy presidency, with a narrative based in the private, psychological realm, and it is this coupling that, as Caldwell suggests, makes it an emblematic text of the Reagan era. As he notes:

the privatizing textual and stylistic operations of the epic miniseries during its golden age in the 1980s mirrored a much broader conflation: the cultural ideology of privatization celebrated during the period of Reaganomics.²⁸

Caldwell, therefore, explicitly links the conflation of personal and national stories in the miniseries with the Reagan era’s preoccupation with the importance of the power of the individual over the power of government, and with the blurring of politics with myth and emotion. In *Kennedy*, this blurring is evident as narrative preoccupations with family and class connect the series even more closely with the Reagan era. In her study of television during the Reagan era, Jane Feuer highlights the televisual representation of a contradiction in

Reaganomics between populism and elitism, in other words, an ideology based on the freedom of the individual from government power that simultaneously supports and encourages the wealth of the elite. This, Feuer argues, results in an escalation of depictions of family, in particular the use of the threat to the family, as a dramatic device, and in the depiction of aristocratic wealth and excess in series such as *Dynasty*.²⁹ *Kennedy* may be likened to these depictions, particularly when one considers the ways the miniseries shows onscreen the visual excesses of the Kennedy presidency combined with the national crises that shape each episode. Unlike the earlier *The Missiles of October*, which connects its presentation of Kennedy with the historical imagery of the Kennedy presidency through its stark, monochromatic style, *Kennedy* combines strong colour schemes with lavishly detailed set designs. One explanation for this may be the different stylistic sources for the two series. *The Missiles of October* is much more theatrical than *Kennedy*, relying far more on dialogue and on enclosed spaces, filming in studios that are more like a stage than the lavish exterior scenes and set of *Kennedy*. Similarly, while the earlier series is clearly influenced by 1960s Cold War political thrillers such as *Seven Days in May* (1964), *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962) and *Fail-Safe* (1964), films and television productions that favour intense scenes set in small rooms, *Kennedy* features numerous exterior scenes, set most notably at Kennedy's coastal retreat at Hyannis Port. Sheen is assisted in his portrayal by the careful, lavish construction of the visual style of the series; through an implicit set of references to the corpus of photographs, films and television appearances of the historical figure of Kennedy. The last episode of *Kennedy* concentrating on the Cuban Missile crisis and the assassination demonstrates a narrative departure from the previous two episodes. The missile crisis scenes are similar to those in *The Missiles of October* though the events depicted are condensed into an hour in *Kennedy* rather than three. The crisis is narrated in *Kennedy* through intense scenes of committees sitting in smoke filled rooms: the glamour of the previous episodes and the use of exterior locations replaced by darkened sets and muted colours. On several occasions throughout *Kennedy*, events are interspersed with scenes showing Jackie Kennedy redecorating the White House, choosing dresses, and generally occupied with constructing

and maintaining the glamour and imagery of the Kennedy administration. This juxtaposition is not always a comfortable one: Tom Shales points out that scenes depicting the brutal reality of rioting during the civil rights incidents in Alabama are intercut with ‘vignettes of Jacqueline fussing over gowns, sipping French wine and making horsey-set chitchat in the White House.’³⁰ What the intercutting of the national importance of the crises with the emotional intimacy of family does achieve, however, is what the form of the miniseries particularly in the 1980s, encourages. As Creeber and Caldwell indicate, the miniseries allows the framing of a historical period such as the Kennedy presidency that is paradoxically from both personal and national perspectives. This combination enables the makers of the miniseries to present the Kennedy story with an emotional intimacy, but also hampers them. *Kennedy* was intended as part of a collection of commemorative programmes marking the assassination, so the challenge for the makers of the miniseries was to use the format to give an insight into the historical period without losing the nostalgic aura that comes from distance, in short to reveal without corrupting the character of Kennedy. The decision to use the format of the miniseries also gives *Kennedy* a foundation for its themes of class, dynasty and family, connecting the Kennedy myth with the political and social ideologies of the Reagan presidency. The depiction of Kennedy through the reactions of others sympathetic or antagonistic to the Kennedy presidency is an important aspect throughout the miniseries, one which also aids in the development of these themes. In the next section, I want to examine the way Kennedy is portrayed in the series - how he is framed, the ways in which other characters act as proxies for aspects of his presidency and how this technique of characterisation accentuates the themes of class and family.

Kennedy in *Kennedy*

The choice of Martin Sheen for the role of John F. Kennedy is interesting for several reasons. Sheen, a Roman Catholic and a long-term Democrat activist of Irish descent cited Kennedy as a hero and had also played Robert Kennedy in *The Missiles of October*.³¹ As Sheen acknowledged, neither he nor John Shea who played Robert Kennedy closely resembled the

Kennedys: his performance relied on a combination of vocal and physical quirks. As Tom Shales bluntly notes:

Martin Sheen, as John F. Kennedy, has the voice inflections and mannerisms down (he played Bobby in “Missiles of October” nine years ago), but he lacks the stature to play JFK. He’s too short and too furtive, one of the most squirrely of actors.³²

Sheen’s JFK was more a set of visual quirks that recall the appearances of Kennedy in magazines such as *Life* and evoke the quality of presidentiality. Fred Rothenberg was more positive than Tom Shales in his assessment of Sheen’s portrayal of Kennedy and suggested that, ‘in profile and from the back, Sheen is John F. Kennedy.’³³ It is significant that this assessment recalls famous photographs of Kennedy such as ‘The Loneliest Job in the World’ (February 10 1961) by George Tames in which the president is shown from behind in the Oval office leaning over a desk yet while the framing of Kennedy to parallel these photographs is evident it is the repeated use of the television throughout *Kennedy* that contributes the most towards recalling the Kennedy presidency. The importance of television in the mythic construction of the Kennedy presidency cannot be understated particularly in the context of my thesis not least because the Kennedy presidency was the first that significantly blurred the boundaries between the performance of a film star and the on-screen performance of the president. As Hellmann suggests:

Kennedy brought to television news and photojournalism the components most prevalent in the world of film: star quality and mythic story. With his telegenic looks, skills at self-presentation, heroic fantasies, and creative intelligence, Kennedy was brilliantly prepared to project a major screen persona.³⁴

The televised image of Kennedy is ubiquitous in the forming of the national memory of Kennedy, from the televised debates between Kennedy and Nixon to the 1975 transmission of the Zapruder footage on ABC and CBS. In short, the physical attractiveness and performance ability of Kennedy meant that television became a prime forum for him to communicate with the nation. Writing about the Kennedy era, Tom Shales suggests:

How we felt then about the president and the time in which we lived was largely affected by what we saw on television. It was a turning point in the nation’s relationship with television; our dependence on it expanded

drastically and has never lessened. This was perhaps when television entered the national bloodstream for all time to come.³⁵

The importance of television is evident throughout *Kennedy*, but most explicitly in a number of scenes that show some of Kennedy's key speeches such as his inauguration. In these scenes, the focus of the camera shifts from a recreation of the speeches on a television to the viewer of the television, sometimes Hoover, but more often members of Kennedy's family. This device, 'actors playing historical figures looking at television sets on which there are other actors playing historical figures' prompted Tom Shales to suggest that it demonstrated the series' pre-occupation with exposure and the misrepresentation of history calling it, 'a fifth-generation carbon copy of overheard innuendo.'³⁶ I would argue, however, that these scenes perform a function that actually contradicts Shales' criticism. The speeches are faithfully recreated moments that tap directly into the national memories of watching the Kennedy presidency on television and enhances the presidentiality of Sheen's performance. In his book *Monochrome Memories*, Paul Grainge connects this construction of the past with a political commodification of nostalgia during the Reagan presidency. As he suggests:

If, as some would say, the Presidency was Reagan's last great acting role, then the executive script involved a large degree of mythic invocation, riding slipshod over historical particularity and factuality to construct a useable past that would support a variety of right-wing political adventures.³⁷

Using television sets to present these speeches, the makers of *Kennedy* encourage this memory, but also distance the viewer from the character of Kennedy. In other words, the scenes create a simultaneous intimacy with and distance from the past, a national, mediated memory presented in scenes that invite an emotional reaction. This is enhanced by the presence of a viewer of the speeches onscreen. Shales finds this tableau unsettling and it is true that these scenes are oddly filmed, the camera focusing on characters such as Joseph Kennedy and Edgar Hoover shown silently watching the events on television sets. Rather than being unsettling, these scenes may be interpreted as placing a pseudo-religious emphasis on the characterisation of Kennedy. Compared with the frequently invented dialogue throughout the rest of the miniseries, the speeches in these scenes are fixed and iconic. They become, in a way, the gospel texts of the Kennedy presidency, presented in ways that recall and replicate a

national, mediated memory of famous and archival moments of Kennedy on television. The presence of other characters watching these speeches creates a second level in the miniseries viewers' interpretation of the Kennedy speeches. The onscreen viewers of the speeches are shown physically reacting to Kennedy, in the case of Joseph Kennedy and the Kennedy family with excitement and pride, in the case of Hoover with resentment and cynicism. These reactions, together with the framing of the scenes, turn these characters into apostolic witnesses to the Kennedy presidency and we, the viewers of the miniseries, are invited to view and interpret the speeches through our reactions. Contrary to Shales' view that these scenes add a layer of misrepresentation to the already subjective historical material in *Kennedy*, I argue, they act rather as moments of historical veracity, strategically placed throughout the miniseries that actively support and encourage a hagiographic narration of the Kennedy presidency. Furthermore, I would argue that they may be seen as part of a deliberate attempt at depicting Kennedy in ways that protect the character from excessive and corrupting revelations whilst still providing an intimate, emotional access to the historical moment for the viewer.

Throughout *Kennedy* there exist three main sets of characters. The first is John F. Kennedy, his wife, his brother and his staff; the second is Joseph Kennedy and his wife; the third is FBI director J. Edgar Hoover and his staff. I would argue that each of these groups influence the characterisation of John F. Kennedy in different ways; in particular, the second and third sets, Hoover and Joseph Kennedy, presented a characterisation of Kennedy from two opposite yet linked viewpoints. These two figures are designed to act as binary opposites in relation to the Kennedy presidency. Hoover is portrayed and filmed as the villain of the series, the makers of the miniseries construct a sinister and corrupt myth of Hoover that both contrasts with and, as I will later demonstrate, protects their interpretation of the Kennedy myth. As critic Michael Hill noted, Hoover was played with 'a menacing air that would make Darth Vader look like Mother Theresa.'³⁸ This menacing air is partially a creation of the actor Vincent Gardenia, who played Hoover with a collection of sinister mannerisms, but is also a consequence of

effects in the framing and lighting techniques. As Tom Shales notes, the direction of these scenes featuring Hoover frequently seems to take more from the genre of the horror movie than the bio-pic: lighting the character from below and emphasising the grotesqueness of the man.³⁹ By contrast, Joseph Kennedy is presented in an endearing way, surrounded by his family and, in the last episode, rendered sympathetic, almost infantile, after a stroke. This contrast is emphasised most clearly at the end of episode two, set at Christmas (see Figure 1). During these scenes, the Kennedy family Christmas, busy, chaotic, brightly lit and colourful is juxtaposed with Hoover's Christmas meal. The scenes depicting Hoover's Christmas are stark and bleak. They open with Hoover saying 'We can have all this celebration and still be in the office by three' following which he sits at a large table with a single staff member being served his meal and then exchange presents. Significantly, after an episode that was mostly concerned with Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights movement, the only other figure in these scenes was a black manservant serving a taciturn Hoover. The contrasts between the Kennedy and Hoover Christmas meals are clearly designed to demonise Hoover and, coming after a scene in which a weeping Jackie Kennedy sits by an unconscious Joseph Kennedy in hospital, reciprocally emphasises the family's unity and humanity. The more the series shows Hoover to be emotionally sterile, remote and sinister the more it reinforces the contrasting characteristics of Kennedy. The two characters, Hoover and Joseph Kennedy, represent two opposing reactions to the Kennedy presidency by the same generation, traditional and immobile versus accepting and progressive. Finally, the two parallel characters of Joseph Kennedy and Hoover may be interpreted as assisting in the construction of a major theme of the series, one which bridges the gap between the 1960s era subject matter of *Kennedy* and the time of its production in the 1980s: the importance of family. As Martin Sheen stated in an interview prior to the miniseries transmission, in *Kennedy*, 'politics and the family are inseparable... .. it's an intertwining of world-shattering events with the family life.'⁴⁰ *Kennedy* is infused with the idea of family, when considering the priority given to characters such as Jackie, Bobby and Joseph Kennedy throughout the series: it becomes clear that the title referred as much to the Kennedy dynasty as to the figure of John F. Kennedy

himself. Many of the crises and incidents presented in the series are shown partially from the point of view of a Kennedy family member such as the focussing on Jackie Kennedy during the assassination scenes or on Robert Kennedy during the Cuban Missile crisis and in scenes featuring Robert Kennedy and Hoover. Hoover is presented as an antagonist in the series' construction of the idealised, dynastic family, and this is highlighted during the Christmas scenes. The emphasis placed on these two juxtaposed scenes is that of a contrast between the sterile atmosphere of Hoover's meal and the chaos and emotion of Kennedy's. Significantly, with Joseph Kennedy in hospital following a stroke, John F. Kennedy is shown at the head of the family table, carving the turkey. The scenes of Hoover during the series also allow the producers of *Kennedy* to reconcile the positive and negative aspects of the Kennedy myth. In almost every scene in which he appears, Hoover is shown to be obsessed about the sexual affairs of Kennedy and consequently is shown to order covert surveillance of the president. This has the effect of isolating the salacious aspect of the Kennedy presidency - the sexual infidelity that Hellmann referred to as a 'denial that this incarnation of the ideal was what it is purported to have been'⁴¹ - within the context of Hoover's obsessive need for information and power. The framing of Kennedy's sexuality in this way provides an insight into the less idealistic aspects of Kennedy whilst it simultaneously protects the idealism of the character. The conclusion of the Hoover storyline is the ultimate example of this device, as Hoover is shown effectively blackmailing Kennedy with his information, gained by surveillance, into allowing him to use covert surveillance against Martin Luther King.

The contrasts between Hoover and Joseph Kennedy are interesting in that they are both framed as viewers of the Kennedy presidency, but while the latter is depicted as an approving, endorsing viewer, the former's role as a viewer is in a covert, antagonistic sense. The two characters represent opposing views of the events of the early 1960s, from the standpoint of the generation preceding John F. Kennedy's and ultimately, it is Joseph Kennedy's idealistic reaction to the presidency that is the dominant one. The theme of family throughout the

miniseries is a crucial one as it provides insulation for this idealistic reaction against the revisionist, salacious attitudes as expressed by the actions and motivations of Hoover.

This combination of emotional closeness to and simultaneous distance from the Kennedy presidency is particularly evident in the depiction of the major event that forms the climax to the miniseries, the Kennedy assassination. As the film that I will examine in my next case study *JFK* (1991) concentrates for the most part on this single event, it may be worth examining these scenes in episode three of *Kennedy* more closely.

The Kennedy assassination is an event that has repeatedly invited analysis and debate that has manifested itself in various ways: the media's preoccupation with the assassination, the Warren Commission and the popular conspiracy theories, were all driven partly by a desire to be close to, and to understand, the event. This was fuelled in part by the Zapruder film, an 8mm amateur recording of the event, described by David M. Lubin as 'less a Rosetta stone than an illustration of the Heisenberg uncertainty principle.'⁴² Lubin suggests that the Zapruder film as a record of the Kennedy assassination is paradoxical, an "unimpeachable witness" that is compromised by the quality of the recording, the lack of sound and by the fact that in order to use it to study the assassination it is necessary to break the footage down into a sequence of still images.⁴³ In other words, the footage gives the illusion of revelation, of intimacy with the event, but is in fact an empty signifier waiting to be filled by interpretation and distanced from the event by the quality of the film.

The depiction of Kennedy throughout the assassination scenes is different from the rest of the series. In place of the invented dialogue and glamorised imagery, the climax showing Kennedy and Jackie Kennedy in the Dallas motorcade is simply filmed with minimal dialogue. I would suggest, however, that there are two noteworthy aspects to these scenes that elevate them beyond being a simple historical recreation. The first is the focus the scenes placed on Jackie Kennedy and the second is the proximity of the camera to the assassination,

particularly compared with the position of Zapruder's camera. The mood of the miniseries shifts during the last episode from the tension and triumphalism of the scenes involving the Cuban Missile crisis to the inevitable and melancholic scenes of the assassination. Significantly, this shift comes suddenly: after breakfast on the day of the assassination, Kennedy appears outside a hotel to give a speech whilst Jackie Kennedy prepares for the trip to Dallas. During the speech, the crowd are calling out for Jackie Kennedy and Kennedy reassures them that she is delayed in getting ready. At this moment, the camera pans upwards to the window of the Kennedys bedroom and zooms in on Jackie. The music suddenly changes and becomes more ominous, the reason being that Jackie is shown wearing the pink dress and hat reminding the viewer of the assassination. It was Jackie Kennedy, therefore, that acts as a harbinger of the assassination and is a trigger for the build up in tension during the final scenes of the miniseries. From this moment, following her absence from the first hour of the episode during the Cuban Missile crisis, Jackie Kennedy becomes an equal, if not greater, object of the series' attention than her husband and frequently the camera focuses on her rather than Sheen. In many ways, the assassination is depicted from her point of view (see Figure 2): once in the motorcade, the camera, filming from inside the car, concentrates on her and follows her line of sight, when she looks at the crowd and when she looks at Kennedy so does the camera. When Kennedy is shot first she looks towards him and we see him clutching his throat, she then looks away for help at which point the second bullet hits him spraying her with blood. The main motivation for this is clearly to avoid showing the more explicit, second head shot, but from the moment the second bullet hits, the camera remains focussed on Jackie Kennedy until the last shot of the series, a close-up of her face, praying for her dead husband at Parkland Memorial Hospital. As well as avoiding an excessively visceral depiction of the shooting, concentrating on Jackie Kennedy gives the scenes a more intimate and personal aspect and this is enhanced by the closeness of the camera to Kennedy and his wife. At first glance, these scenes offer an intimacy that fulfils the desire engendered by the Zapruder film. The position of the camera throughout the assassination allows the viewer of the miniseries to sit in the limousine opposite Kennedy and his wife. The focus of the camera on Jackie

Kennedy at key moments during the event has the effect of distancing the viewer from these moments. Just as the Zapruder footage provides a false intimacy with the assassination, obscured by the quality of its filming, the scenes in *Kennedy* obscure the assassination by concentrating on the emotional effect on Jackie Kennedy rather than on the physical effect on John F. Kennedy. Once again, the significance of a moment of national importance is transferred to an individual emotional reaction: the viewer is allowed access into the private space of the assassination but is denied insight beyond what they might gain through watching the Zapruder film. In this case, the deferment of insight into the death of John F. Kennedy into an insight into the emotional reaction of Jackie Kennedy both retains the mystery and enhances the tragedy of the assassination. Other aspects and events of the Kennedy presidency are depicted using the same technique but with different results. I would argue that just as Jackie Kennedy provides an emotional commentary on the death of Kennedy, other characters at various times are used to highlight positive aspects of Kennedy's life, the strength of his family connections but also to contain and insulate him from the negative aspects such as his alleged promiscuity.

Kennedy, Kennedy and Reagan

When discussing the trajectory of the Kennedy myth over the twenty years after his assassination, Theodore White states that 'Kennedy was cut off at the promise, not after the performance, and so it was left to television and his widow to frame the man as legend.'⁴⁴ White is suggesting that the legacy of Kennedy, the 'performance' of his presidency, was perpetuated by the actions and statements of Jackie Kennedy and by the commemoration of him in the American media. *Kennedy* realises White's statement, presenting Kennedy from the emotional perspective of characters orbiting his presidency, including his wife, and by transforming the television set, and texts of his speeches, into totems, objects for meditation that tap directly into the national memory of Kennedy on screen in the 1960s. What is significant in *Kennedy* is the way in which the story is framed and narrated, not just from the emotional perspective of the supporting characters, but with reference to an emotional

interaction of the individual with national issues, a confluence that might be seen as a core ideological tactic of the Reagan administration. In a sense, the production encourages the formation of a national emotional intimacy with Kennedy but retains a distance from the figure. This, I would argue, simultaneously protects the historical integrity and, at the same time, offers a new, more personal position from which to view the character. As Caldwell and Feuer suggest, the genre of the miniseries is the ideal location for the narration of historical, national events. It may be seen as a form that is constructed around paradoxical, seemingly contradictory aspects. In 1983, the miniseries had a high cultural currency and was perceived as elite television, but also utilised, in Glen Creeber's words, "soap-like" dynamics,⁴⁵ a fusion of the melodrama of the individual with the stentorian formality of historical drama:

They have perhaps dramatically illustrated the powerful ability of the small screen's multiple/serial narrative to breathe 'emotional' and 'personal' life back into grand epic histories and broad historical landscapes which are so often clouded and frozen by the production and discourse of historiography itself.⁴⁶

The effect this has on the narration of the presidency in *Kennedy* is to contextualise the myth in social and emotional rather than in political themes. Kennedy becomes not just a political exemplar, but a paragon of the Reagan ethic of success. The themes that recur throughout the miniseries, class, the aristocracy of wealth and the importance of family, are also those that form the backbone of the Reagan reformation of domestic politics. Criticism of *Kennedy* has centred on the trivialisation of the myth. When Tom Shales described the series as a 'supermarket-tabloid history of John F. Kennedy', he exposes the fear that an intimate, and, to some degree, fictionalised, account of the Kennedy presidency would corrupt the myth.⁴⁷ I would argue to the contrary, that the series instead negotiates a path between the melodrama and the history of the Kennedy presidency that is at once both respectful and revelatory. The blurring of the micro with the macro-historical, of intimacy and distance, does not corrupt the myth. In fact, the makers of *Kennedy* go to lengths to preserve the hagiographic national perception of Kennedy and in doing so, I would argue, *Kennedy* may be read as part of a wider reformation of 1960s nostalgia for the Reagan era, a territorial land-grab of the Kennedy myth by the Republican party. As my next case study will reveal, the miniseries also

marks the beginning of a battle between Democrats and Republicans for the Kennedy legacy which continues throughout the 1980s and beyond.

From *Kennedy* to *JFK*

It is possible to trace throughout *Kennedy* a depoliticisation of the presidential myth of JFK. The character of Kennedy in the 1983 miniseries may be said to have been emptied of explicit partisan political signification. This emptying left a void that was filled instead with social and cultural themes, such as class and wealth, which were more relevant to a Reaganite ideology. In a sense, *Kennedy* narrated not only the weakening of the man as an icon, exclusively serving the Democratic Party, but also the broadening of the myth as an ideal of leadership and presidency that transcended partisan politics. The years between the transmission of *Kennedy* and *JFK* were punctuated by the political use of the Kennedy myth, particularly during the presidential campaigns of 1984 and 1988 by Ronald Reagan and candidates such as Gary Hart and Michael Dukakis.⁴⁸ Indeed, the legacy of Kennedy caused more problems for the prospective Democrat campaigners than for Reagan. During the primary campaigns for the 1984 election, for example, Democrat contender Gary Hart struggled against claims that his resemblance to Kennedy was superficial. As Paul Henggeler writes:

Hart's "Kennedy problem" rested with his failure to realise that by continuing his invocations of Kennedy and Kennedy-styled themes, he drew attention to similarities in mannerisms and looks, opening himself further to the charge that he was an imitator.⁴⁹

The accusation that Hart's claim to be Kennedy's successor was limited to his physical rather than political or ideological resemblances led to his Democratic rival Walter Mondale to ask during a televised debate, 'where's the beef?' Whilst this accusation was driving a rift between Hart and Mondale, Reagan was beginning to occupy the space vacated by his Democratic rivals as Kennedy's successor:

As part of his appeal to crossover Democrats, the seventy-three-year-old candidate invoked John Kennedy, associating himself with images of toughness, progress and heroes.⁵⁰

Reagan did not share the politics of Kennedy, nor did he have the same aristocratic, wealthy background. Despite this, he associated himself with the Democrat president in the ways in which he created a national mythology that relied on the success of the individual. Reagan cast himself as the primary narrator of this mythology, a loadstone of inspirational narratives that encouraged a fusion between the romantic, pioneering spirit of the past with the success ethic and which acted as the rhetorical spine of his ideology; he adapted the national myth of Kennedy, melding youth, enterprise, success and strength of purpose, to assist in his development of Reaganomics. Henggeler describes this reconfiguring of the Kennedy mythology and argues that in the process, politicians such as Reagan actually damaged the reputation of Kennedy:

In their effort to get elected, to make voters feel better about themselves, these leaders reinvented Kennedy to suit their own ambitions. In the process they heightened unrealistic expectations, burdened the political process with nostalgia, and added to the vacuousness of the Kennedy legacy.⁵¹

The historical significance of his presidency became subsumed by an over-concentration and excessive referencing of a national nostalgic feeling towards Kennedy. Throughout the political campaigns of the 1980s, he became a component of leverage between Democrats and Republican contenders to the presidency. Significantly, all these campaigns resulted in a Republican presidency, so what Henggeler describes as a 'symbolic kidnapping' of Kennedy may be seen to have been successful. The fight for the control of the Kennedy myth also has a generational component and this can be seen most clearly in comparisons between Kennedy contemporary Reagan (born 1911) and Gary Hart (born 1936) and in the later debate between vice-president nominees Lloyd Bentsen (born 1921) and Dan Quayle (born 1947) when Quayle, invoking Kennedy, was criticised by Bentsen with the famous retort: 'I knew Jack Kennedy. Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy.'⁵² This remark, made in 1988, marks a conflict throughout the campaigns of the 1980s between those participants that 'knew' Kennedy and those that were inspired by Kennedy, a conflict won in the 1980s by the Kennedy generation, by Reagan and George Bush (born 1924) and not resolved until 1992 when Bill Clinton defeated Bush and became the first American president

born after the Second World War. The next film I intend to examine, *JFK*, comes before the Clinton election, after a period of ten years during which the Republican party were in power. I want to examine how *JFK* engages with this fight of control of the Kennedy myth, the motives behind Oliver Stone's film and how Stone, by forming a creative relationship with Jim Garrison, may be seen as an attempt to reconcile the Kennedy generation with the baby-boomer generation.

***JFK* (1991)**

JFK was directed by Oliver Stone and starred Kevin Costner as Jim Garrison, New Orleans District Attorney. As with my study of *Kennedy*, I want to examine the generic forms used throughout the film and how the figure of Kennedy is depicted within these forms. By interpreting these two aspects of *JFK*, I want to demonstrate how *JFK* reflects the status of the Kennedy myth at the end of the 1980s and how the film may be read as a prefiguring of the Democrat party's repatriation of Kennedy as a successful ideological tool during the 1992 Clinton campaign. To these ends, I intend to build on the work of critics such as Paul Grainge and Robert Burgoyne to examine how Stone politicises the Kennedy assassination. I would suggest that by refuting the national 'master memory' promulgated by the Warren Report, Stone, through *JFK*, might be seen as rallying his audience into performing a quest for the truth, calling for a national unity of purpose. I will argue that *JFK* challenges the depiction of the president in the 1983 miniseries by offering a defence against what Paul Henggeler refers to as the ideological hijacking of Kennedy by the Republican party and, in particular, Reagan.⁵³ I believe that the confusion of generic forms and the complexity of Stone's formal techniques throughout the film create a similar combination of intimacy and distance with the historical figures as the earlier miniseries, but with different political consequences. Whereas the miniseries constructs a Kennedy mythology that focuses on the social, personal attributes of the presidency, Stone's Kennedy myth brings to the fore the political legacy of the president and uses this focus to chart the national anxieties concerning the power and

accountability of the presidency through the 1970s and 1980s after his death. It may be useful at this point to give a brief summary of what I believe to be Stone's motivation behind making *JFK* and of the reaction to the film after its release.

While the title of the film suggests a biopic of the thirty fifth president, *JFK* actually begins with the assassination of Kennedy and follows the attempts made by New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison as he struggles to expose the culprits and their reasons for the killing. Garrison refutes the lone gunman theory authorised by the Warren Report and suggests instead an ambush by multiple gunmen controlled by a complex governmental conspiracy whose motivations derived from Kennedy's alleged intention to withdraw American troops from Vietnam. In his book *The Kennedy Obsession*, John Hellmann suggests that by the time *JFK* was produced, Oliver Stone had already told its basic story in his earlier film *Platoon* (1986). Hellmann argues that *Platoon* suggests a 'mythic parable' of the Vietnam War in which it becomes a 'crucible for moral self-discovery, choice and growth' and that this reinterpretation of history in the 1960s and 1970s is expanded upon in *JFK* as Stone applies essentially the same story and character structure to the Kennedy assassination.⁵⁴ In this earlier film, Stone tells the story of Private Chris Taylor, who struggles with his conscience pulled morally between the influences of two sergeants, one good, Elias, and one corrupt, Barnes. Taylor is forced to confront and expose the truth behind atrocities committed by Barnes in order to avenge the murder of Elias. Hellmann convincingly notes the similarity between the sets of characters in *Platoon* and those in *JFK*. Taylor is recast as Garrison, while the heroic father figure Elias becomes Kennedy. *Platoon* may be read, therefore as a prefiguration of *JFK*. The narrative structure and the mythological concerns of *JFK* are evident in the earlier film but on a personal rather than national level. I would also argue that these elements are also present in Stone's 1987 film, *Wall Street*. In this film, the narrative structure of a son struggling with his conscience when confronted by two father figures, one good, one evil, is again evident, but in this case the conflict is set within the 1980s yuppie culture of Reagan's America. The two settings of *Platoon* and *Wall Street* and the ways in

which these settings influence the narratives of the films reveal the attitude of Stone to the 1970s and 1980s. As Tommy Denton suggests:

Since Kennedy was slain, the American people have witnessed flagrant instances of official lies and cover-ups, most involving covert actions by government agencies: Lyndon Johnson's prosecution of the Vietnam War; Richard Nixon's Watergate; Ronald Reagan's Iran-Contra. Suspicion of government motives may be unfortunate, but at least a generation of Americans has been given little choice. If *JFK* provokes within the body politic a healthy questioning of institutional secrecy, then Stone will have made a valuable contribution to democracy.⁵⁵

Wall Street and *Platoon*, together with *Salvador* (1986) and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), all directed by Stone, share this structure - which Martin Fradley calls a 'proto-Blakean quest to cleanse the doors of perception for his [Stone's] audience'⁵⁶ - but, as Denton points out, in producing *JFK*, Stone postulates that the source of these national anxieties can be found in one event, the assassination of Kennedy. In the context of Stone's preoccupations with recent American history, *JFK* may be read as an origin myth, an antitype of the events of Stone's earlier films. In *Platoon* and *Wall Street*, the triangular father/son relationships of Chris Taylor, Elias Grodin and Bob Barnes and Bud Fox, Carl Fox and Gordon Gekko, are reproduced on a national scale with Jim Garrison, John F. Kennedy and the authority of the US Government. In this way, *JFK* can be read as a causal study of the fragmentation of the relationship between the American people and the government and also as a parable highlighting the importance of reconciliation between generations. At the same time as presenting a national perspective to the Kennedy assassination, however, Stone also focuses on the personal effects of the assassinated president on Garrison's life. *JFK* contains two concurrent narrative trajectories: the first expanding the breadth of the conspiracy, the second focusing on the physical details of the body of Kennedy. Each of these trajectories engage with what Stone perceives to be the corruption and fragmentation of American society since the assassination and demonstrates a shift from a mythology of Kennedy that focuses on his life, using the imagery of magazine journalism as a cue for presidentiality, towards a mythology that focuses on his death, using the imagery of the Zapruder footage and autopsy photographs. Stone's film connects this assassination myth with the socio-political

fragmentation of American society of the late 1960s and 1970s and also with national anxieties concerning the accuracy of American history in the 1980s and 1990s. In his study of the cinematic representation of the past in the 1990s, *Monochrome Memories*, Grainge examines the source of a societal anxiety that appears in the late 1980s and early 1990s that is principally concerned with the degradation of historical awareness,

As formulated by liberals and neoconservatives in the burgeoning culture war of the late 1980s and early 1990s, “memory crisis” had very acute political stakes. Liberal visions of national fraying and disuniting joined neoconservative diatribes against deculturation and the collapse of tradition. In the bellicose disputes over “political correctness,” the American “memory crisis” was discursively intertwined with a series of debates about education and the status and teaching of history.⁵⁷

While it engages with this crisis, *JFK* may also be read on a subtextual level as narrating the conflict between national memory and the authority of historical documentation. Grainge in particular explores the relationship between the use of monochrome in film with the construction of cultural memory. He looks at the films of Steven Spielberg, describing three films, *Schindler’s List* (1993), *Amistad* (1997) and *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) as ‘cultural master memories, humanist dramas infused with themes of redemption and collective (national) remembrance.’⁵⁸ While Spielberg may be regarded as a ‘guardian of American memory’, Stone’s revisionist historical dramas culminating with *JFK*, may be read as opposing the collective memory derived from the authorised Warren Commission report and, in effect, recognising and embracing the memory crisis as a step towards understanding the past. Indeed, the primary themes of *JFK* are those of doubt and scepticism, the demonstration of the fragility of the authorised account of the assassination. This message was enhanced and repeated in the debates about the historical authenticity of the film following its release. In the first section of this case study, I want to examine the complex use of film genres and generic forms throughout *JFK*. In doing so, I will expose the different ways Stone engages with the past and how his use of genre and his formal techniques frame a re-politicised and national, but still intimate and personal version of the Kennedy myth. In the second section, I want to examine the tension between intimacy and distance in Stone’s visual representations of Kennedy throughout the film to demonstrate how the director transforms Kennedy from a

social icon embodying Reagan ideology into a political martyr. In this way, I will argue, Stone narrates a crisis in an American national identity that is connected directly to the imposition of a national memory of Kennedy, in his view corrupted by the Warren Commission. Having done this, Stone gives the American viewer an illusion of intimacy with the Kennedy presidency, a newly constructed memory that demonstrates the national significance of the life of Kennedy, but that also fetishises his death.

The Genres of *JFK*

Stone's use of film genres throughout *JFK* is complex. As I noted earlier, the title of *JFK* initially suggests a connection with political biopics such as *Abraham Lincoln* (1930), *Young Mr Lincoln* (1939) and *Wilson* (1944); however, it rapidly becomes clear, when watching the film that unlike the earlier 1983 miniseries, *JFK* is not a biopic of Kennedy but of Garrison. Stella Bruzzi describes *JFK* as 'a cinematic version of television's 'docudrama', a genre that is based on fact but which identifies itself (via the use of actors and the presence of a script) as a fictionalised version of these facts.'⁵⁹ I would argue that Stone's film may also be influenced by film genres such as the conspiracy thriller and the courtroom drama. Unpacking these different generic influences will expose how each impinge on what I perceive to be an important motivation behind the filming of *JFK* - that of the political reconstruction and nationalisation of the myth of Kennedy. In doing so, I intend to examine how Stone's formal strategy - specifically the mixing of real, reconstructed and fictional material - may be seen to be derived from the docudrama but repeated in an altered state by the thriller genres.

Critic Richard Grenier suggests that Stone directs *JFK* 'in a pummelling style, a left to the jaw, a right to the solar plexus, flashing forward, flashing backward, crosscutting relentlessly, shooting "in tight," blurring, obfuscating, bludgeoning the viewer until Stone wins, he hopes by a TKO.'⁶⁰ In her essay 'Cinematic Shots: the Narration of Violence', Janet Staiger equates this aggressive style with the conflict between the authorised versions of the assassination and the filmmaker's popularised version.⁶¹ Stone's formal techniques, therefore, may be

interpreted as an early sign of the wide ranging debates that took place after the film's release concerning the authenticity of Stone's evidence. They also may be interpreted as a representation of Stone's perception of the state of American society after the assassination. Robert Burgoyne suggests that 'the disjointed temporality and dislocated spaces of *JFK* can be read as reflecting the distorted and irrational sense of national identity and the fragmented social reality that the film finds at the heart of the United States in the post-Kennedy era.'⁶² In other words, Burgoyne argues that the fragmentary technique of Stone is a stylistic device that represents the obfuscation and fractious debates concerning the truth of the assassination. In this way, Burgoyne suggests, Stone's individual technique becomes a mirror for the political and ideological disunity in the country during the 1970s and 1980s. This crisis of national identity is also an important aspect of the 'memory crisis' of the 1990s, as Grainge argues:

films that are in some way 'about' cultural memory participate in a dialogue that equates how we remember with who we are. The representation of the historical past is a question not just of atmosphere or decoration but of cultural identity.⁶³

Grainge suggests that the 1990s memory crisis was in effect a shift from an anxiety about the authentication of the past to an anxiety over who has control of the past and over the blurring of the boundaries between the remembered and the historical past. In his words:

memory, in particular, became a field of negotiated meaning. If the academy was debating how, if, and in whose interest a culture remembers the past, similar issues of memory and identity were being figured cinematically.⁶⁴

Throughout *JFK*, this is repeatedly debated, but whereas Grainge suggests that the source of the tension behind this negotiation of memory was the isolation of the white male American in an increasingly multicultural society, in *JFK*, the tension is between the government and the governed. *JFK* may be seen as a part of a wider hybridisation of memory and history, what Burgoyne calls 'prosthetic memory'. Burgoyne notes that films such as *JFK*:

explicitly take on the role of offering an experiential relation to history, inserting their main characters and, by extension, their viewers, into what appears to be a physical, literal relationship with historical figures captured in archival film images.⁶⁵

In other words the mixture of fictionalisation and archival footage provides an attraction to the viewer of a film such as *JFK* as it encourages an intimacy with the historical event, or at

least, in the case of *JFK*, with the interpretation of the event by Stone, and allows the viewer to experience a relationship with the past that is more akin to a memory than an interpretation of history. Indeed, it may be argued that the generic influences behind *JFK* are a significant part of this fictionalising of the Kennedy assassination and in turn the tensions between the genres of conspiracy thriller, docudrama and Garrison biopic, provide an important connection between the cinematic popularism of Stone and his historical vision of the Kennedy presidency. Just as the miniseries form allows *Kennedy* to tell a story of national importance in a popularised, intimate way, Stone's use of thriller genres helps him to subvert the authorised versions of the Kennedy presidency and assassination, and to replace them with a new, national perspective made attractive by being enclosed within a series of recognisable and accessible narrative forms. By examining the generic influences behind *JFK*, I argue that Stone's transitions between, and uses of, the different generic forms describe a narrative trajectory that gives a national perspective to the assassination and subsequent mourning, in the words of Burgoyne, a 'unisonance' across generations while simultaneously encouraging an intimacy with the historical moment.⁶⁶

Throughout *JFK* it is possible to detect a range of different generic influences with three arguably standing out as being prominent. The first is the docudrama, the second is the thriller, specifically the conspiracy thriller, and the third is the courtroom drama. The film begins with a montage of documentary images narrated by Martin Sheen that tells the story of the Kennedy presidency from Eisenhower's farewell address through the 1960 election, the Bay of Pigs incident, the Cuban Missile Crisis to the assassination. This footage coupled with a 'voice of God' narration are important components of the documentary genre.⁶⁷ In *JFK*, the footage and voiceover have the cumulative effect of giving a didactic authority to the film, while Sheen's explanatory narration offers a commentary on the events which exposes their covert aspects, but considered in detail, I would suggest that the footage mixes the personal with the national. The montage imagery is a juxtaposition of intimate footage of Kennedy including home-movies and televised speeches with news-reel and documentary footage of

national and international historical moments illustrating the Cuban Missile crisis, the Civil Rights movement, the U.S. Steel crisis and shots of the US military in action (see Figure 3). The use of the Zapruder film throughout the montage may be seen as a bridge between the intimate and the impersonal. The footage is a home-movie, but one that, as I noted during the *Kennedy* case study, gives the viewer a false intimacy with the assassination. Stone's fast-paced editing throughout the montage also adds to an overall sense of an impending crisis. As the moment of assassination approaches within the opening montage sequence, the narration ends and the images become more fragmented and staccato. The overall effect of this opening montage is to fix Stone's agenda for *JFK* as a film that encourages scepticism of archival media footage and that mixes national with personal imagery. As Christopher Sharrett notes, the opening sequence sets Stone's methodology for the rest of the film as it emphasises the importance of the assassination as 'a turning point for history in that an understanding of the event depends so heavily on media representation.'⁶⁸ As the opening montage reaches its climax it becomes clear that Stone's direction moves away from the conventions of the docudrama. As the moment of assassination approaches, the loss of Sheen's narration coupled with the increasing rapidity and chaos of the footage creates an interpretive vacuum that is only filled at the very end of the film during the courtroom sequence. As Peter Knight suggests:

The ending thus begins to revise and color the beginning – quite literally. The initial chaos of the opening scene's black and white camera montage of gunshots in Dealey Plaza retroactively transforms itself into the comparative narrative clarity and color of the Zapruder film, which Garrison shows to the jurors.⁶⁹

Indeed the courtroom scenes that form the last third of *JFK* can be seen to mirror those of the opening sequence but with the montage footage replaced by repeated use of the Zapruder film and with narration by Garrison rather than Sheen. These differences give an indication of the trajectory of the narrative of *JFK*. The film opens with documentary footage and voiceover narrating the authorised history and ends with the Zapruder film and Garrison narrating his conspiracy theory. Bridging these book-ended moments is the story of Garrison's investigation into the assassination, drawing on the detective genre, and the story of resistance

to Garrison's search for the truth drawing on the conspiracy thriller genre. As Knight indicates:

In effect the film operates a three hour long game of hide-and-seek with its viewers, since the opening sequence takes us up to the very moment before the climactic fatal head shot, which is then only shown in the film's climax in the courtroom. The ending thus spreads its influence backwards over the narrative, initiating a retrograde movement that undermines the strong end-orientation of classic narrative plotting.⁷⁰

Knight highlights the importance of the narration by Garrison during the final scenes as offering a shape and coherence to the disjointed images seen at the end of the opening montage. In this way, he argues, the film can be seen to subvert the conventions of the detective genre in which the narrative progresses teleologically towards a revelation exposing the crime. Instead, Garrison's closing explanation does not expose the ultimate culprits of the crime but instead changes the shape of the crime itself. Garrison's case reforms the assassination as a 'grand, tragic event', the primary moment not only in the decline of America, but in the decline of Garrison and, as Knight suggests, 'the state of decline felt by Garrison is so pronounced that only a correspondingly momentous original murder can do justice to the grandeur of his feelings.'⁷¹ The opening montage sequence of *JFK* invites comparison with later historical films of the 1990s such as *Malcolm X* (1993), *Schindler's List* (1993) and *Forrest Gump* (1994), films that Paul Grainge labels 'documentary-based memory films'. These, Grainge suggests, are films that 'articulate themes of American national memory,'⁷² and it is evident that by combining the national and personal archival footage, the news-reel with the home-movie, Stone is already suggesting a connection between the personal life of Kennedy and the political life of America. As the film progresses, these connections are seen to constitute a Kennedy mythology based around the 1963 assassination that contextualises national and international concerns such as the Vietnam War within the personal, private concerns of Garrison, the ordinary white, middle-class American. This blending of national and personal is also an example of the convergence of history with memory and, as such, the montage sequence may be seen as the first example in the film of an attempt to create a new master-memory of the assassination. This blending of the intimate

with the impersonal and the national state of America with the individual lives of both Kennedy and Garrison, is a theme that is repeated throughout the film, but, as I will demonstrate, is framed differently within each generic form.

The struggle and decline of Garrison, and by association America, may be seen to be depicted within a conspiracy narrative that bridges the opening sequence and the courtroom scenes. Stone's use of the conspiracy thriller genre can be seen most clearly in scenes approaching the trial sequence. Garrison meets with X, a former CIA agent, who reveals the extent of the conspiracy behind the assassination. This scene follows the same format as the introductory montage and the trial sequence: a progression of images narrated on this occasion by X played by Donald Sutherland. Sutherland's character demonstrates to Garrison the range of the conspiracy, but also reveals the futility of searching for the culprit or culprits. Instead he indicates that the labyrinthine nature of the conspiracy is such that the only investigation that can expose the truth is one into the political motivation behind the assassination. Following this scene, the plot of *JFK* begins to resemble conspiracy thrillers such as *The Parallax View* (1974) or *Three Days of the Condor* (1975) as Garrison and his family are threatened and covertly spied upon by unseen antagonists. This narrative reaches a climax in the scenes before the court case begins. Following the revelations made by X, Garrison's investigations move onto a national level and cause frictions within his legal team and problems with his home life. His increasing obsession with Kennedy takes precedence over his family and wife, while his belief in the wide extent of the assassination plot causes anxiety amongst his colleagues. These plotlines are resolved in two concurrent scenes only after Garrison's wife threatens to leave him and one of Garrison's team resigns. Garrison's wife is reconciled, both symbolically and physically, with her husband after the assassination of Robert Kennedy convinces her of the conspiracy. Only after the corrupting member of his team has departed and his wife is shown to support him can the final court case begin. Knight argues that the near breakdown of Garrison's marriage is a part of a wider Oedipal subtext throughout *JFK* in which Garrison's obsession with his father figure Kennedy 'unmans' the District Attorney

and causes a loss of heterosexual desire for his wife.⁷³ Robert Burgoyne argues, the disjointed formal structures of *JFK* may also be interpreted as metaphor for a fracturing of national identity in America after Kennedy's assassination. I would suggest that the trajectory of Garrison's relationships with his staff and family throughout the film is also a part of this allusion. Stone in effect uses the conventions of the conspiracy thriller to produce an intimate, micro-historical metaphor for his belief in the assassination as the foundation of the corruption of American politics. By the beginning of the third act of the film, the courtroom scenes, Garrison's personal and professional relationships have stabilized. He has become reconciled with his wife both physically and, when she reveals she believes in the conspiracy, emotionally, and his team is strengthened by the ejection of an unreliable and untrustworthy member who later is shown reconciled with Garrison's team during the courtroom scenes. Burgoyne suggests that the fragmentation that occurs throughout *JFK*, particularly in Stone's complex and chaotic use of film stocks and flashbacks, parallels the fragmentation of the nation. In his words:

Spilt and divided, the idea of the nation becomes a kind of lost object in *JFK*, a unisonance once identified with patriotism and home – signified with exceptional nostalgic power in the lengthy montage scene that opens the film – now identified with loss and silence.⁷⁴

Through Stone's use of the conspiracy genre, *JFK* offers a reading of 1960s America that fetishises national cohesion or 'unisonance'. From this perspective, the motive that underpins the film appears to be mourning of the loss of this cohesion but also attempting to target the point at which the nation began to fracture:

The film creates a snapshot of the nation at the moment of assassination, forging a picture of a national community beset by tragedy, linked by the ubiquitous television broadcasts detailing the news of the assassination, the arrest of Oswald, and the swearing-in of Johnson.⁷⁵

Stone focuses on the moment of the assassination as the source for this fragmentation, but as Burgoyne suggests, the death of Kennedy and the sequence of events that followed it, was also a period of national unification. Stone's method is first to rebel against this national reconciliation, the cause of which he perceives as the fallacy of the lone gunman theory authorised by the Warren Commission and then to suggest a different focus for unification

behind his quest for the truth. The conspiracy thriller aspects of the film may be read as an attempt to narrate the corruption caused by the lone gunman theory of the assassination, the national 'master memory' of the event. Reading Garrison and Burgoyne's interpretation of Stone's formal technique as a political metaphor, this narration of corruption may be seen to operate at both the personal and national level.⁷⁶ Stone's rejection of authorised history in his role as 'mythic iconoclast'⁷⁷ within the conspiracy thriller section of the film offers a pessimistic reading of the late 1960s and 1970s in which the very concept of American nationality and the trust between government and governed is exposed as fragile and friable. In the final act of the film, however, Stone offers his proposed solution to this fragmentation: the unification of Garrison and Kennedy's generation with Stone's and beyond.

In her article 'God Bless Juries!' Carol Clover underlines the characteristics of the courtroom drama and suggests that rather than being, as Langman and Finn indicate, a 'sub-type' of the crime drama, they can be seen to be part of a genre in their own right.⁷⁸ When examining the 1988 film *The Accused*, Clover derives the idea of the 'double trial structure' in which the principal narrative, that of the prosecution of the defendant, is matched by a second trial. In the case of *The Accused*, this second trial is, in Clover's words, 'whether one female lawyer can buck a male system set in its ways and a male law structurally biased against victims of rape.'⁷⁹ Clover suggests that this double structure highlights the existence of two different audiences in the courtroom drama. The first trial is directed towards the textual audience, that of the court and the jury, while the second trial is directed towards the extra-textual audience - the viewers of the film. The courtroom scenes in the final part of *JFK* may be split into sections that I will outline below and throughout these scenes I believe this double trial structure may be seen to exist. I would argue that these sections demonstrate the double trial structure as the focus moves from the prosecution of Clay Shaw, through a more generalised exposure of the assassination to a final monologue by Garrison directed more towards the film's audience rather than the jury within the film. Garrison's case is against Clay Shaw, a New Orleans businessman who Garrison believes is a covert CIA agent connected to the

conspiracy. The courtroom scenes begin with a series of witnesses identifying Shaw, all of whom are dismissed by the prosecution or deemed as supplying inadmissible evidence by the Judge. Garrison then moves to the second stage of his case by seeking to disprove the authorised theory of Oswald as the single assassin by arguing that the trajectory and timing of the shots indicate multiple gunmen. At this stage, Stone introduces specially filmed footage recreating the scene of the assassination and mixes this with the Zapruder film and with models and diagrams used by Garrison within the court. As has already been suggested, Garrison's speech becomes a narration that recalls that of Sheen at the beginning of the film and of Sutherland during the conspiracy thriller section. The footage and the use of the Zapruder film gives the film's chaotic opening montage a structure and a sense of time. In the climax of this portion of the courtroom scenes, Garrison repeatedly shows one short segment of the Zapruder film, the fatal head shot, to disprove the lone gunman theory, thus creating an interpretive void. During the third stage of the courtroom scenes, Garrison fills the void he has created by offering an alternative interpretation of the events surrounding the assassination. This phase of the case is primarily narrated through monochrome flashbacks focusing on Oswald from the assassination to his own murder with an interpretive voice-over by Garrison. The final phase of the trial consists of Garrison's closing statements, shown without flashbacks. It is in this scene that Garrison outlines the reasons and the extent of the conspiracy and calls for the release of CIA material concerning the assassination. This monologue forms the climax not only of the trial but also of the whole film and I would argue is designed to inspire an ongoing dialogue involving the audience of *JFK* indeed the last sentence in the speech, 'it's up to you,' is delivered by Garrison looking into the camera and therefore at the audience of the film (see Figure 4). In addition to this, the speech repeatedly calls for the quest for the exposure of the conspiracy to be passed to the next generation, Garrison states that he is 'already telling my eight-year old son to keep himself physically fit so that one glorious September morning in 2038 he can walk into the National Archives and find out what the CIA and FBI knew.' At this stage of the trial, Shaw is effectively forgotten and the content of Garrison's case has shifted to the national scale of the conspiracy while the

focus of the trial has become redirected towards the viewers of the film and the next generation of Americans, as John Hellmann suggests:

JFK attempts to position us as Hamlet in a play not yet finished, a drama in which the audience – like the film’s hero – can play the tough-guy detective who will find those responsible for arresting the development of a generation, and in doing so at last take the Kennedy image into the self.⁸⁰

The trial sequence is important because of the ways in which Stone uses the form of the courtroom drama genre to create a connection between the events of the film and the lives of those watching the film. Stone’s formal techniques, his use of flashbacks, of the Zapruder film and his fabricated footage become extensions of the evidence of the trial. The content of the trial moves the conspiracy from a localised crime, that of Clay Shaw, to a national crime involving the CIA, FBI and the Government. However as I will examine later, as Garrison’s accusations become national, the ways they are presented within the trial become more personal, offering intimate and unique depictions of the assassination through the flashbacks of Oswald and seeking to engage and communicate with the individual viewer.

Stone’s use of genre is part of the same complexity evident throughout *JFK* that uses cinematic devices to create what Martin Fradley calls an ‘aggressive polyphony’ that ‘has the effect of relativist distancing.’⁸¹ In other words, the overlapping confusion of genres and the blurring of the boundaries between documentary, conspiracy thriller and courtroom drama, coupled with Stone’s distinctive use of flashbacks and recreated footage, distances the viewer from the authorised historical sources and instead assists in the construction of Stone’s revisionist conspiracy thesis. A closer reading of the use of genre, however, suggests that there exists across each, a structure and a thematic trajectory that has a more complex effect. Each genre in effect offers a variation of the same treatment of the past and engages with what Paul Grainge refers to as the ‘memory crisis’ in different but interlinked ways.⁸² Each depicts the past in a similar way using monochrome flashbacks and recreations of the assassination and each offers a repetition of the form of the opening voice-over, from Sheen to Sutherland to Costner. Also each section of the film combines the intimate with the

national blurring the distinction between historical record and memory but also drawing the viewer into a personalised relationship with Kennedy's death. This transforms the assassination into an event of national scale, a movement away from an authorised 'master memory' of the Kennedy assassination towards Stone's new, more politically significant revision of the event, but on a personal level, connecting with the different generations of viewers. The opening montage offers a version of Kennedy's political career that is close to the authorised version, drawing on Kennedy's speeches and television appearances and depicting the assassination with documentary footage and specially filmed footage, fragmented and confused by the speed of editing. The voice-over by Sutherland's X and the accompanying footage transforms the assassination from a local crime by a single gunman to a national conspiracy with a political motivation. The conspiracy narrative that follows offers a metaphor for the fracturing of American society following the assassination. Finally, Garrison's court case and the double trial structure made possible by the courtroom drama genre makes the connection between generations, reiterating the national nature of the conspiracy but also emphasising the need for generational unity in the continuation of Garrison's investigation.

In the next section, I will demonstrate how this progression from local to national is matched by a progression from an authorised, mediated presentation of Kennedy in the opening montage, to an uncomfortably intimate depiction that focuses with the Zapruder film on the moment of his death and with the autopsy footage on his body post mortem. Stone's use and manipulation of generic forms in *JFK* give clues to the director's motives behind his conspiracy thesis. I want to examine the position and depiction of Kennedy at key moments throughout *JFK*. In doing so I intend to assess the ways in which Stone's manipulations of the generic forms engage with the history of the Kennedy presidency and death and how the director attempts to create a set of new master memories. In effect, I will demonstrate how Stone uses the imagery of the assassination and autopsy as a visual cue that brings a quality of presidentiality to *JFK*.

Kennedy and *JFK*

Christopher Sharrett describes the depiction of Kennedy throughout *JFK* as an ‘absent presence.’⁸³ The figure of the president serves, in Sharrett’s reading, as a ‘free floating signifier’ that is repeatedly visually marginalised but is constantly ideologically present. Unlike the earlier miniseries *Kennedy*, the focus of *JFK* is on the absence of Kennedy, as Sharrett suggests, ‘on his “erasure” not just as a living human being but as a significant force in the narrative.’⁸⁴ While *JFK* marginalises Kennedy visually; politically and ideologically he is omnipresent as the inspiration behind Garrison’s actions. The depiction of Kennedy in the film and the emphasis on his ‘erasure’ reflects the anxiety Stone feels in the absence and the ‘erasure’ of the conspiracy theory ‘truth’ by the authorised version of the assassination. This is not to say that a visual representation of Kennedy is entirely absent from *JFK*. I would argue that each appearance by Kennedy in the film is significant as it allows the viewer a feeling of increasing intimacy with the president and enables Stone to bring the quality of presidentiality to the film, despite focusing on the dead or dying body of the president. Indeed footage of Kennedy virtually book-ends the film from the opening montage sequence to the use of the Zapruder film in the courtroom scenes. In this section, I want to look at how Stone depicts Kennedy both visually and politically, how his momentary presences engage with, and falsify, a national memory of the president, and how they offer the viewer an increasing sense of intimacy with the historical figure. Finally, I want to examine the effect the character of Kennedy as represented by Stone and the implication of Garrison’s appeal for generational unity at the end of the film have on the shape and use of the Kennedy myth in the political world of the early 1990s.

The physical appearances and representations of Kennedy throughout *JFK* can be seen to correspond to the three generic forms in the film. While the generic influences help to describe a narrative trajectory through the film that combines an intimate with a national perspective of the assassination, I would argue that the physical depictions of Kennedy move

from one of historical distance in the opening montage to almost uncomfortable intimacy in the courtroom scenes. At the same time, however, the forms taken by these depictions, ranging from film appearances to faked autopsy footage seem to act against this trajectory of intimacy. The images of Kennedy in the opening montage are drawn from a combination of newsreel and home movie footage. Despite the clarity of the images, I would suggest that the viewer is denied intimacy with Kennedy by the framing of the images. The documentary clips, coupled with Sheen's voice-over and montage structure, isolates and historicises the images of Kennedy. Unlike the painstaking and complete recreations of televised speeches in *Kennedy*, the footage in the opening sequence of *JFK* is presented at a fast pace and is fragmentary, cut with newsreel footage not depicting Kennedy. I would argue, therefore, that in this case, the use of mediated footage of Kennedy has the effect of distancing the president from the audience. As I have previously argued, this sequence sets the tone and style for the rest of the film; the voice-over and the documentary structures are repeated throughout the film, but in each case they are filtered by the various different generic forms that Stone uses. Because it is presented using documentary techniques as opposed to explicitly fictionalising genre forms, the opening sequence has the effect of emphasising the historical distance of the life of Kennedy while the film that follows has the effect of emphasising the immediacy of the death of Kennedy and the relevance of the assassination to the 1990s audience.

The next appearance by Kennedy in *JFK* takes place early in the film after Garrison becomes obsessed with the Warren Report. As Garrison reads the report, the transcribed interviews are reconstructed on screen as flashbacks. Gradually, the flashbacks replace the shots of Garrison reading and the sequence reaches a climax by showing the Zapruder film up to the moment the limousine is obscured by a sign and before the first bullet strikes Kennedy. There is a brief, indistinct close-up of Kennedy's face before the camera cuts to Garrison waking up suddenly in bed from a nightmare (see Figure 5). This scene recalls a moment in a draft script of *JFK* in which Stone reportedly intended to have a scene in which the ghost of Kennedy visits Garrison.⁸⁵ The blurred image of Kennedy comes at the end of a compilation of witness

statements that convince Garrison of the fallibility of the Warren report. This moment may be read as the beginning of Stone's vision of the Garrison/Kennedy relationship as a parallel of Hamlet and his father, a vision that is completed when Garrison states in the courtroom: 'We have all become Hamlets in our country – children of a slain father-leader whose killers still possess the throne.' When Garrison says this, the parallel with the Hamlet story has become a national one, indeed in the context of the courtroom and the double trial narrative structure, a generational one. At the moment of Garrison's nightmare, however, it is an individual vision directed solely at Garrison. The depiction of Kennedy as a blurred image staring at the camera operates as a lure for Garrison, using the indistinct qualities of the Zapruder footage to create uncertainty and to enhance the mystery of the moment. The framing of the Zapruder film within Garrison's imagination is the first indication of the film's fetishisation of the imagery of the assassination and with Garrison's (and Stone's) motivating desire for intimacy with the moment. This obsession with the visual details of the killing reaches a climax with the various and repeated images of Kennedy during the courtroom scene.

The final scenes in *JFK* contain a variety of depictions of Kennedy, both documentary and reconstructed. The two main examples of these depictions are Garrison's use of the Zapruder footage and Stone's recreation of the Kennedy autopsy. I would argue that the ways in which these two events are shown on screen offer a climax to the steadily increasing intimacy with the assassination and with the body of Kennedy. J. Hoberman describes *JFK* as a 'gilded frame' around the Zapruder film highlighting the historical significance of the footage as the 'clock by which the Dealey Plaza drama is played out' but also the importance of the footage in the construction of dramatic tension in *JFK*.⁸⁶ The climax of the courtroom scene, and possibly the whole film, is the moment Garrison demonstrates the direction of the bullet striking Kennedy in the head using a repeated loop of a few frames of the footage. This moment is made all the more powerful by the intonation of Garrison and the absence of any other background noise or music. In this way, the moment of Kennedy's death is isolated within the film and, as Hellmann suggests, ritualised:

The authority of the Zapruder film is that of an undeniable fact transfigured into collective rite. We suffered the loss of Kennedy in history, but it has become a religious experience through the collective pain we continue to experience in it. Stone's repetitive use of the home movie makes it a ritual. As we return to the moment of the assassination many times in the course of *JFK*, our re-viewings join us with Garrison/Costner as our surrogate in this suffering.⁸⁷

The ritualised use of the Zapruder film in *JFK*, particularly in the courtroom scenes, has the effect of granting the viewer of the film an intimate view of the moment of the assassination, the reverse of the depiction of the same event in *Kennedy*. In the miniseries the viewer is allowed a viewpoint of the moments leading to the assassination beyond the Zapruder film, but is denied a view of the actual killing, in *JFK*, the moment of death becomes the sole focus of the depiction. Crucially, by ritualising Kennedy's death in this way, Stone is also recreating the murder as a martyrdom. While the visual emphasis in these scenes is on the moment and the method of Kennedy's death, the intonation of Garrison and the shocked, hushed responses of the jury give the scene a liturgical feel. This combination of visual intimacy with, and religious symbolising of Kennedy's death is enhanced by the next depiction of the president. As with the assassination footage, the autopsy is explicit and does not withhold any detail from the viewer. The autopsy flashback is reconstructed by Stone and concentrates on the angles of the wounds to illustrate the magic bullet theory. Garrison suggests that the theory indicates that more than three bullets were fired at Kennedy. Hellmann suggests that the depiction of the autopsy in the film is an extension of the ongoing parallel between the chaos of the death of Kennedy and a fragmentation in American society after 1963:

The autopsy scenes in Washington, in which Kennedy's body is shown being penetrated and opened up, defiled in the interests of deceitful manipulation, make Kennedy's corpse a metaphor for the body politic of the United States and its Constitution, as the examination is manipulated into a lie protecting the murderers.⁸⁸

I would argue that by concentrating on the penetration shown in the footage, Stone is suggesting a reading further than the autopsy as a national metaphor. At one point, the pathologist probes a bullet wound in Kennedy's back with his finger (see Figure 6). This, along with the repeated Zapruder frames, provides the viewer with a final moment of absolute intimacy with Kennedy but also visually recalls events that occur during the crucifixion of

Christ in which the Apostle Thomas touches Christ to ensure he is who he claims to be. The focus of these scenes on the moment and the detail of Kennedy's death provide a climax to a narrative in which Garrison has been transformed, after a dream, into an apostle of Kennedy's ideology. The variety of the film's visual depictions of Kennedy suggests an increasing intimacy not only between Garrison and the truth but also between the viewers of the film and the body of the president. The opening sequence provides a baseline for this trajectory, depicting Kennedy with a set of historical mediated artefacts such as newsreel appearances and televised speeches coupled with home movie footage. As *JFK* progresses, the depictions are drawn instead from a reframed deconstruction of the Zapruder film or are reconstructed by Stone, offering the audience a previously unseen view of the president. This intimacy is matched by the interpretation of the national, political significance of the assassination, so the death of Kennedy is transformed into an act of political martyrdom. As Sharrett suggests, the insistence on the 'murder's central political moment'⁸⁹ is the most important and radical part of Stone's thesis as it reinterprets the moment of the assassination as consequence of the politics and ideology of Kennedy rather than a motiveless or anarchic murder. Another important element of Stone's thesis, however, is the director's desire for the exposure of the conspiracy to be continued beyond the film. The intimacy with Kennedy that Garrison gains through his dream, and the audience is granted through the flashbacks, coupled with Garrison's recasting as an apostle of Kennedy gives the film an evangelical aspect and this is emphasised in Garrison's closing statement calling for the next generation to pass the questions down 'father to son, mother to daughter, in the manner of the ancient runic bards.'

***JFK*, Kennedy and Clinton**

The depiction of Kennedy throughout *JFK* has two primary narrative drives. The first is expansive: Stone suggests a national conspiracy to replace the authorised interpretation of the assassination as an isolated, individual act. Each genre offers Stone a new framework to express and develop this expansion. The second drive may be seen in the visual depiction of Kennedy in the film. In this case, the trajectory moves from conventional newsreel footage of

Kennedy and increases in physical intimacy until the viewers are allowed so close to the president they are able literally to see inside him. By concluding his film with a focus on the corpse of Kennedy, Stone is following a convention that can also be seen later in the other 1990s films which, Grainge suggests, attempt to engage with the theme of an American national memory. He points out that:

If *Schindler's List* and *Forrest Gump* deal with a past marked by trauma – the Holocaust in one and the impact of divisive social turbulence in the other – the filmic re-enactment of that past assumed a function of catharsis and healing, a process of endowing events with narrative coherence and redemptive closure. It is not insignificant that each film ends with a scene at a gravestone, accompanied by a sense of a new generation made possible by those now mourning or mourned.⁹⁰

JFK is significant in the way it transforms the figure of Kennedy into both a 'gravestone' with the Zapruder film and the autopsy footage, but also as an agent for cathartic change. These two narrative drives throughout *JFK* are coupled with a repeated plea to future generations to continue Garrison's work and to uncover the truth behind the assassination. By the end of the film, Stone has developed an almost religious depiction of Kennedy that simultaneously transforms the murdered individual into a political martyr and offers the viewer an evangelical motivation to follow in Garrison's footsteps. Stone's attempt to encourage a generational unification behind the particular collective historical 'memory' of Kennedy is reminiscent of the mythic constructions of Reagan. As George Lipsitz suggests, Reagan in various speeches presented a mythic construction of history that personalised the past creating a 'history of the American state as if it were the history of the American people.'⁹¹ In doing so, Reagan homogenised American society by attempting to impose a collective past on a multi-cultural society. Stone's methodology is similar – he, like Reagan, personalises the history of the Kennedy presidency and assassination; he attracts the viewer to his conspiratorial thesis by forming a mediated illusion of an intimate, apostolic bond between the audience of *JFK*, Garrison and Kennedy. His thesis, however, is a clear attempt to repatriate and politicise the myth of Kennedy to counter the simplified, Reaganite ideology depicted in *Kennedy*.

Paul Henggeler suggests that by the 1992 Presidential election, the mystique of Kennedy continued to be a potent political marketing tool for the candidates. The success of *JFK* as a film and the invasive attractiveness of Stone's thesis helped sustain the Kennedy appeal after a decline of the family's popularity in the late 1980s when 'Edward Kennedy and the Kennedy family became a source more of titillation than inspiration.'⁹² In 1992, however, 'the mythical dimensions of John Kennedy's life and death seemed more potent than they had thirty years before.'⁹³ Crucially *JFK* and Stone's subsequent marketing of the film elevated the profile and helped rehabilitate the figure of Kennedy as a political force. This rehabilitation, as Henggeler suggests, was built upon by Bill Clinton as he successfully combined his position as a baby boom generation candidate with the new political nostalgia for Kennedy:

for those with no actual memories of Camelot, those post-baby boomers who learned history via television, Clinton could be readily cast as Kennedy, a fictionalized player in a prime-time docudrama.⁹⁴

JFK, and Stone's interpretation of the Kennedy myth, acts as a bridge created by the baby-boomer generation (Stone) between the Kennedy generation, portrayed in the film by Garrison, and Generation X, the 'post-baby boomers' who voted for Clinton. As Luc Herman argues, Stone 'turned the assassination game into a contest for cultural authority' and that:

Thanks to the conflict surrounding Stone that was fought out in the media, the key Kennedy TV clips from three decades earlier were shown over and over again. It almost seemed as if Kennedy was being marketed again, this time (given Stone's interpretation) as a commodity of subversion, as a product that gave every single American the possibility of doing something about the un-democratic control pervading society. In other words, early on in 1992, John F. Kennedy once more "held out a promise of change."⁹⁵

Herman suggests that by politicising the assassination and by presenting the figure of the president in an intimate way, Stone commodifies Kennedy and this is most evident when Stone allows the viewer an intimacy with the assassination, what Herman calls his 'manipulation of the spectator.'⁹⁶ Like the makers of *Kennedy*, Stone taps into the Camelot myth, but instead of dislocating the politics from the emotional aspects of the myth, Stone's combination of docudrama and thriller enable him to create a synthesis of the personal and political qualities of Kennedy. In this way, Stone reframes the Kennedy myth as a force for

political change in the 1990s rather than as a nostalgic social artefact of the 1960s as presented in *Kennedy*.

In the next section, I want to explore how this depiction of Kennedy, used for during the 1992 campaign of Bill Clinton, may be seen to be altered in the 1990s by the changing public reaction to the presidency caused by the scandals of the Clinton era.

***Thirteen Days* (2000)**

Thirteen Days (2000) directed by Roger Donaldson and starring Kevin Costner follows the events of the Cuban Missile Crisis from 15 to 28 October 1962. The film tells the story of the international tensions caused when the Soviet Union positioned missiles on Cuba close enough to mainland America to threaten US Cities. It follows the debates within the Kennedy White House from the point-of-view of Kenny O'Donnell, Kennedy's aide played by Costner, and focuses mainly on the arguments between those against a retaliatory invasion of Cuba, lead by Kennedy, O'Donnell and Robert Kennedy, and those advocating the use of military force. Critics such as Robert Butler and Art Simon writing after the film's release compared *Thirteen Days* to 1960s Cold War films such as *Dr Strangelove* (1964), itself a parody of the Cold War thriller genre that includes films such as Sidney Lumet's *Fail-Safe* (1964) and John Frankenheimer's *Seven Days in May* (1964).⁹⁷ While interpreting *Thirteen Days* in the context of this genre is essential to its understanding, the film may also be situated within a particular generic form of the 1990s called the 'new sincerity' film. I will demonstrate that by utilising the characteristics of this form *Thirteen Days* moves the characterisation of Kennedy in a new direction from that constructed in *Kennedy* and *JFK*. Building on the work of Grainge, Collins and Liam Kennedy's associated thesis outlined in 'Alien Nation: White Male Paranoia and Imperial Culture in the United States,'⁹⁸ this reconfiguring of the Kennedy myth offers a depiction of the 1960s president that casts him as a figurative antidote to a raft of social anxieties in the 1990s. Furthermore, I would suggest that this contemporising of the

character of Kennedy must be examined in the light of the damage to the reputation of Bill Clinton after the Monica Lewinsky affair and as an early symptom of a political malaise in America that reached its nadir in the controversial outcome of the 2000 presidential campaign between Al Gore and George W. Bush.

In his essay 'Genericity in the Nineties', Jim Collins observes a divergence in the ways certain films in the 1990s react to what he calls the 'media-saturated landscape of contemporary American culture.'⁹⁹ This divergence creates two different types of film, in his words:

One that is founded on dissonance, on eclectic juxtapositions of elements that very obviously don't belong together, while the other is obsessed with recovering some sort of missing harmony, where everything works in unison.¹⁰⁰

Collins examines two films in depth, *Back to the Future III* (1990) and *Dances with Wolves* (1990). Both films use the form and conventions of the Western genre, but while the former playfully adapts the genre, mixing different forms to comedic effect, the latter does the opposite by attempting to 'demythologise' the Western, in Collins' words, to access 'a lost authenticity [that] is situated in a West before the Western 'got to it.'¹⁰¹ Collins labels these two new genres of film 'eclectic irony' and 'new sincerity' and in the context of *Thirteen Days*, it is the latter genre I am most interested in. The 'new sincerity' form is partially defined as a film that attempts to recover a pure version of a genre such as the Western, undiluted by the conventions, structures and iconography of other films of that genre. As Collins suggests:

the move back in time away from the corrupt sophistication of media culture toward a lost authenticity defined simultaneously as a yet-to-be-contaminated folk culture of elemental purity, and as the site of successful narcissistic projection, the hero's magic mirror; the foregrounding not only of the intertextual, but of the 'Ur-textual,' in which an originary genre text takes on a quasi-sacred function as the guarantee of authenticity; the fetishizing of 'belief' rather than irony as the only way to resolve conflict; the introduction of a new generic imaginary that becomes the only site where unresolvable conflicts can be successfully resolved.¹⁰²

In Paul Grainge's words, the drive towards 'unmediated representational authenticity' is embodied within the new sincerity film in a variety of ways.¹⁰³ Grainge expands on Collins' thesis and observes the ways in which the new sincerity genre engages with his own theories of mediated nostalgia in the historical film. Grainge argues that both the eclectic irony and new sincerity genres when applied to historical films such as *Forrest Gump* (1994) or *Schindler's List* (1993) are characterised by a foregrounding and elevation of 'a redeeming and/or redeemed white "father".'¹⁰⁴ This characteristic may be seen as a part of a wider anxiety in the 1990s outlined by Liam Kennedy regarding the place of the white male in the face of 'public paranoia about significant economic, political and social changes which have disrupted the coherence and cohesiveness of national myths and ideologies of Americanness.'¹⁰⁵ In the first section of this case study, I want to locate *Thirteen Days* within this debate, to examine how the film uses characteristics of the new sincerity form to prioritise authenticity in its presentation of the Cuban Missile Crisis and how, by doing this, the film may be read as an attempt to first expose and then recreate the unmediated origin of the Cold War thriller.

***Thirteen Days* and the new sincerity film**

The first indication that *Thirteen Days* may be situated within Jim Collins' new sincerity genre is the casting of Kevin Costner as Kenny O'Donnell. Costner's roles in the late 1980s and early 1990s include two films that Collins suggests epitomise the new sincerity genre: *Dances With Wolves* and *Field of Dreams* (1989). Indeed, these films were among Costner's most critically acclaimed; the former won seven Academy Awards including best actor and director for Costner while the latter was nominated for three Academy Awards. Considering his past roles, Costner's casting in *Thirteen Days* may be said to have brought aspects of his heroic characters from these earlier films to his portrayal of O'Donnell. Costner's roles in other films in the 1990s also add to his characterisation of O'Donnell in *Thirteen Days*. Critics such as J Hoberman point to Costner's role as Jim Garrison in *JFK*, another one of his critical and commercial successes, suggesting that *Thirteen Days* marks Costner's return to

the Kennedy mythology. Hoberman even suggests that Costner's presence in *Thirteen Days* turns the film into 'a sort of *JFK* prequel.'¹⁰⁶ Other critics point to Costner's failure in later 1990s films such as *Waterworld* (1995) and *The Postman* (1997) suggesting that by appearing in *Thirteen Days*, Costner is granted an 'opportunity to refurbish his media image.'¹⁰⁷ Costner's casting in *Thirteen Days*, therefore has a multilayered effect on the film. Firstly it brands the film with Costner's early 1990s screen persona as a star of the new sincerity film, an actor who came to symbolise historical authenticity and integrity. Secondly, it refers back to Costner's earlier encounter with the Kennedy story, one that acted as a watershed in Costner's career between the success of films pre-*JFK* such as *The Untouchables* (1987), *Field of Dreams*, *Dances With Wolves* and *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (1991) and the failure of films post-*JFK* including *Waterworld*, *Tin Cup* (1996), *The Postman* and *For the Love of the Game* (1999). *Thirteen Days* combines two aspects of Costner's previous roles: his characters in new sincerity films and in a film that effectively rehabilitates the Kennedy mystique with a sense of a rehabilitation of Costner's image. Costner both brings an aspect of the new sincerity genre to *Thirteen Days*, but is also enhanced by it. The aura surrounding the film of an important historical event told without irony rewards Costner with the suggestion that he has returned to the form of his early 1990s films, while the combination of Costner with Kennedy returns him to the scene of his last great triumph, *JFK*, and completes the connection between Costner's polysemy and the idealism of Kennedy. Costner's casting is part of the authentication of *Thirteen Days* and a first step in the linking of the film with the new sincerity genre.

The first scenes in which Costner appears on screen in the film also conform to the characteristics of the new sincerity film outlined by Collins. The opening scenes of *Thirteen Days* follow O'Donnell as he wakes, breakfasts and travels to work. A characteristic of the film is the use of on screen subtitles informing the viewer of the identity and role of the character. In these opening scenes (see Figure 7), this subtitle is delayed and Costner's character's name and role is initially not revealed. It becomes clear in this opening that the

events of the film will be shown from O'Donnell's perspective and the opening scenes gradually reveal his character's importance in layers. Over breakfast, O'Donnell quizzes his children on the identity of key members of the Kennedy administration, so we know he is involved in politics. O'Donnell travels to work at a location revealed to be the White House. O'Donnell is then shown in his office, revealed to be next to the Oval Office. He then walks to the private residences where he meets and argues with Jackie Kennedy then joins John F Kennedy for breakfast and only then is given a subtitle revealing him to be Kennedy's special assistant. The cumulative effect of these scenes is not just to build O'Donnell's role, but also to grant the viewer a gradual entry to the private realm of the White House. Each stage in O'Donnell's journey to work literally and figuratively brings him a step nearer to Kennedy and as O'Donnell is the film's 'man on the inside', the scenes demonstrate to the viewer of *Thirteen Days* the level of intimacy they are to expect in the rest of the film. When comparing these scenes to the opening sequence of *JFK* it becomes clear how differently the two films locate themselves within the historical world of the 1960s. The montage that opens *JFK* has a similar effect of setting the style and degree of intimacy for the film; in the case of *JFK*, that being highly mediated, eclectic and distanced. Critic Desmond Ryan describes Roger Donaldson's direction throughout *Thirteen Days* as 'unobtrusive' and this is certainly in evidence in these scenes especially when compared to the *JFK* montage.¹⁰⁸ Collins describes in films such as *Dances With Wolves*, *Field of Dreams* and *Hook* (1991) a 'free-floating technophobia', a preference for an authentic, unmediated 'liveness.'¹⁰⁹ In Collins' argument this technophobia is manifested thematically within the films, indeed, as I will suggest later, the fear of nuclear attack and computer or communication malfunction in Cold War thrillers such as *Fail-Safe* or *Dr Strangelove* is a version of this fear of technology. I would suggest, however, that it is also demonstrated in *Thirteen Days* in the formal construction of the film. For example, Donaldson chooses to present the scenes introducing O'Donnell simply, and without any extra-diegetic historical information such as voice-over or captions, and without the jarring mixture of monochrome and colour as in *JFK*. Indeed, compared with *JFK*, *Thirteen Days* is sparing and subtle in its use of monochrome. Black and white is used

throughout the film, but only at the beginning of certain scenes before the colour returns. Writing about *Forrest Gump*, Paul Grainge describes a use of monochrome that could just as easily apply to *JFK*, a film that shares *Forrest Gump*'s position as a contender for the 'eclectic irony' generic form:

Monochrome is part of an iconic repertoire and is used without any particular reverence for its representational and/or historical authenticity; it contributes to the more general breakdown of distinctions between fact and fiction, representation and experience.¹¹⁰

By contrast, the use of monochrome in *Thirteen Days* is unobtrusive, with scenes moving from black-and-white to colour without cutting away. I would suggest this blending of colour and monochrome blurs the distinctions between the past event and the depiction of the past on screen. Indeed at times during the film such as when the news of the crisis breaks in the press, archive newsreel footage, originally black and white, is colourised by the film-makers with the aid of computers and inserted alongside monochrome scenes filmed by Donaldson. The use of monochrome throughout *Thirteen Days* has the effect of suggesting an archival quality to the events shown in the film that reconciles rather than juxtaposes the authorised history of the crisis with the presentation of the crisis on screen. The choice of which scenes open with monochrome initially seems random. Art Simon criticises the use of black and white in the film suggesting that the makers of *Thirteen Days*: 'borrow, for no apparent reason, Oliver Stone's technique of cutting brief sequences of black-and-white footage into their color photography.'¹¹¹ Observing the position of the monochrome scenes throughout the film, however, some patterns are discernible and reasons behind the use of black-and-white throughout *Thirteen Days* may be suggested. Scenes that open with black-and-white frequently depict characters such as the Soviet ambassador or Robert Kennedy arriving at meetings, or include scenes such as John F Kennedy giving a speech or his Press Secretary, Pierre Salinger giving a press conference, or scenes with Robert and John F Kennedy in the Oval Office or in the Rose Garden. The binding thread that links all of these moments is that they are all events from the Kennedy presidency that featured in the media at the time. The characters arriving at meetings are accompanied by news photographers, Kennedy's speeches

and Salinger's press conferences all appear on television while the scenes of Robert and John F. Kennedy are framed to recall the iconic monochrome images of the Kennedy presidency by photographers such as George Tames. The use of black-and-white in these particular scenes create, in Paul Grainge's words, 'an authenticating historical aesthetic,'¹¹² but one that not only reaches back towards, or suggests, an archival memory of the events of the Cuban Missile crisis, but also of the iconic media depictions of the time. This aesthetic is an important way that the aura of presidentiality is introduced into *Thirteen Days*. Tellingly, the use of monochrome is greatly reduced during the second half of the film as the narrative moves from public to private negotiations. The significance of these monochromatic moments throughout the first half of *Thirteen Days*, particularly the scenes of the Kennedys in the West Wing, is that they include the character of O'Donnell. As Mark Janusonis suggests, these scenes present O'Donnell as 'a sort of third Kennedy brother (Ted is never seen), who prods and cajoles and tries to light a fire under JFK as he wavers on how to meet the Soviet threat. O'Donnell seems to be everywhere; he often seems to be pulling the strings behind the scenes.'¹¹³ Costner, in the role of O'Donnell, is insinuated into the iconic moments of the Kennedy presidency through the film's use of monochrome just as Forrest Gump is insinuated into archival footage of key events of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Grainge, observing this technique in *Forrest Gump* suggests that the character becomes 'an agent and observer of "official" national history', a past that is 'explained and experientially distilled through a figure whose simple-minded decency can heal the pain and distemper of bruised history.'¹¹⁴ While O'Donnell cannot be described as 'simple-minded' (except perhaps in contrast with the Kennedy brothers who, he admits, are 'smarter' than him) his function as a conduit between the viewer and the historical moment is the same as that of Gump. The use of monochrome in *Thirteen Days* has the dual effect of accessing and reproducing a mediated, historical vision of the Cuban Missile Crisis whilst simultaneously inserting the figure of Costner into this vision. Unlike *Forrest Gump*, a film that Grainge suggests falls into Collins' definition of an eclectic irony genre film, the media imagery that *Thirteen Days* recreates is not a manipulation of genre characteristics, in Grainge's words, a past 'realized through pop image

and textual pastiche.’¹¹⁵ Instead it may be seen as an attempt to reconstruct an authentic past with reference to archival documentary footage that ties it firmly to the new sincerity genre. This is not to say that *Thirteen Days* cannot be examined in relation to more conventional Hollywood genre forms. While, as Collins suggests, *Dances With Wolves* may be read as an attempt to ‘demythologise the classic Western,’¹¹⁶ *Thirteen Days* may be seen to perform a similar demythologisation of the genre of the Cold War thriller. In the next section, I want to examine how Kennedy is framed and characterised throughout *Thirteen Days* and how this characterisation may be seen to be affected by the film’s use of the conventions of this genre.

Thirteen Days and Kennedy

Three films that *Thirteen Days* may be compared with, *Fail-Safe*, *Seven Days in May* and *Dr Strangelove* were all released in 1964: *Fail-Safe* is the story of a president, played by Henry Fonda, described by Robert Hunter as ‘a model leader,’¹¹⁷ who loses control and is forced to launch a nuclear strike against New York after a catastrophic technological failure. *Seven Days in May* offers a twist on *Fail-Safe*, telling the story of an American air-force general who attempts to depose the incumbent president and start a nuclear war. *Dr Strangelove* parodies the fundamental anxieties that inspired the genre, presenting both an insane general and an out-of-control president. The connections between *Thirteen Days* and these earlier films are complex. *Thirteen Days* is clearly an attempt to narrate the source of the Cold War thriller in the same way *Dances With Wolves* attempts to depict the original Western. *Thirteen Days* shares characteristics with the earlier films: it opens with, and is punctuated by, shots of atomic explosions recalling, as Art Simon suggests, their iconic use in *Dr Strangelove*, while the emphasis *Thirteen Days* places on the conflict between the presidential staff members and the hawkish military recalls, as critics such as Robert Butler and David Elliott point out, similar conflicts in *Dr Strangelove* and *Seven Days in May*.¹¹⁸ Another over-arching characteristic that connects all these films and *Thirteen Days* is the threat, not just of the Soviets to the safety of America, but to the authority of the presidential figures. As critic Desson Howe suggests:

What emerges in “Thirteen Days” isn’t the menace of the Russians; it’s the political pressure that informs every decision. Of course, the future of America is at stake. But so is the integrity of Kennedy’s decision-making power.¹¹⁹

An important element of many of these earlier Cold War thrillers, is the depiction of the presidential character as a central but flawed figure but also, as Robert Hunter suggests, the failure of technology. He points out that central to the Cold War thriller is the danger of the growing power of technology to the point where it supersedes human control.¹²⁰ This motif is repeated throughout the genre and is represented not just by the obvious apocalyptic symbol of technology, the mushroom cloud, but also by breakdowns in communication or of computers. In many ways, the Cold War thriller epitomises the ‘technophobia’ of the new sincerity genre, the anxiety of a presidential loss of control brought about by computer or communication error and the ultimate failure of technology that forms the basis of the MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction) scenario, is matched by a desire for a return to the purity and the simplicity of earlier times, to wars fought before the atom bomb. *Thirteen Days* shares this technophobic reaction to the Cold War. The film is riddled with minor failures of technology such as Kennedy failing to communicate first with the Pentagon and then with Khrushchev. Indeed, this failure in modern communications is illustrated in the middle of the film when the White House is struggling to talk to the ‘real’ Khrushchev and O’Donnell decides to go to Church to pray. These moments suggest a juxtaposition between the failure of the new communication of telegraph and telephone, and the resort to the old communication of prayer. What *Thirteen Days* does not share with the earlier films, however, is a sense of absurdity. Ian Scott argues that:

In fact the critical distinction that drove these early 1960s’ narratives into the conscience of watching Americans was their ability to translate cultural icons, and semi-authentic events, into a *mise-en-scène* of absurdity, while giving an almost breathtaking sweep of assumptions and misnomers about American power and politics through its history.¹²¹

Because it is a depiction of a real historical event, arguably the original, pivotal inspiration behind the 1964 films, *Thirteen Days* eschews absurdity in favour of sincerity. Like its predecessors it focuses on the internal conflict between those advocating military escalation

and those advocating negotiation as much as on the international conflict between America and Russia; but, by combining the dramatic characteristics of the Cold War thriller with the more sober characteristics of the new sincerity genre that emphasise historical authenticity, *Thirteen Days* reveals the idealised solution to avoid nuclear war. As Butler suggests, the combination of historical authenticity with the drama of the Cold War thriller is an important aspect of the film's success:

This historical re-creation (or docu-drama, if you like) succeeds largely because it seems so, well, real. Enacted mostly by journeyman actors whose faces we recognise but whose names escape us, and presented with a matter-of-factness that seems an antidote to the usual Hollywood manipulation, "Thirteen Days" is a nail-biter that works even though we already know how it will end.¹²²

Butler's use of the phrase 'journeyman actors' is interesting when considering the effect the film has on the myth of Kennedy. The characterisation of Kennedy throughout *Thirteen Days* is closely intertwined with the film's combination of the Cold War thriller with the new sincerity film. One set of opposing characteristics of the Cold War thriller is the centralisation or marginalisation of the presidential character. In *Fail-Safe*, the unnamed president played by Henry Fonda dominates the screen. He is heroic but isolated as he struggles for individual control of the situation. In *Seven Days in May*, the unpopular president, Jordan Lyman, is marginalised by the more famous Burt Lancaster playing General James Scott. In *Thirteen Days*, Kennedy, and the actor who plays him, Bruce Greenwood, is marginalised by the star presence of Costner and the focus the film gives to O'Donnell. Reviews of the film and interviews with Costner recognise this. Desmond Ryan suggests that Costner attempts to avoid eclipsing Kennedy by not giving a 'star performance,'¹²³ while Costner was aware that, "Jack Kennedy was golden in this movie, as was Bobby. It was important that I make sure that happened, as the actor and the producer. So it wasn't a star turn".¹²⁴ Costner's concern when considering the choice of actor to play Kennedy was that it should not be him, Costner suggests that, "I couldn't play Kennedy as good as Bruce did. In my mind, I've had too much interface with the public to play such an iconic person".¹²⁵ I would argue, however, that Costner's performance as O'Donnell does eclipse Greenwood's performance as Kennedy, but

because of his previous 'interface with the public' the marginalisation of Kennedy has a positive effect on the character of the president. The casting of Costner as a character who becomes a surrogate third Kennedy brother is combined with the actor's new sincerity polysemy. As in *JFK* when Kennedy is insulated by his absence, the sidelining of Kennedy in *Thirteen Days* by the more visible O'Donnell, the casting of Costner in the role as advisor/witness to the crisis, coupled with the prominence placed on Robert Kennedy throughout the film, prevent the isolation of the president seen in earlier Cold War thrillers. Crucially, however, it is not just the new sincerity pedigree but also the failure of his films in the mid and late 1990s that Costner brings to the *Thirteen Days*. The suggestion that *Thirteen Days* is a return to form for Costner, a return to the success of the new sincerity films of the early 1990s and to the subject matter of *JFK*, repositions Kennedy in a redemptive role. Costner may bring the past, idealised memories of films such as *Dance With Wolves* and *Field of Dreams* to *Thirteen Days*, but it is the characterisation and positioning of Kennedy in relation to O'Donnell that encourages the viewer to recall these roles and to exorcise the effect of the run of failed films from Costner career. *Thirteen Days* therefore adapts the genre of the Cold War thriller, presenting instead of absurdity and catastrophe, a quest for the authentic, historical source. In this way, and with the presence of Costner, Kennedy is recast as the original, sincere character, the national white father-figure, the search for which Liam Kennedy and Grainge suggest is the driving motive of the new sincerity and eclectic irony film. The myth of Kennedy is therefore redirected from being a 'commodity of subversion,'¹²⁶ as in *JFK*, to being a commodity of historical stability, sincerity and, crucially, catharsis.

Thirteen Days, Kennedy and Clinton

The motives behind this reconfiguring of the Kennedy myth can be seen in the context of the political world of the late 1990s. Like the 1974 miniseries *The Missiles of October*, *Thirteen Days* uses Kennedy's heroic actions during the Cuban Missile crisis as a cathartic reminder of a nostalgic past:

Thirteen Days doesn't explain how the world came to the brink of nuclear war, only that it did...and that catastrophe was averted. But it is also a movie of its own moment. The TV docudrama *Missiles of October* was broadcast only four months after Richard Nixon's resignation and served a useful social purpose in rehabilitating the prestige of the American presidency. The timing of *Thirteen Days* is scarcely less uncanny, although the effect may not be so comforting – the film encourages the audience to ponder, if they dare, the spectacle of George W. Bush under pressure.¹²⁷

Hoberman suggests that *Thirteen Days* offers an ideal presidential reaction to a crisis that anticipates an anxiety regarding the strength of Bush. As Bush was not elected before *Thirteen Days* was released, and as the film was in production during the Bush/Gore campaigns, any intentional parallels between the film and the Bush presidency must be discounted. I would argue, however, the Hoberman is correct when he suggests that *Thirteen Days*, like *The Missiles of October* might be a reaction to a failure in the perception of the presidency. I argued in the last case study that Oliver Stone's *JFK* anticipated the election of Bill Clinton by presenting a reconditioned Kennedy myth in a narrative that petitions its audience for political change. The generational unification argued for by Stone was realised by Clinton in 1992 when, with the help of a photograph showing a childhood encounter with Kennedy, he defeated George H. W. Bush to become president. Paul Henggeler suggests that Clinton used similar public relations techniques to Reagan, attaching himself emotionally to the nation through the promotion of national myths. In the case of Clinton, these techniques, combined with already developing rumours of his womanising, meant that he gained a reputation, in Henggeler's words, 'for evasiveness and confirming for many the image of "Slick Willie".'¹²⁸ Clinton, with his historical and ideological connections to Kennedy, may be seen as an embodiment of Liam Kennedy's 1990s 'white male authority' but is also an icon of the multiculturalism that inspired the anxiety in the first place. When Toni Morrison called Clinton America's 'first black President' she suggested that Clinton's appeal was regardless of ethnicity, but then indicated that this appeal was also evidence of his insincerity.¹²⁹ Clinton, in short, was both the champion of the white middle class as well as being one of the causes of its anxieties. In 1998 these anxieties reached a climax when Clinton was impeached following revelations concerning his affair with White House intern

Monica Lewinsky. After this crisis in Clinton's public image, Luc Herman suggests Clinton began to reduce his frequent referencing and emulating of Kennedy:

he and his advisors must have realised all too well that it had become difficult to score points with the public at large by evoking a sovereign whom he had come to resemble too much. Indeed, the libido parallel effectively put an end to the organized use of the Kennedy reference.¹³⁰

Paul Henggeler concurs suggesting that by the time *Thirteen Days* was produced, comparisons with Kennedy had become as much of a problem for Clinton as a boost in public relations:

Once Clinton inevitably failed to fulfil the expectations that accompany myth, the public felt damaged by the deception and turned against him. It has always been easier and more assuring to dismiss leaders as "no JFK" than to question the assumptions of the myth.¹³¹

I would suggest that it was this public relations crisis in the Clinton presidency that *Thirteen Days* may be seen to engage most closely with. Between *JFK* and *Thirteen Days* it is possible to chart a progression in the ways that the films construct a myth of Kennedy. This progression, I would argue, is congruous with a similar progression in the public attitude towards the Clinton presidency in the 1990s from national desire for political change to a national anxiety regarding Clinton's political and personal authority. As Clinton fails to match the succession of 1990s white male heroes, what Grainge calls the 'power of historical redemption'¹³² is transferred instead back to the Kennedy presidency. In short, *Thirteen Days* is part of a dislocation of the Kennedy myth from the Clinton presidency. Using the tropes and characteristics of the 1960s Cold War thriller and the 1990s new sincerity genres, the film presents a depiction of Kennedy that is in many ways cathartic. This catharsis operates to rehabilitate Costner's polysemy, to rehabilitate the Kennedy myth after the controversies of *JFK* and to rehabilitate the presidency after the scandals of the Clinton era.

¹ John Hellmann, *The Kennedy Obsession* (New York: Columbia UP, 1997) ix-x.

² Paul R. Henggeler, *The Kennedy Persuasion* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1995) 4.

³ James N. Giglio, "Review," *The American Historical Review*, 101. 3 (June 1996): 933.

⁴ Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X Files* (London: Routledge, 2000) 78.

⁵ Knight 226.

⁶ Hellmann 90 and 147.

⁷ Robert Dallek, *John F. Kennedy: An Unfinished Life* (London: Penguin Books, 2003) 701.

⁸ Hellmann 90.

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- ⁹ Hellmann 139-9.
- ¹⁰ David M. Lubin, *Shooting Kennedy: JFK and the Culture of Images* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) 30.
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- ¹² John Hellmann, "JFK: The Author and the Text," *American Literary History*, 2. 4 (Winter 1990): 745.
- ¹³ Henggeler 4.
- ¹⁴ Henggeler 119-20.
- ¹⁵ Henggeler 164-72.
- ¹⁶ Arthur Unger, "Twenty years after," *Christian Science Monitor* 10 November 1983. 35.
- ¹⁷ Bruce Crowther, *Hollywood Faction* (London: Columbus Books, 1984) 166.
- ¹⁸ Tom Shales, 'Dragging Camelot Down,' review of *Kennedy* in *The Washington Post* 19 November 1983. C1.
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- ²¹ Margaret Montgomerie, 'Miniseries', <http://www.museum-tv>
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- ²⁸ Caldwell 189.
- ²⁹ Jane Feuer, *Seeing through the Eighties: Television and Reaganism* (London: BFI, 2000). 114.
- ³⁰ Tom Shales, "Dragging Camelot Down." C1.
- ³¹ Jerry Buck, "Martin Sheen Portrays His Hero," review of *Kennedy* in *The Associated Press* 18 November 1983. 2.
- ³² Tom Shales, "Dragging Camelot Down." C1.
- ³³ Fred Rothenberg, "NBC's *Kennedy* Miniseries Starts Sunday Night," review of *Kennedy* in *The Associated Press* 18 November 1983. 2.
- ³⁴ Hellmann 90.
- ³⁵ Tom Shales, "Camelot Recaptured; TV Pays Homage to the First Television President," *The Washington Post* 13 November 1983. L1.
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- ³⁷ Paul Grainge, *Monochrome Memories*. (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2002) 45.
- ³⁸ Michael E Hill, "Kennedy: A Dramatization," review of *Kennedy* in *The Washington Post* 20 November 1983. 3.
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- ⁴⁰ Martin Sheen interviewed in Jerry Buck, "Martin Sheen Portrays His Hero." 2.
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- ⁴³ Lubin 173.
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- ⁵¹ Henggeler 217-8
- ⁵² *The Vice Presidential Debate*. CBS 5 October 1988.
- ⁵³ Henggeler 207-18.
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Chapter Two – Nixon

Paul Henggeler argues that Nixon was fixated on the Kennedy presidency. In his words:

In the whole cloth of the Nixon presidency, the Kennedy legend was a mere thread. But by following the Kennedy strain, the suspicion, bitterness, and resentment that burdened Nixon can be uniquely appreciated. As president he emulated John Kennedy's image while denigrating his reputation.¹

Nixon's challenge, as a successor of Kennedy, was to emulate and compete with that president's telegenic appeal and almost mystical relationship with the public. Henggeler argues that the paradoxical relationship between the Nixon and Kennedy image is indicative of an ambiguity in the nature of the Nixon myth. Nixon is presented in Henggeler's analysis as a president desperate to find and control an attractive public persona, but ultimately doomed to be defined by scandal. Like Kennedy, Nixon's presidency was defined by a single event but where Kennedy was assassinated, Nixon was forced to resign after Watergate. Historian Mark Hamilton Lytle describes Watergate as the 'last battle' in the civil and cultural tensions of the 1960s and 1970s.² The two events, Kennedy's assassination and Nixon's resignation, bookend a fractious period of American history defined by the fight for Civil Rights, the Vietnam war and by an increasing national disillusionment with the authority of the American political institutions. As well as the contrasting reactions to the resignation and assassination, the two presidents are frequently analysed in contrast with one another. From the 1960 campaign and the iconic televised debate, Nixon and Kennedy are seen as being at opposite ends of both the political and cultural spectra. In this chapter, I will examine three films that I argue demonstrate a changing relationship between the screen depictions of Nixon and the political and social tensions of America in the 1970s and beyond.

All the President's Men (1976)

First I want to examine the depiction of Richard Nixon in the 1976 film *All the President's Men* directed by Alan Pakula and starring Dustin Hoffmann and Robert Redford. Unlike the films and television series that formed case studies in the previous chapter, which concentrated on narrating events from twenty, thirty and forty years in the past, *All the*

President's Men was filmed only four years after the Watergate burglary, the event that opens the film. Unlike the historical docudramas *Kennedy*, *JFK* and *Thirteen Days*, *All the President's Men* is more a study of contemporary events. *All the President's Men* can be compared to the 1974 television miniseries *The Missiles of October* in that both may be seen as a reaction to Watergate. While the miniseries can be interpreted as a call for an end to the political cynicism regarding the presidency, using Kennedy as a nostalgic idealised exemplar, *All the President's Men* seems instead to attempt to recall and recreate this cynicism, positioning Nixon as the principal villain. As I will argue in this case study, *All the President's Men* may be read not just as a commentary on the scandal of Watergate, but also on the controversial pardoning of Nixon by Gerald Ford in 1974, an action that was intended to achieve the national unification that *The Missiles of October* appeared to call for. In Ford's words, the pardoning of Nixon was a sign that America's 'long national nightmare is over';³ in this light, *All the President's Men* can be seen as an attempt to reignite the flames of the scandal and following Ford's pardon, denying the people a trial in the American courts, offering them the trial of Nixon by cinema instead. In short, my examination of the character of Nixon in *All the President's Men* will be a consideration of the origin of the cinematic Nixon myth, later developed in films such as Oliver Stone's 1995 *Nixon* and the 1999 teen movie *Dick*. My examination of *All the President's Men*, as with my previous case studies, will focus on the relationships between the formal and generic makeup of the film and with the political characterisation of the presidential figure. By comparing *All the President's Men* with other films from the 1970s such as *The Parallax View* (1974), *Three Days of the Condor* (1975) and *The Conversation* (1974), I intend to demonstrate how the conventions of the two connected genres of the surveillance and paranoid thriller may be seen to be used by Pakula in his reaction to the Watergate scandal and in his re-formation of the nightmarish political myth of Nixon. In doing so, I intend to demonstrate how *All the President's Men* both reignites the paranoia caused by the Watergate conspiracy and ultimately implicates Ford in the scandal. Firstly, it may be useful to outline a debate that connects the themes of the paranoid genre with particular political and social anxieties of the 1960s and 1970s.

In *The Seventies Now: Culture as Surveillance*, Stephen Paul Miller describes a shift in America between the 1960s and 1970s from a preoccupation with external to internal surveillance. Miller perceives the Watergate scandal as the central moment in this movement:

Secrecy and the control of information became more important than powers of persuasion. As Nixon wished to turn our gazes from Vietnam, he turned his gaze to his “personal” enemies and in the process became both America’s model self-survevor and self-enemy.⁴

This movement may be seen in cultural terms as the distinction between the Cold War thrillers of the 1960s and the paranoid thrillers of the 1970s. These films, including *Klute* (1971), *Play Misty for Me* (1971), *The Parallax View* (1974), *The Conversation* (1974) and *Three Days of the Condor* (1975), Miller suggests, anticipate the themes of the Watergate scandal by presenting an anxiety over the increase in surveillance technology and the redirection of the surveillance towards domestic rather than international targets. As Martin Ruben suggests, these films:

reflected the [1970s] tendency to turn the focus of political paranoia strongly inward, towards America’s own fundamental institutions, rather than towards external threats (such as communism or gangsterism) to those institutions.⁵

For example, Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Conversation* features Gene Hackman as Harry Caul, a surveillance expert who believes he has uncovered a murder plot whilst covertly recording a couple’s conversation for an anonymous corporation. It transpires, however, that Caul himself is under surveillance and is threatened by the corporation that has employed him. Parallels between films such as *The Conversation* and the Watergate scandal seem to support Miller’s thesis of a latent anxiety concerning self-surveillance that pre-determined Nixon’s downfall. As Ray Pratt points out:

The film was released in the midst of the Watergate crisis, though the director said it was planned before these events. Watergate seems to intersect with and inform the narrative, themes and central character of this film – Harry even resembles and dresses like Watergate figure and ex-CIA agent James McCord.⁶

The Conversation also focuses on anxieties regarding the invasion of private space that was such a key element of both the Watergate case and *All the President’s Men*. At the end of the

film, for example, Harry Caul discovers that despite his almost religious devotion to privacy and anonymity, he has been bugged. The final scene shows him tearing apart his own apartment frantically searching for a surveillance device before finally abandoning the few non-surveillance aspects of his life as he smashes a statue of the Virgin Mary. In terms of the absence of any exposure of the conspiratorial power that is endangering Caul, Ray Pratt suggests at the end of the film that the audience is placed in a similar position to the surveillance expert, 'He is trapped, as is the audience, which initially felt morally superior but end up feeling just as deeply implicated and vulnerable as Harry Caul.'⁷ The bugging of Harry Caul brings the film full circle as the surveillance expert's domestic space is invaded. This cycle of surveillance and self-surveillance mirrors the Watergate affair that begins with Nixon and his subordinates bugging the Democrat offices and ends with the revelation that Nixon has installed surveillance devices in the Oval Office. These repeated motifs of technology and the threat of surveillance, coupled with themes of 'alienation, communication, loneliness, privacy and responsibility,'⁸ suggested by Steve Jenkins as characteristics of the genre, may be detected in numerous films of the 1970s, both pre- and post-Watergate. The surveillance thriller may be seen as a subgenre of the paranoid thriller not directly inspired by the Watergate scandal, but sharing the same pre-existing cultural and political anxieties. Historian Mark Hamilton Lytle suggests that Watergate was the closing moment - the 'last battle' - in a long running 'uncivil war' within America between the citizen and the political authorities that redirected the national anxieties from the threat of the foreign, during the Cold War, to the threat from inside America, one that included anti-Vietnam and Civil Rights protests and the rise of the hippie counterculture.⁹ The relationship between *All the President's Men* and the genre of the paranoid thriller is an important one in that the film narrates the events of a central defining political moment in the societal preoccupations of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the first section of this case study, I want to examine how *All the President's Men* uses these themes that characterise the genre of the paranoid and surveillance thrillers.

***All the President's Men* and the Genre of Paranoia**

There are several aspects of *All the President's Men* that suggest it should be placed in the paranoid thriller genre. David Cook describes this film, along with *Klute* and *The Parallax View*, as the director's 'paranoid trilogy' and it is clear when comparing the three that they all share a preoccupation with surveillance and a narrative that focuses on the struggles of individuals against unknown or invisible authorities.¹⁰ *Klute* is described by Stephen Miller as 'a cultural foreshadowing of Watergate'¹¹ in its depiction of an exposure, by a private investigator, of a conspiracy, while *The Parallax View* similarly features the revelation of corruption in an organisation exposed, in this case, by a journalist. Another characteristic of the paranoid thriller genre is the inconclusive ending. In *The Parallax View*, *Three Days of the Condor* and *The Conversation*, the main characters are, to differing degrees, unsuccessful in exposing or preventing the conspiracy. In *All the President's Men*, the outcome of the narrative is never in doubt, the international awareness of the Watergate investigation means that the viewer is aware throughout of both the identity of the conspirators and the safety of Woodward and Bernstein. The two generic influences behind *All the President's Men*, the paranoid thriller and the docudrama, appear to operate in tension with one another. The former relies, much as the detective genre, upon an element of mystery and uncertainty in the narrative to create tension, whereas the latter relies more on the appeal of a narration of process and the revelation of the truth behind fixed historical events. As Pakula acknowledges, 'the constraints of truth deny [*All the President's Men*] the wilder shores of hypothesis and dread.'¹² One way Pakula attempts to resolve this conflict is to introduce visual characteristics of the paranoid thriller into *All the President's Men*. Pakula's film is notable for its frequent intercutting of light and dark: scenes such as the Watergate break-in itself or Woodward's visits to Deep Throat which take place in darkness and shadow, the latter in an underground garage; while many of the interviews take place in sunny, open spaces, and the newsroom of *The Washington Post* is fluorescently lit:

Audiences react audibly to *All the President's Men*'s abrupt cuts from the dimness of the environs of skulduggery to the crisp, primary-colored brightness of the *Post* newsroom, but Pakula's use of dark and light more

frequently strays from such simplistic contrast. Truth-seekers enter the darkness at their peril.¹³

The effect of the light/dark contrasts is such that the lighting in the film becomes symbolic of the paranoia and menace underpinning the Watergate story using 'space and shadow to connote the systematic character of political corruption.'¹⁴ The significance of this alternation of light and dark in the film becomes clear when one considers the difference between the different types of scenes in the film. The *Washington Post* scenes are not only brightly lit but also carefully framed in deep focus, Woodward and Bernstein often in the same frame. The Deep Throat scenes are more abstract: Woodward's informer appears from nowhere and remains in the shadows, just on the edge of the audience's perception. Pakula offers a contrast between the 'lidless-eye look of the *Post* newsroom,'¹⁵ where everything is revealed, with the 'Langian ruptures of spatial logic' of the Deep Throat scenes.¹⁶ Pakula's preoccupation with openness and focus in the newsroom scenes extended to the point where he arranged for wastepaper to be imported to Los Angeles from the real *Washington Post*, adding invisible authenticity.¹⁷ These two types of scenes in *All the President's Men* transform the film from a historical re-enactment of the Watergate investigation into a paranoid thriller using the visual codification of the conspiracy genre. Pakula uses his filming to distinguish between the revelation and concealment of the truth and in so doing imbues *All the President's Men* with a similar aura of menace that he achieved in *Klute* and *The Parallax View* but without the uncertainty of the fates of both the heroes and the villains of the conspiracy. As Pratt notes:

Thanks to Pakula's brilliant direction, the film contains often riveting moments of paranoia, achieved through extreme close-ups of phone conversations or through face-to-face interviews. Noir lighting techniques are evident in Woodward's nocturnal meetings with Deep Throat in darkened parking garages, with face obscured by shadow. All these directorial touches convey a mounting sense of menace – yet nothing violent ever occurs.¹⁸

Pakula sets up a visual sense of menace, aligning *All the President's Men* with the paranoid thriller genre through his use of framing, noir lighting and through the juxtaposition of scenes of light and dark. In other ways, however, Pakula retreats from the conventions of the genre. The director's depiction of Woodward and Bernstein, for example, contrasts with his earlier

characterisation of a reporter, Joseph Frady, in *The Parallax View*. As Richard Jameson suggests:

All the President's Men reverses the trajectories of *The Parallax View*, and its camera style keeps faith with the most casual-seeming maneuvers of its inquiring reporters. Unlike Joseph Frady, they are not pawns of their environment or the organising force that lurks behind it. When Carl Bernstein (Dustin Hoffman) is first glimpsed through the doorway of Harry Rosenbloom's (Jack Warden's) office as the first inkling of the Watergate story comes through, it is because he has accidentally been granted the opportunity (like the police squad who got to make the raid because a car nearer the Watergate was gassing up) to make history, rather than being fingered as its stooge.¹⁹

Woodward and Bernstein, unlike Caul, Frady or Joseph Turner, Robert Redford's character in *Three Days of the Condor*, appear in control of their investigations from the start. Indeed, throughout the film they are portrayed not as victims but as secondary perpetrators of conspiracy and surveillance. This is demonstrated by the reporters' frequent use of intimidation and guile in achieving their story, such as gaining information using a fellow reporter's intimate relationship with a conspirator or insinuating entry into the homes of CREEP staff members. As well as this, Woodward and Bernstein's roles as a team and within the *Washington Post* as a part of a group of people with similar expository goals, contrast with the individual struggles of Caul, Frady and Turner. The effect of this is to turn Woodward and Bernstein into conspirators themselves. For example, one or the other is often shown on a second telephone line covertly listening in to an interview. In this way, Pakula effectively breaches the conventions of the paranoid thriller, blurring the lines between the conspiracy and the investigation of the conspiracy. The principal effect of this is to emphasise the ambiguity of the motivations of Woodward and Bernstein, as Pakula acknowledges:

I think we feel the reporters' ruthlessness in the film. In dealing with an administration, part of whose tragedy was the end seemed to justify any means – and some of those ends were pretty crummy too – Woodward certainly did not hesitate to have *their* end justify some very questionable means. Their end was to get the story, not to save the country.²⁰

This conflation of the typical roles of paranoid thriller victim and antagonist in the depiction of *Washington Post* reporters can also be seen in *All the President's Men's* framing of Nixon.

In the next section, I want to examine how Pakula's framing of Nixon contrasts with his framing of Woodward and Bernstein. I will argue that Nixon's physical absence from *All the President's Men* casts him as the unseen and malevolent villain while simultaneously framing him as a victim, out of touch with the public attitude towards him and out of control of the investigation but also physically isolated within the film. This, I will argue, exposes and diminishes Nixon, particularly when compared with the aggressiveness and assertiveness of the reporters.

***All the President's Men* and Nixon**

The depiction of Nixon in *All the President's Men* is marginal and infrequent. When he does appear in the film it is in the form of documentary footage on television sets. As David Cook notes:

Unlike the Watergate films (e.g. the 1979 CBS-TV miniseries *Blind Ambition* [George Schaefer], or Oliver Stone's 1995 feature *Nixon*), none of the administration principals are portrayed by actors; Nixon and his lieutenants reveal (or, more accurately, expose) themselves only through the real television interviews, addresses, and newscasts that had taken place during the previous three years, and had the currency of "instant history".²¹

As Cook suggests, the depiction of Nixon on television sets at key moments throughout the film adds to a more general drive in *All the President's Men* towards historical and documentary authenticity that includes the lengths Pakula went to accurately recreate sets such as *Washington Post* offices. These moments contrast with scenes throughout the film that use lighting effects and camera movements that move away from a naturalistic presentation of the Watergate investigation towards a more abstract, atmospheric narration. I would suggest that this tension between the documentary and impressionist approaches to the Watergate investigation also has the effect of both centralising and isolating Nixon. With this in mind it may be worth briefly unpacking these two approaches. Throughout *All the President's Men*, Pakula uses camera and lighting techniques to drive narrative themes as David Cook suggests:

Much of Alan J Pakula's work of the 1970s depended on elaborate zoom effects, especially *All the President's Men* (1976), shot by Gordon Willis,

where slow aerial pull-backs are used to show Woodward and Bernstein trapped in maze-like configurations whose shapes are perceptible only from a bird's-eye view – for example, the famous Library of Congress shot where the camera pulls up from a close shot of the two men at the card catalogue to an aerial perspective from the ceiling in what appears to be a single continuous shot (but is actually a combination of tracking, zooming, and two dissolves).²²

Cook argues that Pakula's use of pull-backs, particularly in shots featuring Woodward and Bernstein, add to the sense of the reporters' challenge as they examine the minutiae of the Watergate scandal such as their search for a particular library card, whilst unknowingly pitted against a wider political conspiracy. In a sense, what Richard Comb describes as Woodward and Bernstein's 'mole-like labours'²³ is an apt metaphor, the reporters working in the dark whilst the viewer of the film, through Pakula's camera work, is given a suggestion of the complexity and scope of the scandal (see Figure 8). In short Pakula represents the historical hindsight of the viewer using the conventions of the conspiracy thriller. This tension between the obliviousness of the characters in *All the President's Men* and the historical knowledge of the viewer is also evident in the scenes which depict Nixon. Appearances by Nixon bookend the film: *All the President's Men* opens with a documentary clip showing Nixon addressing Congress in June 1972. The date of this speech is relayed to the viewer through an unusual image of an extreme close-up of typewriter key striking paper. These two images are a condensation of the principal themes of the film: the aggressiveness of the typewriter keys, the sound of which are overdubbed with additional sounds such as whiplashes and gunshots are juxtaposed with the formal documentary clip of a triumphant Nixon.²⁴ In these two juxtaposed images, Pakula presents both the object and method of Woodward and Bernstein's investigation. As well as this, the two images sum up Pakula's two distinct approaches to presenting the investigation, namely the impressionistic and the documentary. Richard Jameson examines the formal significance of the opening shot of the date:

The black typewritten message brings lucidity to the infinite chaos of *lux*, as the discoveries of the *Post* journalists bring truth to the reader and confusion to the corrupt byzantine order of the Nixon regime. It is a formal proposition, stated in the most elemental terms available to the filmmaker. And this, finally, brings us to the heart of Pakula's classicism, what makes him worthiest to wear the mantle of classicist. Form itself is profoundly exciting

to him; it constitutes an authentic and powerful event in itself, and that power comes across relentlessly on-screen.²⁵

Taking Jameson's analysis further it is possible to read this positioning as part of an ongoing sequence of juxtapositions between both the aggressiveness of the press, the fragility of the Nixon presidency and the isolation of the image of Nixon. One method Pakula utilises to this effect is to show Woodward and Bernstein working in the newsroom of the *Washington Post* whilst in the same shot televisions display key historical moments of the Nixon presidency. The last scene of the film, for example, opens with a wide angle view of the *Washington Post* newsroom showing Woodward and Bernstein working alone. The camera slowly zooms in and the scene fades to a later time with the reporters in the same position but now sharing the frame with a shot of Nixon's second inauguration on television. As the camera continues to zoom in, the television becomes visually more dominant, but the sound of Woodward and Bernstein's typing increases in volume so by the time the twenty-one gun salute is heard on the television, the sound of typewriter keys begin to dominate it. In the words of Pakula:

The President is never shown except at the height of his powers. There were people who said "why didn't you give him the defeat; why didn't you show him down and out and give the audience that satisfaction?" That's not what the film is about. The godlike quality the audience has at the end of that last scene, seeing the man take the Oath of Office for the second term as President of the United States, at the height of his power; and those men with their little typewriter keys against the gunshots of the cannon salute. Thank God they had the twenty-one gun salute, because it set up the keys as weapons. And the reporters don't look up: just that same, driven *Nixonian concentration*.²⁶

Unlike the opening of the film which also juxtaposed the work of reporting with the newsreel footage of Nixon, this final scene shows the two in direct competition. Pakula continues the theme of the aggressiveness of the reporters but in the closing moments of the film suggests Woodward and Bernstein's ultimate victory. Another important element to this final scene is suggested by Pakula who notes that the reporters are oblivious to the events that are unfolding on the television screen (see Figure 9). This is a reprise of a similar moment in the middle of the film when Woodward is shown typing whilst Nixon is shown accepting the nomination at the 1972 Republican Convention or when Woodward and Bernstein are shown working in the newsroom as the rest of the *Washington Post* staff gather around a nearby television to watch

the results of the Democrat Convention. The most interesting aspect of these scenes when considering the position of Nixon within the film is that all the moments where he is shown on the televisions giving scripted political speeches, he is ignored by the principal characters Woodward and Bernstein. The subtext of this is the idea that the reporters are seeking the truth beyond the stage managed aspects of the Nixon presidency. This suggests the object of Woodward and Bernstein's investigations is that which is occurring behind the closed doors of the White House, but also highlights a social reluctance in the personality of Nixon. Interestingly, throughout the film, the revelation of this reality is denied to the viewer; it is symbolised by repeated shots of newspapers being delivered to the White House that get no further than the gates. Instead, the image of Nixon permitted to the viewer is distanced from the 'reality' of the *Washington Post* newsroom by being on television, and subordinated by the antipathy shown by Woodward and Bernstein. This focus on the difference between the transmission of controlled information from the White House in the form of speeches and press statements and the uncontrolled information in the form of the White House recordings is an important one. The White House tapes were a crucial element in the Watergate investigation and the revelation that Nixon was aware of the break-in and subsequent cover-up in the so called 'smoking gun' recording of 23 June 1972 led directly to his resignation. These moments in *All the President's Men* also highlight a general tension between a controlled and uncontrolled intimacy throughout the Nixon presidency between Nixon and the American public. In this way, the moments construct a myth of Nixon that is based on his absence. Furthermore, the Nixon myth as outlined in *All the President's Men* is subordinate to a corresponding and opposing myth of Woodward and Bernstein. To conclude this case study, I want to examine how the representation of this tension may be expanded upon when considering the brief period between the resignation of Nixon and the production of *All the President's Men* during which Gerald Ford became president and pardoned his predecessor.

All the President's Men, Nixon and Ford

When Ford succeeded Nixon the differences between the two personalities were pronounced.

As John Robert Greene suggests:

The new occupant of the Oval Office was, in a word, a comfortable man to be around. Before moving into the White House he would fetch his morning *Washington Post* while still in pajamas and bathrobe and wave to curiosity seekers in the street. He was prone to taking laps in the White House pool with an inflatable rubber duck at his side, and urged reporters to take all the pictures that they wanted. One of his first orders was to stop the playing of "Hail to the Chief" when he entered a room; he contended that the school song of his alma mater, the "Michigan Fight Song," would do.²⁷

In short while Nixon was, in the public eye, austere, formal and, in the words of Mark Feeney, 'inward, indwelling, inhibited', Ford was relaxed and easy going.²⁸ These changes in leadership styles and personalities contributed to a recovery of the national regard for the presidency after Watergate. A great deal of commentary and analysis of the scandal focuses not just on how the White House tapes exposed the complicity of Nixon in the activities of CREEP (Committee to Re-elect the President), but also on the differences between the private and the public Nixon. When campaigning, Nixon drew upon his strict religious upbringing and his dislike of swearing. When in office, he favoured an 'imperial presidency' rich in formalities and ceremonial trapping. Watergate exposed the 'coarse and undignified'²⁹ reality behind the closed doors of his presidency and, in Mark Hamilton Lytle's words, 'painted a picture of a White House out of control.'³⁰ The depiction of the president in *All the President's Men* highlights the tensions between the two aspects of Nixon and presents them within a set of paranoid thriller tropes. The primary effect of this is to emphasise not just the conspiratorial corruption uncovered by the Watergate scandal, but also the hypocrisy of the personality flaws exposed in the Nixon presidency. The secondary effect of these references throughout the film is revealed when the timing of the production of *All the President's Men* is considered. Initially Ford's personality and the ways in which it contrasted with that of Nixon appealed to the American people and helped restore the trust between nation and government. Ford's accessibility and self-mockery as opposed to Nixon's secrecy and his obsessive control over the public perception of his character led to his being branded, in the

words of Greene, 'a regular guy.'³¹ However, when Ford pardoned Nixon in September 1974 he entered what Greene terms 'his second term.'³² In other words, the pardon may be seen as the event that ended Ford's honeymoon period and began a slow decline in popularity which culminated with his defeat in the 1976 presidential election. In the words of Robert Dallek:

Ford's decision touched off an immediate negative reaction that reverberated throughout his two-and-a-half year presidency. Complaints that he had made a corrupt bargain with Nixon to gain the White House severely damaged his credibility as a trustworthy public official.³³

The pardoning of Nixon brought a degree of a latent national suspicion remaining after the Watergate scandal to act against Ford. The central themes of *All the President's Men*, the aggressiveness of the media, the corruption of the authority, the overriding fear of political surveillance coupled with the timing of the film's release just before a presidential election may be seen as an attempt to reignite the mood of dissatisfaction following Watergate by compounding the assault on the self-constructed character of Ford following his pardoning of Nixon. The key aspects of Ford's approach to the presidency, outlined by Greene, that separate him from the flaws of the Nixon administration are all referenced in the film. Ford's apparent openness with the public and the press and his lack of formality in the ceremonial aspects of the presidency are all presented throughout the film from the perspective of Nixon. The connection of Ford with the Watergate scandal following his pardoning of Nixon makes these qualities appear somehow sinister, the suggestion being that Ford was better at concealing his flaws than Nixon. The presentation of Nixon as a victim of both his self-surveillance and of the aggressive surveillance of Woodward and Bernstein, disperses the blame for the corruption of Watergate, indeed the dramatic progression of the film may be seen as a listing of culprits behind the scandal, literally 'all the president's men'. A key moment of the film occurs on the night of Nixon's re-nomination prior to his second presidential campaign. This news is relayed through a scene similar to that which closes the film, Woodward is shown in the newsroom typing whilst in the same frame a television set is showing images from the Republican National Convention. Crucially while throughout the film Nixon is shown as himself, in this scene it is Ford who is shown on the television set

introducing Nixon. The image of Ford in support of Nixon may be interpreted as a direct reference to his later pardon, his depiction in the film in a way identical to a later framing of Nixon firmly positions Ford as one of the ‘men’ of the film’s title. It is through these scenes and their juxtaposition with scenes that use the conventions of the paranoid thriller that *All the President’s Men* may be read as an attempt to recreate the tensions and cynicism of the Watergate era, to combat the initial popularity of Ford and to help to pave the way for a Democrat victory of Jimmy Carter in 1976.

The absence of Nixon in *All the President’s Men* is unusual in the raft of depictions of Nixon on screen. Mark Feeney notes that while the image of Kennedy is ‘so potent that just invoking his name conjures up his presence,’ Nixon, ‘in all his sweaty darkling spendor, challenges the imagination. He has to be seen to be believed – and then reimagined to be understood.’³⁴ This direct approach is taken to the extreme in Robert Altman’s *Secret Honor* (1984) which depicts Nixon alone in the White House speaking into a tape recorder. Oliver Stone’s 1995 film, *Nixon*, starring Anthony Hopkins, adopts a similar, psychoanalytical approach to a depiction of Nixon. In the next case study I want to examine Stone’s *Nixon*, a film in which, unlike the earlier *JFK*, which offers only a fleeting depiction of Kennedy, the title character is present in virtually every scene.

***Nixon* (1995)**

To examine Oliver Stone’s 1995 film *Nixon* I return to the debates inspired by Jim Collins’ essay on genericity in the 1990s and the study of the biopic by George Custen. *Nixon*, like *JFK*, manipulates and subverts the characteristics of the biopic genre such as the flashback and the newsreel montage to tell the story of Nixon’s presidential career from two perspectives: his private and political presidential mythologies. While in *JFK*, Stone’s characteristic formal techniques emphasised the chaos and uncertainty of the Kennedy assassination, in *Nixon*, his use of compound flashbacks and changing film stocks may be

seen as part of a structured depiction of a multiple personality. In this way Stone's film is, in effect, a representation of the tensions that exist between the office of the presidency and the occupant of that office, a version of the medieval doctrine of the king's two bodies, applied to the modern presidency by critic Michael Rogin.³⁵ Following Rogin's account of Nixon's downfall in terms of these tensions, I want to suggest ways in which *Nixon* may be seen as an attempt by Stone to depict these two aspects of the modern presidency using the techniques of the biopic genre. In addition the timing of Stone's film, released a year after Nixon's death, suggests that *Nixon* may be read as an attempt to engage with, and perhaps combat, a re-evaluation that, in the words of Stephen Miller, 'tended to treat Watergate as inconsistent with the rest of his presidency.'³⁶ Just as in *JFK* when Stone positions the myth of the Kennedy assassination in a wider, national context, Stone positions the Watergate scandal as a sequence of events that defined the whole of the Nixon presidency and, as such, retrospectively imbued the narration of Nixon's childhood and early, pre-presidential political career with the dominant themes of Watergate such as honesty, surveillance, ambition and human failure.

Stone acknowledges that the making of *Nixon* was 'accelerated' by the ex-president's death in 1994 but it is also clear that the film forms part of a wider attempt by the director to present and understand the history and politics of America in the 1960s and 1970s.³⁷ *Nixon* may be seen as another example of Stone's historical dramas that include *Platoon* (1986), *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) and, crucially, *JFK*. Indeed in the context of its unorthodox approach to historical source material and its formal techniques, *Nixon* may be considered as a sequel to *JFK*. James Cameron-Wilson, critical of the film, writes that in *Nixon*, as in his earlier films, Stone 'takes a sacred American subject, shuffling up historical fact with conjecture, fantasy and interpretation, and then splattering it all over the screen in a profusion of technical pretension.'³⁸ In his technique and his approach towards history, then, it is clear that *Nixon* bears a resemblance to *JFK*: both use compound flashbacks and variations of film stocks and monochrome as well as *March of Time* montage sequences to create a mediated portrait of

key events from the 1960s and 1970s. When the depiction of the presidency is considered in the two films, however, the differences between *Nixon* and *JFK* become clear. Critic Jose Arroyo suggests that the main difference between *JFK* and *Nixon* is that Stone's later film depicts these issues from the 'centre of power', rather than at its periphery.³⁹ In other words, while *JFK* was a depiction of the Kennedy presidency and assassination that focussed on Jim Garrison as a proxy for the president and thus took a distanced approach to the figure of the president, the amount of screen time devoted to Anthony Hopkins as Nixon - practically the whole film - suggests that Stone is attempting to offer a more direct and more intimate portrait of the title character. On first viewing *Nixon* may appear to be a conventional biopic but, I will argue, Stone marries the characteristic structures of that genre with his own complex narrative techniques. Stone suggests that the film may be divided into two acts: the first charting Nixon's journey to the presidency, the second concentrating on the events of his presidency leading to his resignation.⁴⁰ The film's presentation of Nixon begins by showing him in November 1973 in the last few months of his presidency, listening to himself recorded on the White House tapes discussing the Watergate burglary. Stone then cuts to a flashback showing the conversations that Nixon is listening to. The film continues in this manner jumping between conversations from the White House tapes in 1971, 1972 and 1973 demonstrating Nixon's complicity in the Watergate scandal and outlining the reasons for his resignation. A further flashback moves the action to 1960 showing the debate between Kennedy and Nixon. This begins a sequence of scenes that form the first act of the film narrating the election defeats of Nixon in 1960 and 1962 and the childhood of Nixon in the 1920s and 1930s. The first act of the film uses imagery of the resignation of Nixon and of Nixon ruminating over the White House tapes as a frame for a set of flashbacks that, in Stone's words, 'lay out the antecedents of the man.'⁴¹ The flashbacks in the opening act are either direct illustrations of the events that Nixon is shown listening to on the tapes, or prompted by a more general mood of recollection and reminiscence as Nixon is shown struggling to recall his conversations which in turn inspire recollections of his childhood and political career. The second act of the film focuses on the presidency of Nixon and follows

events more or less chronologically with fewer flashbacks. While in the first act, Watergate is used as a literal framing device for the flashbacks, in the second act the scandal becomes instead the inevitable climax of the narrative. To this end, Stone ensures that almost every major event of Nixon's last years in power that he depicts, even the president's success in China, is coloured by Watergate. In the first section of this case study, I want to explore how this complex structure may be seen as an attempt to use the conventions of the biopic in a way that exposes the tensions between the personal and the political characteristics of Nixon. In doing so I will argue that *Nixon* may be seen as an attempt by Stone to present *two* biopics of the same man, one charting the life of Nixon the man, the other the political life of Nixon the president, each informed and structured by the themes and preoccupations of the Watergate scandal.

***Nixon* and the Biopic Genre**

As *Nixon* narrates the life of its eponymous character, it is clear that it can be classed as a biopic; it shares many of the key formal characteristics of that genre such as the narrative framing device, the flashback and the montage sequence. It may first be useful to outline these key characteristics and to examine how they operate in *Nixon*. In his study of the genre, George Custen indicates that flashbacks and montage sequences are important characteristics of the biopic. The flashback, Custen suggests, allows the director to 'retell history from the vantage point of a particular narrator' and goes on to suggest that the technique 'allows the narrator to frame the life not just in terms of the order and content of events, but to frame its significance.'⁴² In other words, Custen suggests that the flashback allows the director of the biopic to organise the life of the subject of the film on both a chronological and a thematic level, framing the past within the concerns and preoccupations of the present. By contrast, the use of montage allows the director of the biopic to compress the biographical narrative. He argues:

If flashbacks economically situate a tale, frame it with a particular set of references, montage moves it forward or back so the essence, the unique angle, of the life on film can be accorded the time it merits.⁴³

Essentially, Custen suggests that in the biopic genre, the flashback and the montage are used for different reasons, the former as a method of telling a life that creates a coherence throughout the narrative that thematically connects the past with the present, while the latter acts as ‘a shorthand of narrative action’, compressing the life of the subject into a rapid sequence of key events.⁴⁴ Throughout *Nixon*, Oliver Stone uses both of these techniques, but with sometimes subtly and sometimes explicitly different effects. For example, the flashbacks and corresponding framing scenes in *Nixon* are not accompanied by a more traditional voice-over; instead they take the form of Nixon’s recollections prompted by the White House tapes. The use of flashback in *Nixon* recalls Jean Mitry’s definition when describing the flashback not as ‘a chunk of the past brought forward into the present like a brick moved from one place in a building to another but the restructuring of the past through the memory.’⁴⁵ In this way, Stone uses the flashback technique to generate intimacy with Nixon by exposing his past through his own memories. Susan Hayward describes the flashback as ‘a mimetic representation of thought processes looking to the past, whether they be dreams, confessions or memories’⁴⁶ and at various moments throughout *Nixon* they can be interpreted as all three. Furthermore, Stone uses the White House tapes as the prompt and narration for these memories. The flashbacks in *Nixon* are both triggered by, and thematically revolve around, the incriminating discussions that brought about Nixon’s resignation. The *March of Time* montage sequence at the end of the first act of the film also conforms to the function suggested by Custen. It allows Stone to compress the incidents in Nixon’s early career into an abbreviated set of images in a faux documentary form. It also introduces a repeated theme throughout the film that focuses on the death of Nixon. The newsreel montage is in the form of a political obituary leading up to Nixon’s failure to win the governorship of California in 1962 and comes after Nixon has faced a press conference that has, in Gavin Smith’s words, ‘the air of a death by firing squad.’⁴⁷ Custen suggests that this form of montage is ‘the most powerful marker of the teleology of fame, of its relentlessly forward march to a predetermined goal’, and in the case of *Nixon*, this goal may be seen as the failure and

political death of the subject of the biopic.⁴⁸ By emphasising this, Stone effectively undercuts the subsequent success of Nixon in the 1968 election by having introduced his subject in terms of failure. This is a device that Stone uses repeatedly throughout the film, for example when Nixon's success in China is offset by the failures of the Watergate scandal. In Stone's words:

The first act is about Nixon's loss of power, the second about Nixon in power, but power leads again to loss. It was a repetitive cycle with Nixon throughout his life – self-destruction, loss, crisis, then victory. He seemed to have a junkie's need for victory and loss.⁴⁹

Throughout *Nixon*, Stone symbolises this loss in the death of the title character, using the imagery of Nixon's imagined death as a source for presidentiality in a way perversely reminiscent of his treatment of Kennedy in *JFK*. The montage showing the political obituary of Nixon is matched by a montage scene later in the film when Nixon succumbs to viral pneumonia, a moment that Stone shoots in the form of a death scene. Stone begins by showing Nixon in bed suffering from a coughing fit that produces blood (see Figure 10). Nixon is taken to hospital, which Stone shoots, switching back and forth from colour to black-and-white, leading into a series of quick flashbacks to Nixon's childhood with his past 'flashing before his eyes'. After his mother appears spectrally at his bedside, Stone cuts briefly to a shot of Nixon lying 'in state' surrounded by what appear to be the Oval Office tapes. Stone then cuts back to the hospital where Nixon has been sedated. The trolley on which he is lying is pushed towards a bright sun-like light, a combination of a character riding off into the sunset at the end of a film, and a dying person passing through a tunnel of light. Nixon is then shown in a coffin, the lid slowly being closed, in a final explicit reference to his 'death'. The next scene opens with the resignation of Nixon's vice-president Spiro Agnew and the voice over of a reporter relaying the details of the subpoena issued by Archibald Cox for the Oval Office tapes, to which Nixon replies, 'Never! Over my dead body'. Finally, Stone concludes a cycle of depictions of the death of Nixon by showing documentary footage of his actual funeral after the end title sequence. The montage sequence is therefore used in *Nixon* not just as a compression of Nixon's life, but as part of a wider series of depictions of

Nixon's death. The *March of Time* newsreel narrates Nixon's premature political death focussing on themes that presage the Watergate scandal, while the latter sequence shown before his resignation connects Watergate and the failure of Nixon's presidency with the collapse of his physical health. While the flashbacks in the first half of the film separate the political 'childhood' of Nixon from his real childhood, these sequences conflate them so that the political and the personal sides of Nixon become confused and inseparable. Stone uses these characteristics of the biopic genre, but uses them in a way that combines them with his distinctive, complex style of film making. A Gavin Smith suggests:

Stone seemingly projects the twentieth century through the prism of film itself. Nixon's manic-depressive secret history is composed from the fragments of a century of cinematic technique, encompassing Griffithian associative superimposition and *Forrest Gump* digital compositing, Soviet montage and Wellesian *mise en scene*, the 60s American avant-garde and *March of Time* newsreels. *Nixon* hotwires that most staid of genres, the reverent classical historical drama, and takes it on a wild ride from psychosis to parody and back.⁵⁰

Smith's comparison of *Nixon* with *Forrest Gump* is interesting as it recalls the work of critic Jim Collins and his genre of eclectic irony. These films that, in Collins' words, contain 'different sets of generic conventions that intermingle, constituting a profoundly intertextual diegesis' react to history in an alternative way to those which Collins calls 'new sincerity' films.⁵¹ Instead of attempting to expose the historical truth behind the myth formed by the genre, the eclectic irony film combines, in Collins' words, 'generic "artefacts" that contradict, as an assemblage, the function of genre as coordinator of narrative conventions and audience expectations.'⁵² *Nixon*, as Gavin Smith suggests, is composed of a variety of cinematic influences that Stone makes no attempt to conceal, and also evident throughout the film are the influences of film genres other than the biopic. For example, the repeated establishing shots of the White House lashed by rain, the use of low camera angles when framing Nixon and even the appearance of the ghost of his mother during Nixon's last night as president are all more common in melodrama or the horror genre than in the biopic. The treatment of the biopic genre and the inclusion of characteristics from a range of other generic sources such as the paranoid thriller and the horror film, place *Nixon* within Jim Collins' eclectic irony genre.

The effect of this is that *Nixon* may be read as a generic hybridisation that encourages a dissonant reading of the Nixon era. The two genre forms also explain the two interconnected narrative strands that may be seen in the flashbacks in the first half of the film. Stone's use of monochrome, of different film stocks and even a hand-cranked camera⁵³ throughout the film created a mediated set of nostalgic modes just as in *Forrest Gump*, but whereas in that film, the stylistic effects are used in an organised way to 'zone' particular periods of post-war history, in Stone's film, the effects purposefully create a fractious vision of Nixon's childhood and early political career. In addition to this, Stone's framing of Nixon with an array of different genre forms that combine the factual core of the biopic with the fictional appearance of the melodrama may be read as a part of a wider thematic motif throughout the film that is concerned with Nixon's obsession with image and historical legacy. In essence, Stone's use of different generic influences throughout the film highlights Nixon's reliance on artifice and the tensions between his attempts to control his public image whilst retaining his privacy and the resulting exposure of his private character during the Watergate scandal. I would argue, therefore, that the influence of film genre in *Nixon* may be seen to have two effects. Firstly, Stone's use of the characteristics of the biopic genre such as the 'March of Time' newsreel sequence and the flashbacks gives a structure to his film that emphasises the psychologically fractured nature of the Nixon presidency. The compound flashbacks to both Nixon's childhood and to his pre-presidential political career give a background to Nixon's life that is framed and shaped by the themes and tropes of the Watergate scandal, whilst the newsreel montage is the first of a repeated motif throughout the film to reference, albeit metaphorically, the death of Nixon. Secondly, Stone's use of other genres of a fictional basis contrary to the biopic such as the melodrama, the conspiracy thriller and the horror film emphasises the tensions between the public and private faces of the presidency, a tension that reached a climax with the release of the White House tapes and the exposure of the artifice of the political character of Nixon.

Nixon and Nixon

As I have suggested, *Nixon* may be considered as two biopics. One focuses on the personal life of Nixon: his childhood, his relationship with his wife and daughters and his health problems. The second focuses on his political career: his early political failures, his deals with J. Edgar Hoover and Texas oil man Jack Jones, his struggle against what he labels 'the Beast', defined in the film as the decentralisation and corruption of military and political power. Stone presents these two strands of Nixon's life in separate flashbacks, but each is framed by the concerns and events of Watergate. For example, a scene showing Nixon's failure to lie to his mother is placed directly after the scene in which he fails to defeat Kennedy in a presidential debate, while his humiliation on a football field at college is shown directly before his resignation from political life following his defeat in the 1962 California gubernatorial election. As the film moves from the first to the second act, these comparisons become more intertwined, developing Stone's depiction of a psychological split in the Nixon personality. The first sign of this is the moment Nixon is introduced at the 1968 Republican convention. The scene opens with a close up of Nixon with no background noise; Nixon's face is sombre and expressionless. The camera gradually pulls back as the background noises are faded in, it becomes clear that Nixon is on a stage and, from the sound, in front of a large audience. As the noise reaches its peak, Nixon suddenly adopts his traditional celebratory pose, grinning with both arms raised in a twin V salute (see Figure 11). The transition between the two poses complements the tension between the private and the public Nixon, but in this scene rather than presenting them in separate flashback sequences, Stone allows both aspects of the character to occupy the same scene. This moment also demonstrates another aspect of the same tension, this time between a natural intimacy and a constructed performance. The choice of Hopkins for the role of Nixon and his subsequent performance is an important element in Stone's depiction of the president and may warrant further examination. Hopkins' role as James Stevens in *Remains of the Day* (1993) convinced Stone to cast him as Nixon. In this role, Hopkins demonstrated his skill at portraying a character in Stone's own words 'so inhibited, so ill-at-ease, sad and isolated,' qualities essential for

Stone's interpretation of the Nixon presidency.⁵⁴ Hopkins' approach to Nixon is an attempt to emulate the physical characteristics of the president, the posture, the smile and the hand gestures while retaining the oppressed characteristics he demonstrated with Stevens. Through his performance, Stone is able to emphasise Nixon's physical discomfort and awkwardness and, by casting a star with the background of Hopkins, as opposed to Bruce Greenwood's subordination to Kevin Costner in *Thirteen Days*, Stone ensures that Hopkins' portrayal is the centre of the narrative of *Nixon*. Through Hopkins' performance, Stone prioritises Nixon's private quirks and physical ticks of the president over his political and historical legacies or, indeed, his national and international successes. As Christopher Sharrett suggests:

While Nixon may be an archetypal American, there is little grandeur to him, and Stone never gives his protagonist the nuance that Welles allowed his. When we get to the newsreel cavalcade of the hero's past, we don't, of course, see vignettes of the nation's development, but the campaigns against Jerry Voorhis and Helen Douglas, the Hiss Case, the Checkers speech, sweating it out against JFK in the 1960 presidential debates, bellyaching about the press after the defeat by Pat Brown. As we might expect, Stone's Nixon is propelled by ambitions that are small and personal, not grand and global.⁵⁵

Sharrett indicates Stone's repeated undercutting of Nixon's historical legacy with his personal and physical failings and uses the newsreel montage as evidence, but in the film, it is in the second act that these conflicts have the most effect. For example, two scenes narrating Nixon's attempts at triangular diplomacy with the Soviet Union and China focus instead on Nixon's personal situation. The meeting between Nixon and Brezhnev is interrupted and turns into a conversation between the Soviet leader and his interpreter about Watergate, while Nixon's historic meeting with Mao Tse-Tung turns into a conversation about Kissinger's weight. Stone reduces Nixon's international successes by framing them within his domestic, private failings but in addition to this, the reference to Kissinger's weight is part of a repeated motif throughout the film focusing on the human body that, as I will argue, is an important part of Stone's attempt to conduct an intimate exposure and political dissection of Nixon and his presidency. Included in this motif are the references to Nixon's 'deaths' and to the deaths of his brothers, an event Nixon compares with the assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy, at one point in the film, Nixon claims that 'Vietnam and Kennedys cleared a path

through the wilderness just for me; over the bodies. Four bodies'. The escalation of the Watergate scandal is also expressed in terms of the human body as John Dean states, 'there's a cancer on the presidency and it's growing'. Repeatedly throughout the film, Stone connects the physical and the political, the dialogue in the film is full of examples of unpleasant allusions to bodily functions such as 'shit', 'pus' and 'scabs'. Stone furthers this by compressing all the elements of corruption behind the presidency:

With Kennedy and Nixon, we realized that power lay not with the president, but rather with the industrialists, the military, the CIA chiefs, Wall Street and the Mafia; they all limit the power of the executive office. We cannot challenge with impunity those powers which we call the "Beast" in the film. Kennedy tried it and they killed him.⁵⁶

In *JFK* these elements are depicted as part of the complexity and chaos of the Kennedy assassination, in *Nixon*, they become conflated into a single metaphor. Throughout the film, the 'beast' is frequently personified by predatory characters such as Larry Hagman's oil man Jack Jones and Bob Hoskins' J. Edgar Hoover. For example, Christopher Sharrett describes Hoover as the 'human correlate for "The Beast",'⁵⁷ in Stone's words 'a little of the beast within,'⁵⁸ but Sharrett also suggests that the Beast can be interpreted as Stone's representation of 'the roiling, viral evil within both Richard Nixon's psyche and the American body politic'.⁵⁹ Stone continually references Nixon's body and psychology and connects these references to wider national and international issues. The corruption that brought about the Kennedy assassination and the Nixon presidency is depicted in a way that also exposes the psychological conflict between the two sides of the Nixon personality and the tensions between his political and private lives, as Charlotte Etkind suggests:

In Stone's film, events and personal idiosyncrasies were melded in the personality of Nixon as the embodiment of a malignant force – which Stone often calls "The Beast" – that threatened the nation.⁶⁰

In addition to this, I would suggest the repeated use of physical metaphor when describing the Watergate conspiracy intertwines the scandal and the subsequent damage to the perception of the presidential office with the state of Nixon's physical and psychological health. This conflation brings to mind Nixon's later description of the sacking of Haldeman and

Ehrlichman when he states 'I cut off one arm, and then cut off the other arm,'⁶¹ as Michael Rogin suggests:

Nixon insisted on the fusion of his own person with the presidential office. His lawyers claimed that executive privilege covered everyone working in the White House because "members of staff...are extensions of the Presidency." This usage of "members" turned members as individuals into members as limbs of a body politic.⁶²

The connection of the 'body politic' with the 'body natural' in this way is an important aspect of both Stone's depiction of Nixon and of Nixon's approach to the presidency. In his essay 'The King's Two Bodies', Michael Rogin contrasts Nixon's presidency with a medieval courtly doctrine. In his examination, Rogin indicates that Nixon's preference towards the styling and politics of an imperial presidency, complete with formal trapping and ceremonies coupled with his protective attitude towards his privacy as demonstrated by his reluctance to relinquish the White House tapes, effectively closed the gap that legally and metaphorically separated the occupant and the office. In short, Watergate became a crisis of Nixon's personality as well as a crisis of presidency. Rogin suggests:

The taping system aimed to gain Nixon secure possession of the king's royal body... ..Control over the tapes would make Nixon into Mailer's "Lord," passing judgement on others. He could leak their secrets and protect his own. He could transform his "Body mortal" into a "Body that cannot be seen or handled." In control of his own "record," to paraphrase William Safire, he would not be vulnerable to the judgement of history.⁶³

The exposure of these tapes, however, meant an exposure of Nixon, not only his complicity in the Watergate scandal, but also his private character. Rogin highlights, as does Stone, the physical parallels of the Watergate affair and Nixon's predilection for surveillance and self-surveillance: 'Violating the most intimate, physical privacy, he inserts his device into office, home, symbolic body. The language of the White House tapes, over and over again, connected bugging and exposure to filthy inner body contents.'⁶⁴ Like Rogin, Stone recognises the importance of the internal, physical metaphor and frequently returns to it to simulate a psychological intimacy in his narration of the Nixon presidency. This, coupled with his use of the biopic form to narrate both the personal and political personas of Nixon, transforms *Nixon* into an examination of the complex tensions between the official Nixon and

the private Nixon. To conclude this case study, I want to consider the timing of *Nixon*, to examine how Stone's depiction of Nixon relates to a shifting public attitude towards both him and his presidency following his death and to consider how, by depicting a presidency torn apart by the tensions between the body politic and the body natural, Stone may be seen to be seeking to create a new myth of Nixon.

***Nixon*, Nixon's death and the presidential body**

The death of Nixon the year before Stone's film was released was, as Stone acknowledges, an accelerating factor in the film's production.⁶⁵ The event of Nixon's death is referenced in the film by the inclusion of documentary footage of Bill Clinton's eulogy from his funeral after the closing credits. Stone's marginalisation of this footage is significant, as Smith notes, the funeral footage is one of three endings for the film and when asked how he reconciled this, Stone replies suggesting that, 'the real ending is when he walks out with Pat. There's a chastened quality then, and an acknowledgement of the forces inside him. At the credits you can leave.'⁶⁶ I would argue that Stone's positioning of Nixon's eulogy is important in understanding the director's position in the shifting public opinion towards the president after his death and funeral. In this section, I want to examine how Stone's depiction of the president, how his focus on Watergate as a defining event and how his use of physical metaphor may be seen as an alternative to this shift in the perception of Nixon after his death.

Stephen Paul Miller suggests that after Nixon's death:

the press and media had difficulty recalling the specifics of Nixon's presidency and the seventies. They recalled two Nixons, and the more favourable Nixon often seemed the real one. A bloated sense of Nixon's foreign and domestic accomplishments seemed to overshadow the assumed crimes of his presidency, and the latter were in no way related to the nation's decline. America's embrace of Nixon in his death demonstrated how far Nixon, like a political Walt Whitman, had seeped into our political environment. Corruption seemed like the norm, it seemed like the only alternative, the only way to govern.⁶⁷

Clinton's eulogy played a part in this re-evaluation of Nixon's reputation. In his address, Clinton stated that 'today is a day for his family, his friends, and his nation to remember

President Nixon's life in totality... ..may the day of judging President Nixon on anything less than his entire life and career come to an end.'⁶⁸ This call for reconciliation may be read as a tangential reference to the perception of Nixon prior to his death which, in the words of historian Iwan Morgan, had 'been defined hitherto not by his many achievements but by the consequences of Watergate.'⁶⁹ Stone's film, narrating Nixon's life and career and constructing a mythology of Nixon using the Watergate scandal as a framework seems to be a call for a return to this earlier perception. Furthermore, by focusing on the intimate details of Nixon's psychology, Stone seems to be suggesting that Watergate was in equal measures a political and personal scandal. As I noted earlier, considering the re-evaluation of the Nixon presidency after 1995, Miller suggests that:

If coverage of the death of Richard Nixon tended to treat Watergate as inconsistent with the rest of his presidency, Nixon then seemed successful in confining the scandal to the actual break-in, and thus removing his administration and American government from the logic of this seemingly inconsequential act of political espionage.⁷⁰

Stone reconnects Watergate with the Nixon presidency and demonstrates how the scandal may be seen as exposing Nixon's administrative flaws, but also his psychological flaws. In effect an understanding of Stone's version of the Watergate scandal becomes integral to an understanding of his version of Nixon's life. This movement towards focusing on the intimate details of the presidency in order to cast light on the wider national and international legacy is the opposite to *JFK* where Stone searches for an assassin by examining Kennedy's policy decisions. In *Nixon*, Stone examines the background of Nixon's life to offer clues to his self-destructive actions during Watergate. According to Robert Denton, during his speech at Nixon's funeral, Clinton 'transformed Nixon's ambition and ruthlessness into "the striving of our whole people, with our crises and our triumphs".'⁷¹ By demonstrating how the roots of Watergate may be located in Nixon's psyche and by suggesting the collapse of the distinctions between Nixon's body politic and body natural, Stone reverses this transformation, but also offers a wider commentary on the fractious state of America in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Sharrett observes:

Nixon is finally Stone's broadest assertion about the screwed-up nature of the American character, with Nixon not only the representative politician, but also the representative outcome of the more berserk features of American religious and political ideology.⁷²

Stone also places a different emphasis on the importance of Watergate than Pakula does in *All the President's Men*. In that earlier film, Watergate is framed as a triumph of the press, in *Nixon* the press is only marginally depicted. As Morgan suggests, in many ways, Watergate was an important event in the way it shifted the balance of power from authority to the press:

The role of journalism in the downfall of a president became part of the press's own mythology about its importance as the guardian of democracy, even though other agencies within government itself were arguably far more important in exposing the truth about Watergate.⁷³

If *All the President's Men* is an expression of this Watergate based myth of journalism, *Nixon* is a creation of a myth of presidential authority that uses the themes of the Watergate scandal to isolate and expose Nixon. Just as *JFK* may be seen as a reworking of the myth of Kennedy paving the way for a new sincerity representation of Kennedy in *Thirteen Days*, Stone's emulation of the eclectic irony form in *Nixon* and his depiction of Nixon as an embodiment of the social attitudes of the 1970s, effectively paves the way for *Dick* (1999), a film that uses the eclectic irony genre in a more explicit way with its interpretation of Nixon. This will be the subject of my next case study.

***Dick* (1999)**

Dick, written by Sheryl Longin and directed by Andrew Fleming and released on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the year of Watergate adopts an approach to a depiction of Nixon totally unlike that of *All the President's Men* and *Nixon*. It displays a similar ironic nostalgia towards the recent past, coupled with a comedic re-interpretation of historical events similar to that found in films such as *Forrest Gump*, and, like that film, it has at its core a conflict between historical knowledge and the lack of knowledge displayed by its characters. This theme, coupled with the age of its principal characters, also aligns *Dick* with the 1990s resurgence of the teen-movie genre but also recalls a grouping of films that Jim Collins describes as a genre

of eclectic irony.⁷⁴ In addition to this, I would argue that *Dick* adopts a particular style similar to that suggested by Stephen Paul Miller when he describes the 1994 film *Pulp Fiction* as a film set in the present of the 1990s but that had the cultural and visual appearance of being set in the 1970s.⁷⁵ I would argue that this blurring of the 1990s and the 1970s is a crucial one in the context of *Dick*, particularly in its preoccupation with the cultural ephemera of the 1970s and in its use of two generic forms that are solidly rooted in the 1990s. In short, I want to examine the effects the characteristics of these two generic forms have on the film's depiction of Nixon. Following this, I want to consider how the depiction of Nixon in *Dick* might be interpreted in the context of the Clinton presidency.

Dick tells the story of two teenage girls: Betsy (Kirsten Dunst) and Arlene (Michelle Williams) who, like Forrest Gump, inadvertently influence and even instigate major historical events leading from the Watergate break-in to the Nixon's resignation. Betsy and Arlene accidentally stumble into the West Wing during a school tour of the White House and witness the Nixon's White House staff destroying evidence relating to Watergate. They then encounter Nixon himself who, in an apparent attempt to keep an eye on the girls and, at the same time, to bribe them to keep silent, appoints them official dog-walkers to the White House. Gradually as the film progresses, the girls lose their confidence in and respect for Nixon as they come to realise the implications of the cover-up. In a parody of *All the President's Men*, Betsy and Arlene become 'Deep Throat', leaking information to Woodward and Bernstein in order to force Nixon's resignation. Throughout the film, director Andrew Fleming presents a colourful recreation of the 1970s through the girls' fashion, through the soundtrack and through other popular cultural references such as the television. Hoberman describes the film's mixture of political satire with 1970s cultural iconography as 'High lowbrow', *Dick*, he suggests:

is a mass of pop-culture detritus – teen comedy, conspiracy caper, political satire, nostalgia flick. The movie is built on the shards of old commercials and ancient TV shows and fuelled by a constant infusion of '70s pop.⁷⁶

The viewer seems to be invited to compare these nostalgic elements with the neutral drabness of the White House and the even-more-old-fashioned attitudes and appearance of Nixon. Coupled with this is the key trope throughout the film of the girls' loss of innocence, a process that Charlene Etkind suggests parallels the gradually increasing disillusionment of the American public with Nixon during the Watergate revelations. These two elements seem to me to be a synthesis of two different 1990s sources. Firstly *Dick*'s depiction of two teenage girls, its particular focus on their maturing and with pop-culture such as disco, fashion and television place the film firmly within the 1990s resurgence of the teen-movie genre. Secondly *Dick* shares many of the same attitudes towards history that may be seen in eclectic irony films such as *Forrest Gump* with their combination of pop-culture references, humorous re-interpretation of history and, importantly, their approach to genres. In the first section focussing on these two cultural influences, I want to explore the use of different film genre forms throughout *Dick*.

***Dick* and Genre**

Dick draws upon, and subverts, surveillance thriller tropes of *All the President's Men* and the biopic tradition of *Nixon* to tell the stories of Betsy, Arlene and Nixon. The comedic approach to these genre forms, and to specific films, has the effect of stylistically referencing the 1970s. By combining characteristics of the two genre forms, albeit within the comedic framework of the nostalgic teen-movie genre, *Dick* also highlights tensions between the tropes of revelation, a characteristic of the biopic, and concealment, a characteristic of the surveillance thriller. Combining the depictions of Nixon in the two earlier films, *Dick* allows the character of Nixon to be both present and absent through the course of the film, thereby creating a confusion of knowledge and power with innocence. Feeney describes *Dick* as 'an almost-perfervid exercise in seventies nostalgia'⁷⁷ and the parody of *All the President's Men* supports this assessment, but the contrasts between the scenes set in the White House that feature Nixon, and the scenes that feature Woodward and Bernstein are marked. The shift in generic focus from a biopic to a conspiracy thriller pastiche coincides with a central narrative shift

through the film towards a loss of innocence. In this section, I want to examine how this shift may be interpreted within the context of *Dick*'s adoption of the generic characteristics of the nostalgic teen-movie. In addition to this, I will observe how the film's position in the eclectic irony genre affects its presentation of history and, ultimately, its depiction of Nixon.

Charlene Etkind chooses the girls' loss of innocence as the most crucial aspect of *Dick*. She suggests the girls coming to terms with their loss of respect for Nixon acts as a national metaphor:

at first the public was lulled by the campaign promises of a president who would do things differently from earlier administrations; then, as each incident of Nixon's perfidy accumulated, the public – like the girls – was forced into disillusionment and yet, ultimately, growth.⁷⁸

The transformation of the two girls into a national metaphor is strengthened by the costumes they wear at the end of the film. As a conclusion to their coming-of-age, Betsy and Arlene produce outfits based on the American flag becoming physical representations of their nation. Connecting of the girls' loss of innocence with the national disillusionment with the US political authorities after Watergate is convincing, Betsy and Arlene represent the last vestiges of a 1960s American innocence left after the assassination of Kennedy, and are the exact opposites of Nixon and his White House staff. As in *All the President's Men*, Watergate is represented in *Dick* as a watershed event between political innocence and cynicism in America, but in the case of the latter film, Watergate is depicted primarily in relation to the two girls and their associations with characters around them. The film repeatedly demonstrates a tension between the cynicism of the Nixon White House and the innocence of youth. For example, two scenes compare the reactions of two of the girls' teachers at school: the first a straight-laced, white, Christian woman, her blackboard full of neat lists of information, the second a black, liberal, 1960s hippy whose blackboard displays a large peace-symbol. Each of these characters reacts in different, stereotyped ways to Betsy and Arlene's stories of their adventures in the White House, the former berates while the latter encourages. These scenes summarise the tensions in the film between innocent youth and cynical authority, between idealism and conservatism, and between freedom and restriction.

As critic Richard Whitfield indicates, these tensions are crucial in the satire of Nixon's character, 'his old fashioned prissiness was too tempting for many satirists to skip, but Nixon's character reflected a solidity and rigidity, an adherence to the reality principle rather than the pleasure principle suggestive of an earlier America.'⁷⁹ Interestingly, Whitfield's comments were made in 1985, when the 'pleasure principle', particularly in relation to politics, referred to periods of American history before Watergate, for example before the Wall Street crash in the 1920s and 1930s and before Kennedy's assassination in the 1960s. At the time of *Dick*'s production, as I will investigate in depth later, the 'pleasure principle' in politics had taken on a new form, that of Bill Clinton. Etkind offers a convincing summary of the tensions that exist in *Dick* between the girl's youth and innocence and Nixon's experience and cynicism, but, I would argue, this conflict is merely the starting point for the film. The real narrative drive that exists in *Dick* is not solely that of the loss of innocence of the two girls, but also the revelation of innocence in the character of Nixon. Just as the girls innocently enter the world of Watergate, Nixon innocently allows the girls, and through them the hedonistic and liberal elements of youth such as drugs and anti-Vietnam ideologies, into the White House. Interestingly, by becoming a comedic figure Nixon also becomes an innocent and, therefore, sympathetic character. In this way he joins a list of authority figures in the comedic teen movie genre whose relationship with the youth figures is one of competition. Writing about the teen movie genre, Elayne Rapping summarises, 'these kids have utter contempt for straight adults. They deceive and mock parents and school officials with a broad wink to which audiences – even adult audiences – respond knowingly.'⁸⁰ The adult figures in *Dick* all share in this comedic reduction in authority. This is performed to such a degree that the adult characters start to assume the character traits of children as the youth characters start to lose their innocence and start to behave like adults. This swapping of roles is evident in both the childish bickering between Woodward and Bernstein (at one point Woodward accuses Bernstein of 'smelling like cabbage'),⁸¹ and crucially in the adoption (albeit unwitting) of the remnants of 1960s hippy culture: drugs, liberalism and an anti-war ideology, by Nixon and his White House staff.

The film's parodying of *All the President's Men* and the surveillance thriller in general raises questions regarding the revelation and concealment of knowledge in the film. The 1976 film shares a similar trope of the loss of innocence with *Dick* but also the menace of surveillance. In *All the President's Men*, the surveillance power of the White House is only suggested and revealed solely in the reactions of the reporters and the people they interview. The second half of *Dick* offers a pastiche of this, but while the earlier film relied on suggested menace, in the scenes where the two girls are being watched and followed, the menace is shown explicitly from both sides. For example, the girls are tailed by a black van with the words 'Plumbers of Washington DC' written on the side. Both films are preoccupied with the concealment of information and the quest for revelation. In the case of *All the President's Men*, this information is, within the film, kept from the audience, in the case of *Dick*, the information is explicitly shown to the audience. The difference between the functionally similar roles of Woodward and Bernstein in *All the President's Men* and Betsy and Arlene in *Dick* is that the former pairing works from outside the sphere of information; their lack of knowledge is a factor of their lack of access to this information. In contrast, Betsy and Arlene are within the sphere of information from the beginning of the film when they witness the Watergate burglary, but in their case it is their naivety that prevents them from turning this into knowledge.

The retention of information and knowledge from the characters of the film does not apply to the audiences of the films. An adult viewer of *All the President's Men*, for example, would be expected to be aware of the implications and the result of the Watergate scandal and, therefore, be in possession of the information lacked by Woodward and Bernstein. An understanding of the relationship between the film and the audience is important when considering a nostalgic teen movie such as *Dick*. In his study of the teen movie in *Genre and Hollywood*, Steve Neale suggests that post 1960s teen movies had a curious contradiction between the ways they feature young people, but are produced with an *adult* audience in

mind.⁸² This tension between the emotional and chronological age of the characters and the intended age of the audience is represented in films such as *Dick* which feature teenagers, but are set in the recent past. The nostalgic teen movie is a subgenre that includes such films as *American Graffiti* (1974), *Stand by Me* (1986) and, more recently, *Dick*. These films are a representation of what Timothy Shary suggests is a recurring motivation behind the production of teen movies namely for filmmakers ‘to engage in the vicarious experiences of their own lost youth.’⁸³ Indeed *Stand by Me* can be interpreted as a nostalgic recreation of youth in the 1950s, a combination of the childhoods of both the original story writer Stephen King and the film’s director Rob Reiner, both of whom were born in 1947. In the case of *Dick*, director Andrew Fleming and co-writer Sheryl Longin were both born in 1964, and therefore reached early adolescence if not during Watergate, then around the release of *All the President’s Men*. Indeed when watching *Dick*, it becomes clear that the nostalgia displayed throughout the film can be seen as specifically targeting an adult audience aware of both the political events and cultural fashions of the early 1970s. The film is packed with period detail, including the historical detail of the Watergate investigation, the cultural remnants of the 1960s hippy culture, and the parody of *All the President’s Men*, all of which can be seen as aspects of the film marketable towards an adult rather than youth audience. It is interesting to compare the use of historical cultural artefacts in *Dick* with a similar use in *Forrest Gump*. Writing about that film, Paul Grainge suggests:

Through a range of iconic and acoustic markers, *Forrest Gump* plays upon a shared sense of the past, explained and experientially distilled through a figure whose simple-minded decency can heal the pain and distemper of a bruised history.⁸⁴

Compare this description with the roles of the characters in *Dick*. It is clear that Betsy and Arlene perform a similar narrative function to Gump as proxies offering an innocent alternative perspective of a traumatic moment in America’s recent history. Michael Baer when reviewing *Dick* compared the films treatment of history to that of *Gump*:

Dick: The Unmaking of the President is marketed as a wacky ‘70s comedy about Watergate – *Clueless* meets *All the President’s Men*. However, a more accurate description would be *Forrest Gump* meets Oliver Stone’s *Nixon*. Like *Forrest*, *Dick* takes a fictional story and seamlessly weaves it into

history, with the main characters as hidden and unwitting forces in the events of time.⁸⁵

In *Dick*, Betsy and Arlene are the clear parallels with the character of Gump, while the role of Nixon, constantly attempting to manipulate circumstances but is foiled by his own, inflated view of his experience and ability, is in opposition to the girls' characterisation. Grainge argues that *Forrest Gump*'s realization of 'cultural memory' is performed through a pastiche of genres and a manipulation of cultural tropes. This, in his words, creates a 'nostalgia mode', a representation of the past that accesses a 'feel' for the history rather than a cinematic authenticity.⁸⁶ In terms of the different uses of genre, this reading is an extension of Jim Collins' theories of genericity in the 1990s that I have already discussed at length in my case study on *Thirteen Days*. While that film may be described in Collins' terms as an example of new sincerity, *Dick* can be seen as the opposite approach to a cinematic representation of history, the eclectic irony genre. The effect this has on a discussion of the use of genre in *Dick* is to embed the characteristics of the 1970s paranoid and surveillance thriller genre in a 1990s framework, in effect to 'recycle' the narratives and visual iconography of *All the President's Men* in the form of the more contemporary genre of the nostalgic teen movie. In this way, Nixon is recast in a new role, that of the bumbling, comedic authority figure ultimately defeated by the naive, innocent children. This recycling of 1970s genres is part of the confusion between the narrative focus and the intended audience of *Dick*. In her 1998 article 'Tuesday's Gone', Lesley Speed addresses the contradictions within the nostalgic teen film.⁸⁷ Speed points to a trend within the nostalgic teen movies that beyond that of the basic generic text. All teen movies are, she states, 'fundamentally concerned with reversing age-defined privileges,'⁸⁸ in other words, elevating youth to a position of primary importance. The nostalgic teen movie, however, 'because it augments the ostensible themes of rebellion and anti-authoritarianism with an adult perspective,'⁸⁹ adds another narrative layer to the relationships between adults and youth. Speed uses the example of *Stand by Me* to illustrate her point, particularly through that film's foregrounding of an adult 'writerly voice' in its framing narration.⁹⁰ This, Speed argues, is evidence of how the nostalgic teen movie attempts

to 'contain adolescence' on a narrative level. In this way, the nostalgic teen movie exposes tensions between the story, in the case of *Stand by Me*, the coming of age of a group of young friends, and the narrative, in *Stand by Me*, the use of an adult narration as a framing device. *Dick* does not have an equivalent voiceover, but in other ways does appear to confirm Speed's hypothesis. Through its use of historical in-jokes, and through its parody of films such as *All the President's Men*, and of the 1970s surveillance genre, *Dick* can be said to use a narrative level aimed at an adult audience to tell a coming-of-age story typical of the teen movie genre. I would suggest that for the viewer to fully appreciate the parody and the nostalgic humour in the film, a particular degree of knowledge of 1970s history and popular culture is necessary, as Chuck Klosterman suggests when reviewing *Dick*:

What's interesting about *Dick* is its willingness to blend unsophisticated humor into a story that demands a certain degree of knowledge from its audience: This might be the first teen comedy that requires an elementary familiarity with *All the President's Men*.⁹¹

This, as Speed would argue, effectively isolates the teen audience in a way that contradicts the story the film tells; while the plot concerns the two girls gaining power over the adults, the way it's told may be seen as the adult audience gaining power over the teen audience. In the case of *Dick*, however, this simultaneous liberation and repression of youth is much more pertinent to the subject matter of the film. In the next two sections, I intend to look at the ways in which the presentation of youth in *Dick* connects tensions of the Nixon presidency with the Clinton presidency. Firstly, it will be useful to look in more detail at the ways Nixon is depicted throughout *Dick*.

Nixon in *Dick*

The film's comedic depiction of Nixon differs from both *All the President's Men* and *Nixon*. Nixon is presented in *Dick* as neither the sinister, abstracted figure of Pakula's film nor the tortured, mythic Shakespearean character portrayed by Anthony Hopkins. Instead Dan Hedaya plays Nixon as a caricature, sharing the same physical twitches and gestures that

Hopkins used as a shorthand for his impersonation, but without the undercurrent of psychotic tension, as Charlene Etkind suggests:

Images in *Dick* have been stripped of their mythic proportions. Nixon is not the embodiment of evil that Oliver Stone portrays in his dark drama. In *Dick*, Nixon appears bumbling, fatherly, a bit paranoid, but never more evil than an ordinary man thrust into the pitfalls of Washington politics.⁹²

Hedaya accesses an aspect of Nixon mostly untouched by Hopkins, and certainly not depicted in *All the President's Men*. In *Dick*, Nixon goes through the same character journey as Arlene and Betsy but in reverse: as they slowly lose their innocence and naivety, Nixon exposes his.

The means by which this caricature of Nixon in *Dick* is accomplished are worth examining as they may be seen to be as a result of the characteristic themes of the teen movie genre. The promotional material for the film offers an insight into the positioning of Nixon within these tropes of the genre. The visual construction and text of the poster for *Dick* reflect the relationship between the two girls and the figure of Nixon that is developed in the film itself. The film's title contains several comedic inferences: firstly the sexual connotation, the ironic alignment of the sexually prudish Nixon with the notion of phallic power; secondly, the title serves as a derogatory nickname; finally it recalls the political nickname Nixon picked up 'Tricky Dick', a moniker repeated in one of the film's tag lines 'He was tricky, they [Betsy and Arlene] were better'. The character of Nixon in *Dick* is reduced to a role secondary to the two girls: the poster, the figure of Nixon appearing in silhouette as the 'I' in 'Dick' with the girls flanking the title. Throughout the film, the presence of the girls dominates that of Nixon, both through the amount of screen-time the film devotes to them and through the choice of casting. Hedaya's previous screen appearances are a sequence of supporting roles in films such as *Clueless* (1995) and *Nixon* so his presence has the effect, as with Bruce Greenwood's Kennedy in *Thirteen Days*, of moving the Presidential figure from the centre of the film to the periphery. This decentralisation can be seen to be as a result of *Dick* conforming to the characteristics of the teen movie genre by depicting the events of the film through the eyes of the adolescent characters but it also sidelines the character of Nixon. For example, in one

early scene the girls are distracted from listening to Nixon and Bob Halderman discussing the Watergate break-in by the sight of Nixon's dog. The camera shifts its focus from the political discussion following the girls while Nixon and Halderman's dialogue fades into the background. In one respect, the sidelining of Nixon conforms with the conventions of the teen movie. As critic Elaine Rapping suggests, a common theme of teen movies are young people who show 'utter contempt for straight adults' and in the case of Nixon, fail to recognise the historical implications of what he is saying.⁹³ The domination of the character of Nixon and the politics of his presidency by the nostalgic social and cultural elements of the film works in the opposite way to the treatment of Kennedy in *Thirteen Days*. In both films, the Presidential figure is superseded by other characters, but whereas in *Thirteen Days* the distanced depiction of Kennedy enhanced his mythic qualities, in *Dick* the effect was to draw attention to a marginalised, demythologised Nixon. Rather than raising the character of the President to a pseudo-religious paragon as in *Thirteen Days*, the casting and marketing of *Dick*, as Mark Feeney suggests, lowers Nixon to a 'human scale.'⁹⁴

The cultural context of *Dick* is important in understanding the implications of this depiction of Nixon sidelined by youth. The use of the eclectic irony mode of presenting the 1970s through an array cultural references but with a prioritising of the characteristics of the 1990s genre of the nostalgic teen movie, positions Nixon in contrast with youth and fashion. In this way, I would argue, the depiction of Nixon must also be examined in contrast with the appeal and charisma, and also the anxieties, of the Clinton presidency. In the concluding section of this case study, I want to unpack the ways in which *Dick* visually references these contrasts and how the film, in doing so, retells the story of the Nixon presidency in ways that are relevant to the 1990s.

Nixon, Youth and Clinton

Throughout *Dick*, the character of Nixon is portrayed as an ironic counterpoint to Betsy and Arlene, particularly in contrast with their youth. The scenes set in the White House are filmed

in a contrasting way to the rest of the film: the colour scheme is muted in greys, browns and whites rather than the bright colours of the girls and their bedrooms. Nixon is the central figure in this contrast, when he tells his staff 'I've got a way with young people – they trust me' it is belied by his clearly staid and uncomfortable character. The depiction of Richard Nixon in *Dick* reflects historian Stephen Whitfield's summary of the president's character as being old fashioned and prissy but within a teen movie, this old fashioned-ness is a key thread to the film's humour. At one point in the film, Nixon even stumbles when attempting to remember his own children's names, 'I remember' he states ironically 'when Julie and... what's her name... Tricia were their age'. This apparently throwaway line is a clear example of the basic relationship (or lack of relationship) between Nixon and youth that the makers of *Dick* are attempting to show, a relationship made even more amusing by the girls' initial reaction to the uncomfortable president. For the first half of the film, Betsy and Arlene are besotted by the president and blind to the suspicious nature of the events they witness. This adulation (Arlene goes so far as to replace her bedroom posters of Bobby Sherman with those of Nixon) emphasises both the 'clueless' characters of the girls and the ironic depiction of Nixon as a man who believes he is in touch with youth, but is in reality both ideologically and politically dislocated from youth. His assurance in *Dick* that he 'has a way with young people' directly contrasts with dialogue that occurs during a discussion Nixon has with a White House valet about Kennedy from Oliver Stone's *Nixon* 'All those kids... Why do they hate me so much?' The historical reality of Nixon seems to have been one of antagonism towards the youth of America. His presidency is punctuated by anti-war demonstrations and outbreaks of violence between the US authorities and young people such as the shooting at Kent State University campus, and is overarched by the Vietnam war. *Dick* addresses these issues, explicitly in the case of Vietnam, by depicting Nixon in opposition to youth, whilst simultaneously making him unaware of his lack of youth and sex appeal. Etkind describes *Dick* as a film about the 'innocence of America in the late 1960s and early 1970s,'⁹⁵ but she seems to imply that this summary applies principally to the innocence of youth coming into contact with the 'harsh reality'⁹⁶ of the political establishment. In actual fact, *Dick* may also

be seen as being concerned with the innocence, and ultimately powerlessness, of Nixon and his administration when coming into contact with the liberal ideologies of youth. In *Dick*, Nixon and his White House are depicted in contrast with the youth of Betsy and Arlene, both in the ways the White House scenes are shot, and the reactions of the administration characters to the girls. As Betsy and Arlene are pursued and bugged by the Nixon's 'Plumbers', the trappings of youth similarly assail the White House. At the end of the film, Betsy and Arlene are shown to have beaten Nixon, firstly by forcing his resignation, and secondly, it is suggested, by physically invading the White House transforming the Oval Office into a roller-disco.

In *Nixon* the president asking 'all those kids... why do they hate me so much?' comes at the end of a scene in which Nixon has been comparing himself to Kennedy and recognising the earlier president's flawless affinity with the youth of America, he despairs of achieving it himself. In *Dick* there is a less explicit comparison between Nixon and Kennedy. Etkind describes *Dick* as reflecting a 'longing of the public at the beginning of the 1970s to return to a placid simplicity of an earlier age.'⁹⁷ This 'earlier age' is clearly suggested in the film to be the 1960s. The previous decade hangs over the 1970s setting of *Dick* in several ways. Firstly, as Etkind points out, through the various social concerns referenced within the film: 'the drug culture, the draft, war, and relations with Russia'⁹⁸ are all 'solved' by Betsy and Arlene throughout the film, but are all remnants of social issues from the 1960s. Secondly, the characterisation of Nixon and his administration as 'square' and ludicrously out of touch with youth tacitly recalls the earlier period when the president really was a pin-up. *Dick* may be seen as a narration of Nixon's resistance to the ideologies of the 1960s as much as it may be seen as a narration of the containment of youth.

Stephen Whitfield's remark that Nixon's character is often seen as adhering to the reality rather than the pleasure principle is reflected in the film in the ways it references this earlier time and contrasts it with Nixon. Nixon becomes a character striving for the youth appeal of

Kennedy, but humorously failing. As well as offering an implicit comparison with Kennedy, the film can also be seen as looking forward towards the hedonistic 1990s presidency of Bill Clinton. Critic Scott Sandage points to the physical resemblance in the film between Clinton and Besty's brother (see Figure 12).⁹⁹ Indeed the character seems to be an exaggeration of various incidences from Clinton's youth: the pot-smoking (though as Sandage indicates, Besty's brother *did* inhale) and the Vietnam draft (though Betsy's brother escapes it when Nixon ends the war before he can be drafted). Similarly, the popular cultural references in *Dick* 'foreshadow an age when politics would become, for many Americans, just so many images on so many television screens – a great big dance party where sexual antics are hardly distinguishable from constitutional crimes.'¹⁰⁰ The influence of 1990s eclectic irony characteristics in *Dick*'s recreation of the 1970s makes a connection between the social anxieties of the Clinton years and the political anxieties of the Nixon years; at times it can be seen as an attempt to rewrite the Watergate affair as a sex scandal. Critics such as Sharon Waxman read *Dick* as an attempt by the youth of the 1970s to critique the morality of the Nixon administration, in her words, 'it was probably only a matter of time before the children of Watergate turned around and got even.'¹⁰¹ Waxman goes on to describe *Dick* as a cross between *Clueless* and *All the President's Men*, a comparison she notes as having been made by the producers in their marketing of the film. This comparison is significant as it is reflective of a confusion of the youthful innocence of the 1995 film with the suspicion and menace of the 1976 film. Through its parodic fusion of genres from both the 1970s and the 1990s, the film can also be seen as a more subtle commentary on the moral uncertainty of the Clinton era, reflecting anxieties surrounding Clinton's attempts to connect with the young voter that culminated with the revelations of his affair with Monica Lewinsky in the late 1990s.

Dick, as I have demonstrated, seems to be aimed at the baby-boomer generation of which Clinton (born in 1946) was a member: a generation young enough to idolise Kennedy and old enough to revile Nixon. *Dick* looks backwards to the idealism and innocence of the 1960s and

forwards to the hedonism and media-obsession of the 1990s, creating a myth of Nixon that is in the middle: out-of-time and out-of-touch. The film's use of the characteristics of the nostalgic teen genre, neatly embodies this dislocation in the way it presents the contradictions of the genre. Just as Nixon believes himself to 'have a way with young people', the teen movie appears to be aimed at a youth audience. *Dick*, with its historical detail and parodying of *All the President's Men* displays a similar conflict between its youth and adult audience. Etkind describes the Nixon as presented in *Dick* as being 'stripped of the mythic proportions' of Oliver Stone's biopic. Nixon is no longer presented as the troubled Shakespearian tragic leader, but rather the awkward, bumbling adult authority figure common in the teen movie genre. What *Dick* does bring to the cultural presentation of Nixon, however, is a sense of the character being sandwiched between two eras that championed youth; the 1960s and the 1990s. In this way, *Dick's* depiction of Nixon and his presidency becomes a device that connects the loss of national innocence during the 1960s from the Kennedy assassination to the Vietnam war, and the resurgence, albeit superficial and seedy, of 1960s idealism and hedonism in the election of Clinton in 1992.

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⁴ Stephen Paul Miller, *The Seventies Now: Culture as Surveillance* (Durham: Duke UP, 1999) 38.

⁵ Martin Ruben, *Thrillers* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999) 149 cited in Keith Bertlett. "Grisham Adaptations and the Legal Thriller," ed. Steve Neale, *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood* (London: BFI, 2002) 270.

⁶ Ray Pratt, *Projecting Paranoia* (Kansas: Kansas UP, 2001) 125.

⁷ Pratt 126.

⁸ Steve Jenkins. "The Conversation," review of *The Conversation* in *The Movie* 8. 1608

⁹ Lytle. 357.

¹⁰ David A. Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam* (Berkeley: California UP, 2000) 308.

¹¹ Miller 79

¹² Mark Feeney, *Nixon at the Movies* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2004) 266.

¹³ Richard T. Jameson, review of *All the President's Men* in *Film Comment* 12. 5 (September – October 1976): 9.

¹⁴ Michael Ryan, and Douglas Kellner, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1988) 99-100.

¹⁵ Feeney 263.

¹⁶ Jameson 11.

¹⁷ Richard Combs, "Review of *All the President's Men*," review of *All the President's Men* in *Sight and Sound* (Summer 1976): 189.

¹⁸ Pratt 131-2.

¹⁹ Jameson 11.

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- ²⁰ Richard Thompson. "Alan J. Pakula on *All the Presidents Men* interviewed by Richard Thompson," *Film Comment* 12. 5 (September – October 1976): 14.
- ²¹ Cook 201.
- ²² Cook 366.
- ²³ Combs 189.
- ²⁴ Thompson 16.
- ²⁵ Jameson 8.
- ²⁶ Thompson 17.
- ²⁷ John Robert Greene, *The Limits of Power: The Nixon and Ford Administrations* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1992) 183.
- ²⁸ Feeney 288.
- ²⁹ Robert Williams, *Political Scandals in the USA* (Edinburgh: Keele UP, 1998) 23.
- ³⁰ Lytle 373.
- ³¹ Greene 183.
- ³² Greene 204.
- ³³ Robert Dallek, *Hail to the Chief* (New York: Hyperion, 1996) 184.
- ³⁴ Feeney 329.
- ³⁵ Michael Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, the Movie and other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Los Angeles: California UP, 1987) 81-115.
- ³⁶ Miller 267.
- ³⁷ Oliver Stone interviewed in Gavin Smith, "The Dark Side," *Sight and Sound* (March 1996): 7.
- ³⁸ James Cameron-Wilson. "Nixon," review of *Nixon* in *Film Review* (April 1996): 22.
- ³⁹ Jose Arroyo. "Review of *Nixon*," review of *Nixon* in *Sight and Sound* (March 1996): 48.
- ⁴⁰ Smith 7.
- ⁴¹ Smith 7.
- ⁴² George Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1992) 183.
- ⁴³ Custen 184.
- ⁴⁴ Custen 184.
- ⁴⁵ Jean Mitry. *The Aesthetics and Psychology of the Cinema*. Trans. Christopher King (London: The Athlone Press, 1998) 211.
- ⁴⁶ Susan Hayward. *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts (Second Edition)* (New York: Routledge, 2000) 136.
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- ⁴⁸ Custen 185.
- ⁴⁹ Smith 7.
- ⁵⁰ Smith 6.
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- ⁵⁵ Christopher Sharrett, "The Belly of the Beast: Oliver Stone's *Nixon* and the American Nightmare," review of *Nixon* in *Cineaste* XXII. 1 (January 1996): 5.
- ⁵⁶ Oliver Stone in interview in Michel Cieutat and Michel Ciment. 174.
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- ⁵⁸ Oliver Stone interviewed in Smith 7.
- ⁵⁹ Sharrett 4.
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- ⁶¹ Nixon, Richard interviewed by David Frost.
- ⁶² Rogin 109.
- ⁶³ Rogin 105.
- ⁶⁴ Rogin 104.
- ⁶⁵ Oliver Stone interviewed in Smith 7.
- ⁶⁶ Oliver Stone interviewed in Smith 8.
- ⁶⁷ Miller 259.

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- ⁶⁸ Bill Clinton, *My Life* (London: Arrow Books, 2004) 594.
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- ⁷⁰ Miller 267.
- ⁷¹ Robert E Denton, *The 1996 Presidential Campaign: A Communication Perspective* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1998) 243.
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- ⁸⁰ Elayne Rapping, "Hollywood's Youth Cult Films," *Cineaste* 16. 1-2 (1988): 17.
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- ⁸² Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London: Routledge, 2000) 124.
- ⁸³ Timothy Shary, *Generation Multiplex* (Austin: Texas UP, 2002) 1.
- ⁸⁴ Grainge 141.
- ⁸⁵ Michael Baer, "Girls of *Dick* weaves comedy into Watergate scandal," review of *Dick* in *The Stanford Daily*. 6 August 1999. 2.
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- ⁸⁷ Lesley Speed, "Tuesday's Gone," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 26. 1 (1998): 24-32.
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- ⁸⁹ Speed 24.
- ⁹⁰ Speed 24.
- ⁹¹ Chuck Klosterman, "*Dick* is Nixon: Implausible Movies Spoofs Late President with Humor," review of *Dick* in *Akron Beacon Journal (Ohio)* 4 August 1999. B7.
- ⁹² Etkind 272.
- ⁹³ Rapping 17.
- ⁹⁴ Feeney 333.
- ⁹⁵ Etkind 267.
- ⁹⁶ Etkind 267.
- ⁹⁷ Etkind 269.
- ⁹⁸ Etkind 269.
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- ¹⁰⁰ Sandage 1443.
- ¹⁰¹ Sharon Waxman, "Generation X's Tricky *Dick*; Politics as Comedy? Filmmakers Vote Yes with Watergate Tale," review of *Dick* in *The Washington Post* 1 August 1999. G01.

Chapter Three - Clinton

Bill Clinton became president after twelve years of governance by Republicans. Many critics have noted that Clinton's success as president was due in part to his ability to use the medium of television to shape his own mythology. As Thomas Doherty suggests, this ability helped build Clinton's appeal by crafting a presidency that allowed the public an intimacy with the presidency without diminishing its authority. Doherty states:

Bill Clinton was the most camera-ready of all presidents: talk show host, master of ceremonies on C-SPAN, in shades with sax on *Arsenio*, in boxers or briefs on *MVC*, in less than that in the Starr Report. JFK may have been the first television president, Reagan may have been the first president to exploit a television career for political capital, but Clinton was the first television-bred president... ..The video JFK was glamorous and unattainable; the video Clinton was ordinary and approachable. Little wonder that the Oval Office and its custodian became fit subjects for all kinds of screenplays that refuse to keep a respectful distance.¹

Clinton's successes lie in his ability to connect with the public and in his manipulation of his own media image. At the same time, Clinton's close relationship with the institutions of Hollywood meant that, to start with at least, Hollywood was on Clinton's side. Ian Scott argues that:

In John Kennedy, Washington had a president who was a film buff and looked like he could be in movies; with Ronald Reagan, there was at last an actor in the White House; but in Clinton, public service finally found an artisan who understood exactly how to shape the mythology Hollywood services for his own indefatigable ends.²

Unlike my case studies focusing on Kennedy and Nixon, the films I analyse in this chapter are all contemporaneous with the presidency that influences them. Michael Coyne notes, the Clinton era was a time which saw a general shift from depictions of real to fictional presidents. The films I have chosen to examine in this chapter are all from within this 1990s cycle of fictional presidential films, but all contain what I consider to be thinly disguised representations of Clinton. Coyne suggests that the early affection of Hollywood towards Clinton is evident in what he labels as the 'Nostalgic Phase' of presidential movies. In this phase, Clinton-like presidents appeared in films such as *Dave* (1993) and *The American President* (1995).³ These idealised visions of the presidency were challenged later in the

Clinton presidency during the revelations of the Whitewater and Lewinsky scandals. In what Coyne describes as the 'schizophrenic phase' of the 1990s cycle, films such as *Wag the Dog* (1997) and *Primary Colors* (1998) feature presidents struggling to maintain their media image through sex scandals while films such as *Independence Day* (1996) and *Air Force One* (1997) both depict, in Coyne's words, an 'all action president Bill Clinton surely *would* have been if he had bothered to serve in Vietnam.'⁴ The split between idealism and scandal-based cynicism exposes a perception of the Clinton presidency that is both Kennedy and Nixon-like. In this chapter, I uncover these two opposing perceptions of Clinton and analyse how, using the characteristics of specific film genres, they are depicted.

I have chosen three films that I suggest represent these different attitudes towards the Clinton presidency and that comment, from different perspectives, on Clinton's media control and on his ability to be both authoritative and personal. I argue that these films demonstrate a range of reactions to the Clinton presidency. The first, *Primary Colors*, can be seen as a satire but also an apologia of the flaws in the Clinton personality. The second, *Wag the Dog*, is a critique of oppressive presidential media control in which, as with *JFK* and *All the President's Men*, a president is depicted in his absence. The last, *The American President*, can be seen as a pure, idealised version of Clinton straight from the 'nostalgic phase' of the cycle.

***Primary Colors* (1998)**

Primary Colors, directed by Mike Nichols and released in 1998 follows in the tradition of films such as *The Candidate* (1972) and *Bob Roberts* (1992) in its satirical framing of a specific aspect of American politics - the campaign for election - and the television series *Saturday Night Live* in its lampooning of an incumbent President. Criticism of *Primary Colors* has tended to focus on the film's connections with Clinton's character and the similarities between the events in the film and events in Clinton's presidency concurrent with

the film's release, namely the Monica Lewinsky scandal and Clinton's past history of sexual impropriety. As Scott states:

Primary Colors, the adaptation of Joe Klein's previously anonymous novel, *is Clinton*, for the book and film cannot avoid the templates of character that Klein loaded into the story from Clinton's own 1992 campaign staff, and it therefore falls for the *Citizen Kane*-like veiled biography approach. Nevertheless, the film delves into the deconstructionist 1990s' vogue that searches for synchronous links to truth, fiction, fact and mythology in current society.⁵

The connections between the film and the Clinton character are clear: Jack Stanton is, like Clinton, a Southern State governor and is dogged similarly by accusations of sexual promiscuity. Other characters in *Primary Colors* aside from Stanton can be compared with characters from Clinton's campaign: Billy Bob Thornton plays a campaign manager similar to James Carville and Adrian Lester's Henry Burton performs a similar role to the youthful George Stephanopolous.⁶ As Scott suggests, however, these similarities operate in tandem with a more complex satirical analysis of modern, image-obsessed politics. In the first case-study, I intend to examine these two elements of *Primary Colors*, the specific biographical links to Clinton and the more general satirical background to the film. I intend to analyse the relationship between the film and Clinton within the context of both the 1990s cycle of presidential movies and the subgenre of the political campaign film. Through these comparisons, I propose that *Primary Colors* can be interpreted as an account of the Clinton mythology that unpacks both the appeal of Clinton and the source of the anxieties that developed before and during his presidency. In short, by comparing *Primary Colors* with films such as *Bulworth* (1998) and *The Candidate*, I intend to position the film within Coyne's schizophrenic phase of political films and to unpack how the film offers a similarly schizophrenic mythology of Clinton. Before I consider the generic contexts of the film, it may be useful to look at the background of the book of the film and how the media's reaction to it shifted from the significance of the story's contents to the identity of the book's author.

***Primary Colors*, Joe Klein and Clinton**

Primary Colors the film is based on a book of the same name written in 1996 by an anonymous author. The author was later revealed to be Joe Klein, a journalist for the *New Yorker*, who followed Bill Clinton's successful 1992 presidential campaign. The film charts the primary campaign of Jack Stanton, the Governor of a southern state, through the eyes of his idealistic, black campaign organiser Henry Burton as he battles to become the democratic candidate in the race for the presidency. Stanton and his team find themselves bombarded by scandal as his promiscuous past comes to light and Burton is forced into making a decision about whether to abandon his idealism and accept the reality of Stanton's flawed personality or whether to take a moral stand. To help deal with the repercussions from his past, Stanton enlists the help of Libby Holden, his previous chief of staff recently released from a mental hospital. Initially Stanton requires Holden to research and defuse, to 'dust-bust' his own shady past, however later in the film Stanton decides to 'go negative' on his opponent, the apparently saintly Governor Fred Picker. The resulting revelations cause Burton to become disillusioned with political campaigning and Holden to commit suicide. The film follows a trend of films that expose the inner workings of the modern, 1990s political campaign, films that as Ian Scott observes equate 'image and personality with electoral viability and campaign success.'⁷ This aspect is apparent in *Primary Colors* through the film's pre-occupation with the personality of its politician, such as the opening shots and commentary on Stanton's handshake techniques and the closing scene in which Stanton uses his charismatic persuading power to get Burton back on board. Where *Primary Colors* differs from films such as *Bob Roberts*, *The Candidate* and *Bulworth*, is in its proximity to a real political figure, in this case, Clinton.

Initially, media reaction towards the original book focused on the level of insight into the Clinton campaign it revealed. As reviewer Michiko Kakutani judged:

The novel appeals to our gossip radar rather than our literary instincts. We keep reading not because of the originality of the story or its emotional

power, but because we've been made to feel we're getting an inside look at the 1992 Clinton run for the White House.⁸

The identity (or lack of) of the author was an issue in the first reviews of the book, partly because it was clear from the details of the narrative that the author had some connection to the campaign.⁹ One reviewer described the book as 'the best nonfiction portrait of our magnificently flawed 42nd President' and it is this attitude that appears to be prevalent amongst most of the reviews.¹⁰ Many reviewers marvelled at how accurately the 1992 campaign had been translated into satirical fiction whilst, at the same time criticising the fictional, imaginative aspects of the story such as Burton's moral crisis and events that one critic felt 'as though they've been lifted from a grade-B melodrama.'¹¹ Gradually, however, the critics' focus on the content of the book became subsumed by a search for the identity of the book's author, in the words of Bill Clinton himself, 'the only secret I've seen kept in Washington in three years.'¹² Indeed, one reviewer noted the irony that while all the characters in the novel have clear real-life counterparts, 'only the identity of the author remains unknown to the reader.'¹³ The reviews of the book were replaced in the press by a hunt for the identity of 'Anonymous'. Kakutani believed that the author may have been a 'Republican mole.'¹⁴ while Alex Beam of *The Boston Globe* suggested that while the author was clearly close to Clinton, he or she probably, 'isn't currently on the Clinton payroll, because the book is an astonishing act of betrayal. But it is a Shakespearean betrayal, animated by a deep, unrequited adoration.'¹⁵ These two possibilities for the identity of the author seem to come from two different readings of *Primary Colors*. The first is as a simple anti-Democrat, anti-Clinton piece of polemic writing, the second as a more complex, nuanced work, as Klein later indicated, 'a defense of larger-than-life politicians.'¹⁶ In February 1996, *The Washington Post* constructed a list of those who it thought the most likely contenders for the identity of Anonymous.¹⁷ Although the list is clearly light-hearted, the names referred to in the list are interesting in the areas from which they are chosen. The names range from satirists such as Christopher Buckley and Garry Trudeau, journalists such as Mark Halperin, Sidney Blumenthal and (of course) Joe Klein, and, crucially, high profile ex-staffers of

Clinton such as Dee Dee Myers, Mandy Grunwald, James Carville, George Stephanopolous and Paul Begala, many of whom were directly satirised in the novel. Klein's admission that he was the author of *Primary Colors* came on 19th July 1996 after the hand-written alterations to the manuscript of the book were forensically analysed.¹⁸ The identity of the author led noted journalist Maureen Dowd to reassess the novel: 'Now we know. *Primary Colors* was not a social satire. It was a story of unrequited love, the literary consequence of a romance turned sour between a journalist and a politician.'¹⁹ When the book came to be produced as a film, the focus of the press shifted again from investigating the identity of the author to anticipating the identity of the actor destined to play Stanton. Indeed, after the director's initial choice, Tom Hanks, departed from the project, a similar article appeared to the *Washington Post* list, this time with the names of actors rather than journalists and political operatives. One implication of this is to demonstrate how the notoriety of *Primary Colors* in both book and film form revolved around the identities of the persons involved: the identity of the author, the identity of the principal actor, the political persuasion of those involved and, crucially, the true identity of Stanton. It seems to me that both the book and the film of *Primary Colors* are preoccupied by this notion of identity. In the next section, I examine how this preoccupation is expressed in the film in the satirising of the first Clinton presidential campaign.

***Primary Colors* and the Clinton Campaign**

To understand the relationship between the two genres of satire and biography and their influences throughout *Primary Colors*, it is important to consider the cultural contexts of the film. The political satire as film academic David Haven Blake expands upon, follows in the line of a clutch of films predominantly from the 1990s cycle of political movies including *Wag the Dog*, *Bob Roberts* and *The American President*. These films, as Blake argues, 'in a decade distinguished by widespread distrust of government... ...provided viewers with a privileged look into the artifice behind the presidency.'²⁰ The opening scene of *Primary Colors* illustrates this concept: the camera focuses on Stanton shaking the hands of potential

voters while in a voice-over, a campaign worker gives Burton a running commentary of the significance of the different positions of Stanton's hands (see Figure 13). In this case, the viewer is shown a standard political image whilst being simultaneously provided with a 'user's guide', demystifying the image. Blake refers to the example of P. T. Barnum's carnival hoaxing and historian Neil Harris's phrase 'operational aesthetic,'²¹ in other words the pleasure in seeing the hoax, the political 'artifice', whilst at the same time being allowed to see the mechanism behind the hoax, 'the pollsters, spin doctors, dust busters, and pols.'²² This satirical revelation and deconstruction of the truth behind covert activities such as campaign politics forms the backbones of the 1990s political films. In *Bob Roberts* the satire comes from the relationship between idealistic folksy charm and cynical politics, in *The American President* the romance between the president and a political activist is put in jeopardy by the conflict between the idealistic romance and similarly idealistic political opinions of the main characters. In *Primary Colors* this revelation is central to the narrative of the film. As Ian Scott suggests:

What *Primary Colors* really adds to the collection of Hollywood election movies is an issue largely ignored until now: obliqueness. In the 1990s evasion is the cruise missile of tactical weaponry in political campaigns and its only target is victory. What the film endorses about late twentieth-century American politics is not that rules can be bent, or that the cover-up of one's illicit activities is a serious and professional arm of campaigning when we are aware of this already, but that television and Hollywood have shown the way in adjusting visual composition by refocusing public perceptions of morality and satire to produce political debate out of any issue, be it topical or trivial.²³

Scott argues that as with *Bob Roberts* and *The American President*, *Primary Colors* is principally concerned with the conflict between ideology and cynicism, between the surface imagery and rhetoric of political campaigning and the underlying media manipulation behind it. This conflict gives rise to the primary motivation behind the plot of *Primary Colors*, that of Henry Burton's loss of innocence while struggling to come to terms with the reality of Jack Stanton's campaign. Stanton is presented as both the Kennedy-like hero, and the Nixon-like villain of the film, and Burton stands in the middle as a moral barometer forced to decide between the cynical and idealist approach to politics. Scott develops this argument by suggesting that *Primary Colors* is an examination of the specific concept of deception or

‘obliqueness’; this, he argues, grounds the film in the real world of 1990s politics. Indeed, as I argue, the obliqueness that Scott refers to extends beyond the political revelations and machinations within the plot of the film into the way in which the film is shot and edited.

Ian Scott describes *Primary Colors* as a ‘simulacra’ of a real presidential campaign, as an ‘extension of reality fictionalised for an alternative form of presentation.’²⁴ In this way, Scott sees *Primary Colors* as using the appearance and pageantry of presidential campaigning as a visual and narrative backdrop for a commentary on loss of innocence and idealism. Unlike most other political films of the 1990s *Primary Colors* has explicit roots in a specific political campaign: Bill Clinton’s successful bid for the presidency in 1992. The connections between this campaign and Mike Nichols’ film are rooted in the identity of the author of the source book. In 2002, Joe Klein wrote a book called *The Natural* in which he offered a revised reading of the entire Clinton presidency. Klein described Clinton’s presidency as ‘serious and substantive’ despite the multiple personal scandals that broke before and during his office.²⁵ Klein writes his book from the perspective of an insider, a journalist allowed intimate access and, indeed, it seems that this was what he was permitted during the 1992 election: ‘when it was over, he [Clinton] shook my hand, looked me in the eye, and said, with deep and obvious conviction, “Joe, I want you to know, I *always* value your conviction”.’²⁶ Klein, therefore, was in an ideal position during the 1992 primary to translate the Bill Clinton quirks, both positive and negative, into the satirical character of Stanton four years later. The physical similarities between the characters of Clinton and Stanton are deeper than simply a shared fondness for fast food. Their ability to stage-manage intimate moments, such as handshakes, is a crucial, defining attribute of both personalities. An important political insight into the relationship of *Primary Colors* with the Clinton presidency comes when considering Klein’s possible motivations behind writing his story. Klein describes his own book as a ‘defense of larger-than-life politicians – who, inevitably, have mythic weakness entangled with their obvious strengths.’²⁷ This apologia of Clinton through Stanton influenced the casting of the film. Initially Tom Hanks was lined up to play the part of Stanton but turned it down,

reportedly because of his support for, and friendship with, Clinton.²⁸ John Travolta, who accepted the part, was also pro-Clinton. Interviewed after the film's release, Travolta, as well as defending Clinton against the contemporaneous Monica Lewinsky scandal, offered a summary of the connections between Stanton and Clinton: 'they both care':

the President is bigger than that. You can never underestimate how smart he is. He won't be preoccupied with the movie, however much we want him to in order to flatter ourselves. More than anything, the movie promotes what a decent person he is. It tries to say that people can be great and still flawed.²⁹

It is interesting to speculate how the casting of Tom Hanks would have changed *Primary Colors*. Hanks and Travolta have contrasting screen-presences. Hanks' romantic roles before and after *Primary Colors* tended towards comedy involving verbal rather than physical romance. For example in both *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993) and its thematic sequel *You've Got Mail* (1998), the romance relied on the physical *distance* of the characters, the intimacy of the relationships enacted almost entirely through communication such as letter, radio or email. On the basis of these films, therefore, Hanks would seem to be unsuitable for the role of Stanton. As one journalist noted when Hanks was forced to turn down the part, 'however Hanks might have played the part, any time he affects a Southern accent, we will think of the innocent simpleton Forrest Gump.'³⁰ Travolta's romantic performances, by contrast, have *relied* on physicality and presence. For example in two of his early films, *Grease* (1978) and *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), the romance was sexual and personal as opposed to Hanks' aseptic distant treatment of a love affair. Travolta's roles have often depended on his physical presence, his ability to sing and dance in *Grease* and *Saturday Night Fever* or physically to dominate other characters in *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and *Broken Arrow* (1996). In *Primary Colors*, Travolta's sexual fleshiness is an essential element of his performance. Stanton's (and Clinton's) principal asset is his charismatic physical presence as a reinforcement of his political messages. The opening scene of Stanton handshaking, for example, acts as a meditation on Stanton's physicality. Travolta's screen history of tactile, energetic, sexual roles compared with Hanks' remote, light and emotionally subtle performances, therefore, makes him ideal for the role of Stanton.

At the time of filming *Primary Colors*, John Travolta was also enjoying a career resurgence on the back of his performance in 1994's *Pulp Fiction* in which he played the violent, amoral hitman Vincent Vega. In films including *Broken Arrow* (1996) and *Face/Off* (1997), Travolta continued to play villainous roles.³¹ These 1990's roles followed a career low for Travolta after his breakthrough in *Grease* and *Saturday Night Fever*. His only films of commercial note during the period between *Grease* and *Pulp Fiction* were the sequel to *Saturday Night Fever*, *Staying Alive* (1983) and family comedy *Look Who's Talking* (1989). Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* earned Travolta an Oscar nomination and a career boost for the whole of the 1990s until finally being broken by the unsuccessful 2000 film *Battlefield Earth*. Interestingly, as Jesse Zigelstein argues, Travolta's comeback took place only after the actor had adjusted his star image. Travolta moves from being a 1970s sexualised 'pin-up' to a 1990s serious, sincere actor, whose physical masculinity is frequently balanced against more ironic, self aware twist of the traditional, idealised 1970s male.³² Travolta's role in *Primary Colors* melds these two differing personalities into one character, at the same time a physically and charismatically sexual male and an intellectually sincere politician. After Hanks turned down the role, Travolta's name was top on a journalist's checklist of likely contenders for the role of Stanton:

John Travolta. Age: 42 Height: 6 feet, plus. Advantages: Has charisma and complexity, has played nice ("Phenomenon"), mean ("Broken Arrow") and mean-nice ("Pulp Fiction"). Disadvantages: Booked into the next century.³³

It is telling that the only 'disadvantage' of Travolta for the role was his success. Ironically, this renewed success made Travolta even more suitable for the role: his career highs and lows neatly match, albeit over a larger timescale, those experienced by Stanton in the film and Clinton in real life. The bumpy screen history of Travolta is a reflection of the rollercoaster of the Clinton presidency.

Clinton's reaction to the filming of *Primary Colors* is just as interesting. He visited the set whilst filming was taking place in Washington and after it was released, he invited Travolta to

the White House to impersonate him, an invitation Travolta declined.³⁴ Clinton's apparently positive reaction to *Primary Colors* reveals two things of importance: firstly it supports the claims made by the filmmakers and Joe Klein that *Primary Colors* attempted to be sympathetic towards the incumbent president. Secondly, it reveals the wider relationship between Clinton and film culture. Clinton, as has been noted, counted numerous film stars amongst his friends including Travolta, Hanks and Kevin Spacey. As Martin Walker pointed out in his examination of the state of Hollywood in the Clinton era:

Clinton himself is a devout movie fan... ..Clinton was so attuned to Hollywood's messages, had read its signals of a shift in the *zeitgeist* with such precise intuition, that his own dangerous fascination with movie culture should have been predicted. The trouble was that the people closest to him, who might have warned of its dangers, were similarly star-struck.³⁵

Clinton's method of dealing with *Primary Colors*, to not merely acknowledge it, by inviting Travolta to the White House, but to embrace it, by asking Travolta to the White House in the guise of Stanton, is in keeping with his relationships with both the Hollywood institution and with the general American mass media. The connection between Clinton and Hollywood recalls the career of Clinton's principal political influence, John F. Kennedy. As Stella Bruzzi points out, 'Clinton has been compared to Kennedy and Nixon in equal measure: to Kennedy because of his youth and showbiz friends, to Nixon because of the scandals that have tainted his two terms of office.'³⁶ When *Primary Colors* was released, anxieties over Clinton's inappropriate sexual conduct were being confirmed by the revelations of the Lewinsky scandal. Reacting as he did to *Primary Colors* and drawing attention to his Hollywood friends can be seen as an attempt by Clinton to associate himself once again with idealism of the Kennedy myth rather than the scandals of the Nixon myth. What *Primary Colors* also brings to the fore, however, are the negative aspects of Clinton's relationship with, and control over, the media. Shortly after Clinton's first election, film critic Richard Corliss summed up his character as:

an actor on a soap opera, a salesman on a long road. He has learned that the Presidency is a continuation of the campaign by other means. He knows he can't let up wooing the electorate just because he got elected. With his minority victory he must keep the folks interested and entertained. Campaign

'92 was only Stage One of a five-year sales pitch. Nine-year, if he's a good huckster.³⁷

Corliss perceived Clinton's character as being a cross between an entertainer and a salesman, a perpetual campaigner. This view takes the Kennedy aspects of Clinton, his Hollywood connections, his abilities to manipulate his own image and to use the media, and parallels them with aspects of Nixon, the salesman, the slippery political operator. In *Primary Colors*, Clinton's counterpart Jack Stanton is shown several times using the media in this way.

The use of the media by Stanton is an important part of *Primary Colors*. I would suggest three moments expose the most interesting effects of this aspect. During the first, Stanton and his wife appear together on television to deny allegations concerning Stanton's affair with her hairdresser. These allegations paralleled those during Clinton campaign when he was accused of having conducted a twelve year affair with reporter Gennifer Flowers. In the 1992 campaign, the allegations culminated with an appearance by Bill and Hillary Clinton on the American current affairs programme *60 Minutes* (1968-Present). During the interview Clinton caught a spotlight that almost fell on Hillary's head. In his autobiography, Bill Clinton sums up the occasion, including Hillary's brush with injury as follows:

She was scared, and rightly so. I just stroked her hair and told her that it was all right and that I loved her. After the ordeal, we flew home to watch the show with Chelsea. When it was over, I asked Chelsea what she thought. She said, "I think I'm glad you're my parents".³⁸

In describing the episode as an 'ordeal', Clinton conflates the interview with the near accident so that his daughter Chelsea's comments after watching the broadcast can be read not only as 'I'm glad you're my parents' but also as 'I'm glad you survived'. The ordeal of the Gennifer Flowers allegations in the 1992 campaign becomes corporealised by the danger of the accident, while the heroic act of Bill Clinton perfectly illustrates what the television appearance was designed to suggest. In a similar way, the parallel incident in the film is also matched by a physical act, but in this case, the act is in opposition to the content of the interview. Stanton and his wife are depicted being interviewed on the fictional news programme, *Weekend in Washington*, watched in the studio by Daisy, a campaign worker and

live on television in a bar by Burton. In this way, the viewer is given three perspectives on the scene. Firstly, in a replication of the Clinton interview, the viewer watched Stanton and his wife demonstrating their loyalty to each other by holding hands. Secondly, Daisy's presence in the studio allows the viewer to see what happens when the cameras finish transmitting: in disgust, Stanton's wife pulls her hand away from her husband's. Finally, the viewer is witness to the reactions of the voters as Burton phones Daisy from the bar:

Daisy: How did it play where you are? Wasn't she fantastic?

Burton: Yeah, great. But they'd like to see her hair a little longer.

The scene, therefore has a three stage revelation: the first recreating the Clinton moment, the second displaying the 'operational aesthetics' of the moment, undercutting the apparent, romantic truth of the interview, and finally the third stage reveals the public reality, the fact that the voters are really only concerned with appearance and superficial details.

The second example of political/media crossover in the film is a twist on the previous scene. Stanton is accused of having an affair with his wife's hairdresser – an accusation that appears to be supported when a tabloid newspaper uncovers an incriminating tape recording of an apparent conversation between Stanton and the woman. The Stanton 'dust-busting' team springs into action and discovers that the tape is actually a fake, pieced together from hijacked, more innocent telephone calls. Libby Holden, Stanton's unhinged politico, obtains at gunpoint a signed confession from one of the forgers and comes up with a plan to publicly expose the plot. The plan is to play the same trick on chat-show host Larry King (who appears as himself) live on his CNN television show, playing a doctored recording of him captured from an innocuous telephone conversation. Two aspects of this are interesting, the first is the presence of Larry King, a media personality who Clinton described as having 'a good sense of humour and a human touch,'³⁹ and whose appearance in *Primary Colors* connects the fictional with the real in a way the previous, similar scene did not. Secondly, the scene is interesting in comparison with the earlier moment. Again we see both the transmitted events and the audience reactions to it. This time, however, the audiences are the Stantons and their

staff, while Daisy is interviewed by King. While both events show a television broadcast and the respective audience, the differences between this scene and the last may be seen in the reactions displayed by the broadcasters and the audience. In this case, the interview is intercut with a view of the Stanton staff whose reactions give a different dimension to King's show. This moment represents the successful moments of media spin countering the earlier scene where the reactions of the potential voters were shallow and insubstantial. King's presence brings to mind interviews during Clinton's campaign, including the moment he countered accusations that he had considered renouncing American citizenship in order to dodge the Vietnam draft. The scene following this one, however, reveals the true impact of the Stanton team's attempt to gain the upper hand. In a similar set up, Stanton, his wife and staff sit watching the television, but this time it is a chat-show host making jokes about Stanton and ignoring the revelations of the tapes:

Burton: They just don't care about the fine points
Susan Stanton: No, it would ruin the punchline

The third incident in the film also draws loosely on Clinton's campaign. Stanton is interviewed on a Florida radio station *Shmooze for Jews* by host Izzy Rosenblatt (played in a cameo by *The American President* director Rob Reiner). This sequence carries on the joke set up in the previous scene that the voters in Florida are primarily made up of the elderly and Jewish and Rosenblatt's questions concentrate on Las Vegas, gambling and favourite comedians. Part way through the interview, Stanton's democratic rival Lawrence Harris calls in intent on a political argument. In terms of his position in relation to Stanton, Harris closely resembles Clinton's 1992 democratic rival Paul Tsongas, a former senator who had battled ill health and returned to politics as, in Clinton's words, a 'fitness fanatic.'⁴⁰ The twist with the Stanton radio interview occurs at the end when Harris, unbeknown to Stanton, suffers a near fatal heart attack apparently brought about by the stress of arguing his case. In this instance, Stanton is cast as both the broadcaster and the audience. As the broadcaster he confidently argues with Harris, using the medium of radio and the fact that Harris cannot see him to pretend to refer to his opponents manifesto while in fact quoting from it by memory. At the

same time, when Harris suffers his heart attack, it is out of sight of both Stanton and the viewer of *Primary Colors*. Stanton becomes the victim of a media event that he can neither understand nor control.

These three events in *Primary Colors* offer a range of interpretations of the relationship between the political figure and the media. Collectively they examine the use of media for spin and deception, while each exposing the different 'realities' of how that spin is received. In each case, Stanton is shown to be reduced by the spin. In the first, the public reaction to the appearance is humorously shallow. In the second, the media event is directly followed by another demonstrating the ineffectuality of the first. In the last case, Stanton (and the viewer of the film) believes himself to have gained the upper hand in the debate against Harris, only to discover in the next scene that his opponent has become a martyr by nearly dying whilst arguing his case. Each event picks up the threads of similar moments during the 1992 primary debates and satirises them by revealing their potentially cynical interpretations. In this way, Clinton's relationship with the media is simultaneously represented and analysed. The examples also underline a recurring theme in *Primary Colors* - the juxtaposition of scenes of success and those depicting failure. The Larry King appearance and shots of the Stanton team watching the television, is followed by a celebratory moment in which Stanton appears on a hotel balcony which is then followed by, compositionally, a nearly identical scene of the Stanton team watching negative television reactions to the original broadcast. Similarly, Stanton's success on the radio is followed by a scene of celebration that is interrupted with the news of Harris' heart attack. This motif of the undercutting of success, I believe, refers to the Clinton campaign during which comeback followed disaster which followed comeback, resembling, in Joe Klein's words, 'a cross between a disaster movie and a country music song.'⁴¹ In addition to this all three scenes perpetuate a motif that can be seen throughout *Primary Colors*, that of the contrasting of public and private moments. This trope can be seen in many of the 1990s cycle of presidential films including *Wag the Dog* and *The American President*. The appeal of this confusion comes from the intimacy the public/private scenes

allow the viewer with the private operations of the presidency. They reflect the increasing interest in the personality of the president but also the blurring of the notion of the celebrity with that of the politician. *Primary Colors* offers the viewer a feeling of intimacy with the details of the political campaign, but an overarching theme through the film is that of the tensions between public and private moments. I would argue that these tensions offer the clearest and most interesting satire of Clinton. The confusion through the film between what is private and what is public matches a similar anxiety throughout the Clinton presidency, culminating in the Lewinsky scandal.

Primary Colors, Clinton and the Campaign Genre

Criticisms of both the book and film of *Primary Colors* have concentrated for the most part on the texts' relationships with Clinton and his 1992 campaign, and indeed Clinton's reaction to the film appears to confirm this connection. The film's approach of impersonating Clinton appears to dovetail with the popular satirical comedic presentation of politics, particularly in the long-running television series *Saturday Night Live*. For all its thematic, situational and physical connections with the Clinton campaign, however, I believe that what sets it apart from other generically related films such as *Bulworth*, *Bob Roberts* and the much earlier *The Candidate*, is in the way *Primary Colors* distances itself from reality.

Primary Colors can be seen to be part of a wider and long running cycle of films, literature and cartoons lampooning the presidency. The satirising of the President of the United States in print has a long tradition. In terms of the 1990s cycle of presidential films among which *Primary Colors* must be counted, the most significant text of satirical heritage appears to have been *Saturday Night Live*, a comedy sketch show that started in 1975. A recurring element of *Saturday Night Live* has been from the start the impersonation of the incumbent president from Gerald Ford to George W. Bush. The connections between *Saturday Night Live* and the sequence of American President comedies that began in the 1990s are numerous: at least three of these films, *Dick*, *My Fellow Americans* (1996) and *Head of State* (2003) feature *Saturday*

Night Live cast-members including Will Ferrell, Dan Ackroyd and Chris Rock. Secondly, as David Blake notes, a motif of many of these films including *My Fellow Americans*, *The American President* (1995) and *Dave* (1993) include jokes concerning the impersonation of the President within the storyline. In *My Fellow Americans* for example, two ex-Presidents disguise themselves by posing as Presidential impersonators, and are then ironically criticised for their unconvincing impersonations. With John Travolta's 'spookily accurate impersonation' of Clinton through Stanton in *Primary Colors*, the film taps into the *Saturday Night Live* formula of satire and lampooning.⁴² The general treatment of Clinton, and subsequent reaction to the character of Stanton by Clinton after the release of the film, also recalls *Saturday Night Live*. In general the sketch show's treatment of American Presidents had been negative. Ford was presented as a clumsy buffoon, Carter as ineffectual, Nixon as a 'half-crazy, anti-Semitic racist' and Reagan as absent minded.⁴³ *Saturday Night Live*'s portrayal of democratic Presidents seem to have been more charitable and good natured. For example during the Monica Lewinsky scandal, the time of the release of *Primary Colors*, 'the target of the satire was not Bill Clinton but either the irate Republicans or the transfixed media.'⁴⁴ As John Matviko concludes, 'Clinton and *Saturday Night Live* were made for each other; it should not come as a surprise if, at some future point, the former president ends up as a guest host or even a fixture on late-night television.'⁴⁵ Likewise, the parodying of Clinton in *Primary Colors* is essentially good humoured and at the conclusion (of the film though not of the book) Burton is shown to make the final decision to work with Stanton. This balanced approach is, as Klein suggests, a celebration of Clinton as opposed to a condemnation, seems to match the approach of *Saturday Night Live*. In comparing *Primary Colors* to its cinematic satirical forebears, however, I would argue that questions are raised about the film's treatment of reality. In its satirical lampooning of Clinton through the character of Jack Stanton, *Primary Colors* follows a tradition reaching back to the 1970s in political campaign films such as *The Candidate*. The presentation of satire in *Primary Colors* may be also compared with a film released at the same time: *Bulworth*.

Bulworth, written, directed and produced by Warren Beatty, follows the story of a California senator on the campaign trail. Bulworth depressed and suicidal after years in the American political machine decides to arrange his own death and recruits a hit-man. The act of doing so, however, gives him a new zest for the campaign and the liberation to do and say what he wants regardless of the political consequences. The film, then, is a comedy, as Bulworth tries to avoid the assassin he has hired, and a romance; Bulworth falls for Nina, played by Halle Berry, whom he meets on the campaign and who turns out to be the hit-woman. The film is also a picaresque journey spanning two sides of California; the affluent power brokers of local government and Hollywood and the destitution and poverty of the black neighbourhoods of Los Angeles. Like its 1970s predecessor *The Candidate*, *Bulworth* is littered with references to the real political world. It opens with the statement:

Mid March 1996. The time of the California Primaries. Robert Dole has secured the Republican Presidential nomination. President Clinton runs unopposed by other Democrats. The populace is unaroused.

With this, *Bulworth* anchors itself into a contemporary political world, setting it apart from other election films,⁴⁶ and satirising Clinton in a different way to *Primary Colors*. In *Bulworth*, Clinton becomes an element of the national apathy that is metaphorically represented by the central character's depression. After this opening script, the camera slowly pans around Bulworth's office focusing on photographs of key liberal figures such as Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy and George McGovern.⁴⁷ The effect of this is to provide a nostalgic contrast to what Beatty sees as the homogeneity of modern politics. The true target of the satire in *Bulworth* is not solely Clinton, but rather the political marketing machine and its relationship with corporate America. Party politics and political issues in *Bulworth* take a backseat: in the words of Beatty's character, 'Republicans, Democrats, what's the difference?' Similarly *Primary Colors* avoids Republican/Democrat dichotomies seen in contemporary White House movies such as *The American President* and *The Contender*, by setting the political debates and conflicts during the Democratic Primaries. As film critic Robert Sklar pointed out when reviewing *Bob Roberts* in 1993, 'the problem with satire as a form is that it is good at offering targets but less good at taking positions,'⁴⁸ and this certainly

seems to be the case with both *Bulworth* and *Primary Colors*. In both films, the targets of the satire are more general. *Bulworth* represents Beatty's political anti-capitalist ideologies and Clinton's relationship with them. As journalist Ben Dickenson points out, after his election, 'Clinton was working with the corporate gamblers who'd benefited from Reagan's policies, the same 'office boys' who'd taken over Hollywood business and whose speculation caused recession in 1987 and again in 1991.'⁴⁹ Beatty was a friend, supporter and campaigner for Clinton during the 1980s and the early 1990s so *Bulworth* acts as Beatty's declaration of discontent with the state of the Democratic Party and as a specific break from the social orbit of Clinton. *Primary Colors*, by contrast deals less with Clinton's political position and more with the effect of Clinton-like charisma in politics. As such, Nichols' film comes across as Klein intended - an affectionate if lampooning defence of Clinton.

Both films owe a debt to the 1972 film *The Candidate* starring Robert Redford as Bill McKay, a lawyer who is persuaded to run for the California Senate despite the fact that his opponent, an experienced, embedded Republican, looks unbeatable. McKay begins his campaign as a progressive idealist, using the race to get his thoughts and political opinions into the open. Gradually, however, his campaign begins to be successful. And McKay starts to compromise his ideals when in sight of the winning post. As critic Linda Alkana suggests in her article 'The Absent President,'⁵⁰ *Bulworth* is similar to *The Candidate* in both films' depictions of the relationship between the campaign staff and the campaigners, McKay and Bulworth, and in each films use of an absent President, an absence that, in Alkana's words 'honors the American Presidency as an important symbol of continuity and power, one which can be called upon in times when the reality of political events overshadow the fictional.'⁵¹ In other words, the lack of a Presidential figure in both *The Candidate* and *Bulworth* insulates the reality of the symbolic commander-in-chief from the satire and cynicism in the fictional campaigns. What Alkana does not refer to, however, are the differences between *The Candidate* and *Bulworth* that I believe have a crucial impact in a similar reading of *Primary Colors*, namely the way that reality is presented in the three films.

Richard Maltby says the following about Ritchie's film: '*The Candidate* employs the stylistic devices of documentary - and the presence of several professional politicians and television newsreaders - to assert the accuracy of its representation of the political process.'⁵² Scott agrees, noting the film's indebtedness to political documentaries such as the 1960 film *Primary*, charting the Presidential primary fight between Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey and pointing to Michael Ritchie's use of handheld cameras and staging scenes at real public events.⁵³ This *cinéma vérité* approach, Scott demonstrates, is later adopted and parodied by Tim Robbins' 1992 'mockumentary' *Bob Roberts*. As Maltby argues, however, the realism that is developed by Ritchie's *cinéma vérité* style is offset by the presence of Redford as its star. The glamorous way in which Redford is depicted, particularly the way he is romantically lit in the film, belies the 'caustic' cynicism of the film's intended ironic, political subject matter. In other words, Redford, as the film's star, becomes detached from his character to a degree that distances the film from reality and defuses the power of its satire. *Bulworth* lacks the documentary feel that is given to *The Candidate*; instead, in Scott's words, it 'went in totally the opposite direction by fashioning a far more glossy and urbane visual presentation.'⁵⁴ As in *The Candidate*, however, the star of *Bulworth* (and the director) Warren Beatty is fetishised by the camera, again evidenced in the lighting for the film. In one scene in particular, Beatty is back-lit and silhouetted against the Union flag, whilst on other occasions the pale features of Beatty are contrasted sharply with those of his black love interest in the film played by Halle Berry.⁵⁵ Ritchie's romantic presentation of Redford in *The Candidate* can be seen as disturbing the satire by instigating an antagonistic relationship between the *cinéma vérité* approach and the traditional Hollywood presentation of the film-star, in effect friction between old (classic) and new (1970s) Hollywood styles. In *Bulworth*, however, Beatty embraces the use of his romantic film-star image and manipulates it for the purposes of satire. This is particularly evident in the opening scene: the character of Bulworth is formed initially through shots of Beatty with historical, liberal heroes, establishing the character in relation to these figures. In effect, the first image of Bulworth the viewer receives is actually

that of Beatty himself. The reality is revealed in an uncomfortable cut from these photographs to an unromantic shot of Bulworth in his office weeping and suffering from a nervous breakdown. Through this juxtaposition, Beatty switches from the idealised and romantic to the real, effectively parodying his Hollywood persona to a satirical end. In both cases, it is the moral or psychological breakdown and subsequent political success of the candidates, McKay and Bulworth, that form the story, and the constancy of the political spin doctors that are a principal part of the satire. In *Primary Colors*, the role of the characters is changed. Instead, it is Burton, not Stanton who takes the role of the character who changes and adapts, while the candidate, Stanton, remains the constant both politically and morally. Compared with *The Candidate*, therefore, Burton may be aligned more closely with McKay than the spin doctors.⁵⁶ Like Warren Beatty when he directed *Bulworth*, Mike Nichols in *Primary Colors* chooses not to adopt a ‘mockumentary’, *cinéma vérité* approach to his film. Nor did Nichols, like Beatty, explicitly attach his film to a particular election or time, apart from tangentially referring to the Nixon/McGovern race and Democratic candidate Gary Hart’s downfall in 1988. Instead, it is Travolta’s lampooning impression of Clinton in Stanton, and Emma Thompson’s gloss on Hillary Clinton, that provides the connections to reality. In many ways, Nichols actually distances the film from reality. Throughout the film, Nichols uses voice-overs, slow motion and elaborately staged scenes. For example, in one scene, the campaign staff sit in a hotel room discussing a plan of action. Burton moves to the window and watches Stanton in a Krispy Kreme Donut bar on the other side of the road. The camera then pans forward, through the glass, over the road and pauses at the door to the bar at which point, Burton appears from off camera and enters the cafe (see Figure 14). This scene contains two impossible acts, firstly when the camera moves through the glass, and secondly when Burton appears outside the bar having only just been seen in the hotel room. In constructing scenes such as this, Nichols both reminds the viewer that they are watching a film and not a documentary, and lend the story a fantastic, mythical dimension, one that I believe extends into a characterisation of Clinton through Stanton. Nichols adapts the journalistic political satire of Klein’s novel emphasising, through Travolta’s performance, the character of Stanton

as a charismatic, Falstaffian stereotype. Placing a Clinton look-alike into a morality tale that throughout often resembles a fairy-tale, could be seen as mythologising the incumbent President. In fact, I would argue, it goes further than this. *Primary Colors* outlines a myth of Clinton's first campaign: Nichols' morality tale introduces a Clinton manqué who, like his real world counterpart, has a political and personal life that oscillates between the highs of Kennedy and the lows of Nixon.

Primary Colors is a combination of a Clinton campaign pseudo-biopic and a political satire taking inspiration from the reality-based, *cinéma vérité* of *Bob Roberts* and *The Candidate*, and the romantic, idealism of *The American President*. The film uses the 1992 election as a base of reality, indeed it is so close to Clinton's campaign that Myron Levine describes it as a 'docudrama.'⁵⁷ *Primary Colors* builds its plot, as Scott suggests, on 'simulacra' of real-world events and characters as a means to create a contemporary didactic tale, exposing the moral-bankruptcy of modern politics and the importance of evasion and obliqueness to the modern political campaign. At the same time, however, it distances itself from reality in the way in which it is filmed: Nichols avoids the stylistic approaches used in *Bob Roberts* choosing instead a more traditional, staged technique. As well as this, disembodied camera movements, slow motion and voice-overs lend the film a romantic and fantastic aura. Interestingly, these two generic approaches also have different sources in Hollywood cinema: the political satire influenced by the 1970s film *The Candidate*, and the idealistic and romantic bio-pic recalling such earlier films as *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939). As Thomas Doherty suggests, in the wider context of the 'president-on-film cycle', 'the main ideological divide is between the Capraesque optimism of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) and the Stoned paranoia of the executive branch twinpack, *JFK* and *Nixon*. Good father/bad father, heartwarming leader/bloodcurdling monster, hail to the chief/rail at the chief.'⁵⁸ In this way, *Primary Colors* a mythologised Clinton presidency in the 1990s that uses the conflict between the liberal idealism, an inheritance of the attributes of the Kennedy presidency and the anxieties regarding scandal and sexual impropriety and in turn positions the presidency in the context

of a 1990s preoccupation with spin and image management. In the next two case-studies I intend to examine films that concentrate on these two concepts from *Primary Colors* separately: the 1997 film *Wag the Dog* and the 1995 film *The American President*, films that, as I will argue, occupy these moral polar extremes of the Clinton presidency.

Wag the Dog (1997)

Wag the Dog, directed by Barry Levinson and released in 1997, has been described variously as a satire of Clinton and American politics in general; but is equally a satire of Hollywood and American press culture.⁵⁹ In this case study I examine how *Wag the Dog* relates to the Clinton presidency. In doing so, I continue my consideration of a commentary on the relationship between the media and the presidential candidate begun in *Primary Colors*. By analysing *Wag the Dog* in the context of several different but interconnected genres, I argue that the representation of the presidency through the film is one in which politics and ideology have become subsumed by image, in some ways the final destination of the new, image-led style of presidency that began with Kennedy. I would suggest that by combining the generic characteristics of the 1970s conspiracy thriller with a millennial anxiety concerning reality seen in 1990s films such as *The Truman Show* (1998), *Wag the Dog* performs an analysis of the Clinton presidency that focuses on the power of political stage-management and spin.

The film follows Conrad Brean, played by Robert DeNiro, a master spin-doctor nicknamed 'Mr Fix It', in his attempts to deflect the American news media's attention away from the story of the incumbent President's molestation of a 'Firefly girl' (a fictional variation on an American Camp-fire girl) during the final stages of an election campaign. To do this, he and presidential aide Winifred Ames, enlist the help of Stanley Motss, played by Dustin Hoffman, an extravagant, populist Hollywood producer. Together, they produce the appearance of an American-Albanian war complete with slogans, sound-bites and stirring anthems. The intention of this staged 'international crisis' is knocking the sexual misdemeanour story from

its perch in the headlines whilst simultaneously stirring the country into a patriotic, and consequently a pro-presidential, fervour. This plan proves vulnerable, however, as the CIA intervene to bring the 'war' to an early cease-fire. This crisis forces Brean and Motss to create a 'sequel' to the conflict by creating a fictional war hero, left behind in Albania and then liberated to make a triumphant and, in terms of the election, timely return to America. Unfortunately owing to a clerical error, their request for a soldier on 'special projects' is mistaken for a request for a soldier from a 'special prison', and consequently Brean and Motss take charge of an unstable, psychotic monster, jailed for raping a nun. After a plane crash, Brean, Motss, the soldier (Schumann), and Ames are stranded at a gas station in the middle of nowhere. Schumann takes too much interest in a girl at the gas station and is then shot dead by the girl's father. The film ends with a final, triumphant spin by Brean and Motss who turn Schumann's funeral into a grand, national occasion, in accordance with his heroic status. Motss, however, demands public recognition for his service to the President. This leads Brean to have him quietly killed.

Wag the Dog was made during a hiatus from *Sphere* (1998), a big budget, mainstream Science-Fiction film also directed by Levinson and starring Hoffman. The production of *Sphere* was temporarily suspended owing to 'budget concerns' allowing Levinson to direct *Wag the Dog* in the intervening period.⁶⁰ The latter was filmed in just 29 days with a budget of \$15 million, compared to \$100 million for *Sphere*.⁶¹ *Wag the Dog* purports to be based on Larry Beinhart's 1993 Book *American Hero* but in fact only the central idea, that of faking a war to boost the popularity of a President is used in the film.⁶² A direct adaptation by Hilary Henkin of the book was initially considered by Robert DeNiro's production company Tribeca Productions, sent to Levinson, but then rejected. Levinson then discussed the general themes of the book with playwright David Mamet who independently produced a script.⁶³ The differences between the book and the film are notable. The former is based firmly in the real world: a real conflict, the Gulf War, and a real President, George Bush, while the film presents a fictional president, a fictional war and, as I will examine later, is filmed with a

mixture of pseudo-documentary realism and self-parodying staginess. The similarities, however, lie in their mutual satirising of the Hollywood/Washington relationship and the American news media.

Wag the Dog and Clinton

In the documentary *From Hollywood to Washington and Back*, Barry Levinson states that the foundation for *Wag the Dog* was not as a satire of Clinton or his administration, but rather Hollywood and the media. Watching the film, this is evidently the case. The Clinton-like sex scandal is not integral to the plot and the film's presentation of its president is detached and distant. Unlike *Primary Colors*, where Travolta's performance is clearly an impersonation of Clinton, in *Wag the Dog*, the president is portrayed in a less direct way. The president in *Wag the Dog* seems designed to be a blank canvas both in terms of personality and politics. As in *All the President's Men* and *JFK*, he is absent, aside from occasional, marginal appearances on television sets and photographs, and one-sided conversations on telephones. Unlike those films, however, his absence is not designed to promote feelings of menace or to frame the president as a victim, but rather to distance *Wag the Dog* from real world politics. Unlike the source book *American Hero* where the president is directly identified as George Bush, Levinson and Mamet avoid any references to historical or incumbent presidents. The intention of this seems to be to focus the audience's attentions on the actions of Motss and Brean, satirising both the American news media and the encroachment of Hollywood into politics and to create a mythology of spin doctors in the same way that *All the President's Men* creates a mythology of journalism. Given the limited screen-time and similarly limited characterisation of the president and the focus on Brean and Motss in *Wag the Dog*, it is interesting that the film is so frequently perceived as a direct satire of Clinton and his administration. Ray Pratt, for example, describes the *Wag the Dog* president as a 'thinly disguised version of Bill Clinton,'⁶⁴ whilst critic Robin Dougherty, when reviewing the film, suggests that 'as soon as the project was announced, it was clear that the target of *Wag the Dog*'s satire was the Clinton administration.'⁶⁵ The question that arises from these

assessments of the target of *Wag the Dog*'s satire is clearly where Levinson went wrong. How did a film that apparently wasn't directed at a particular administration, and that presented such an ambiguous presidential figure, come to be so closely associated with Clinton?

For all of Levinson's claims that *Wag the Dog* is not targeted at Clinton, the choice of a sex scandal as the initiating event that brings Conrad Brean into the fray is the first answer to the above questions. Clinton was the president that brought sex into the White House: from the 1992 campaign onwards, anxieties regarding Clinton's sexual conduct were firmly entrenched in the media. Unlike Kennedy who successfully concealed his affairs, under the gaze of 24 hour news coverage Clinton was forced to respond to the allegations of sexual misconduct throughout his presidency. During his first campaign, Clinton was hounded by allegations of sexual misconduct involving Paula Jones and Gennifer Flowers. In the documentary released with the DVD of *Wag the Dog*, clips were shown from *The War Room*, a 1993 documentary directed by Chris Hegedus and D A Pennebaker filmed during Clinton's first presidential campaign and focusing on the attempts by Clinton's campaign aides to control the message and provide damage-limitation in the face of the scandals. It is clear from all this that if Levinson was not influenced directly by Clinton himself, then he was certainly driven partly by the social anxieties concerning Clinton's conduct as president. Crucially, the plot of *Wag the Dog* also owes much to the Clinton administration's reputed reliance on spin-doctors and careful use of the news media.

In his essay 'Hollywood goes to Washington', James Castonguay looks at the relationship between Clinton and *Wag the Dog*, but rather than simply charting the elements within *Wag the Dog* that suggest Clinton, he observes how the 'text' or myth of Clinton, the media and professional construction of the character of Clinton draws the elements of *Wag the Dog* towards him. Castonguay then proceeds to look at the post-production life of *Wag the Dog* as a general signifier of scandal and cover-up, shown in Yugoslavia and Iraq after US military action in those countries in the 1990s, as a didactic reminder of a darker, more manipulative

side to American democracy. According to Castonguay, before *Wag the Dog* was produced, Clinton was already in his words, ‘a scandalous cultural production,’⁶⁶ in other words, he suggests that the Clinton mythology was one which already had come to signify scandal. The purpose of his essay, therefore, was not to observe Clinton within the context of the text of *Wag the Dog*, but rather to ‘ground *Wag the Dog* within the context of the “Bill Clinton text”.’⁶⁷ Castonguay compiles a set of attributes of Clinton that he suggests are relevant to this exercise. He points to Clinton’s role in the context of the media reports of political scandal that rely to a certain extent on confusions between the media status of public figures such as politicians and celebrities such as film stars. He then notes how particular attributes of Clinton confuse this ‘star-politician conflation.’⁶⁸ These attributes, Castonguay suggests, include Clinton’s shifting relationship with both Hollywood and television, something I intend to unpack in detail later, and how this positions Clinton with regards to the concepts of high and low culture. Castonguay expands on this by highlighting the breadth of Clinton’s appeal. He points to how, at the start of his presidency, Clinton had been described variously in newspaper and magazine articles as America’s ‘first black president’ and even ‘first woman president’ owing to his broad multiethnic and transgender appeal.⁶⁹

In the end the shifting borders of race, gender, and class provoked by Bill Clinton, combined with his alignment with “lower” popular forms, genres, pleasures, and people, pose a serious threat to the political order of things and the rigid hierarchies of media culture.⁷⁰

The ability of Clinton to connect and empathise with such a broad range of social groups explains Clinton’s initial appeal, but also contributes towards the state of affairs that led to the concerns expressed in both *Wag the Dog* and *Primary Colors*. Castonguay refers to Clinton during his early presidency as a media consumer in contrast, for example, to Ronald Reagan who, as a result of his pre-presidential career, was always perceived as a media producer. In other words, like Nixon, Clinton was a fan of movie stars but Reagan *was* a movie star,⁷¹ in the words of one critic, ‘Ronald Reagan was an actor who knew he was president; Bill Clinton is a politician who became confused whether he is president or playing one in the movies.’⁷² Clinton’s strengths: his empathy and apparent intimacy with the public, combined

with his flaws: his perceived dependence on spin-doctors, as demonstrated in *The War Room*, his awkward relationship with the military, particularly his avoidance of the Vietnam draft, combined to eventually weaken his presidency. It can be argued that by expanding on Castonguay's view of Clinton's presidency as subordinate and feminised, *Wag the Dog*, while resisting an explicit impersonation of Clinton as in *Primary Colors*, can be interpreted as an equally direct satire of the realities of Clinton's presidency. To do this, I want to place *Wag the Dog* in a generic context and to specifically examine the representation of the media in the film.

***Wag the Dog* and Genre**

Wag the Dog lies chronologically in the middle of the 1990s' cycle of White House comedies that includes *Bob Roberts*, *Primary Colors*, *Dave* and *The American President*, but, as Castonguay and Michael Coyne note, also shares strong thematic links with a subset of the 1970s' conspiracy thriller genre including *Network* (1976), *Capricorn One* (1978) and *The China Syndrome* (1979).⁷³ Also, as Ray Pratt notes in his examination of conspiracy and paranoia in American film, *Wag the Dog* shares a generic link with films that are focused with an anxiety concerning the blurring of boundaries between reality and the media. In Pratt's words, films that have:

less to do with traditional bases of political anxiety than with public fears that movie images and techniques, carried over into politics and news, would now mean that seeing is no longer believing. "Reality" may simply be a construct.⁷⁴

Pratt places *Wag the Dog* in a list that includes films as diverse as *The Game* (1997), *The Truman Show* (1998), *Dark City* (1998), *The Matrix* (1999) and *Ed Tv* (1999). All of these 'millennium-end films' as Pratt calls them, are concerned with the construction and manipulation of reality through the media, as in the case of *The Truman Show*, through corporate America (*The Game*) or rogue computer networks (*The Matrix*). In his analysis of these films, Pratt demonstrates the existence of a recurring narrative of pre-millennial anxiety over what is reality and what is a simulation. As he puts it, 'the simulation by computers of

events, situations, or environments was so unnerving that it helped stimulate a more generalized paranoia and a pervasive cynicism.⁷⁵ This, as I will argue later in this case study, is evident in both *Wag the Dog*'s preoccupation with modern Hollywood production techniques such as the use of Computer Generated Imagery (CGI). When considering the relationships between *Wag the Dog* and the Clinton presidency, it is important to consider how the film balances fantasy with reality. I would suggest this balance is evident both internally within its narrative, but also externally through the film's marketing and the transformation of the film into what Castonguay refers to as a 'mobile signifier' of scandal and cover-up.⁷⁶ By examining these aspects of *Wag the Dog*, I would suggest that the use of the tropes of the 1990s political/social satire and the 1970s conspiracy genres, combined with pre-millennial anxieties over reality support the particular mythologizing of the Clinton presidency throughout the film.

It would be tempting given the time of *Wag the Dog*'s production and its satirical approach to political campaigning, to group the film with others such as *Primary Colors* and *Bob Roberts*. However as I have previously noted, Castonguay convincingly suggests in his rigorous deconstruction of *Wag the Dog*, Levinson's film is actually closer to what he describes as the genre of the 'media conspiracy film,' one that includes *Capricorn One* rather than the political/corporate satires of *Dr Strangelove* (1964), *The China Syndrome* and *Network*.⁷⁷ It is perhaps debatable that the 'media conspiracy film' may be called a genre of itself; Castonguay cites only one example (two including *Wag the Dog*) but seems to *exclude* most other 1970s conspiracy films. Arguably, however, with their combination of conspiratorial narratives and satirising of the media, these 1970s films may be seen as precursors to Pratt's millennium-end films such as *The Truman Show* and *Ed TV*. As such, comparing *Wag the Dog* with *Capricorn One* may be a useful exercise. Peter Hyams' 1978 film is concerned with the first manned trip to Mars. Just before the rocket is due to take off, the astronauts are kidnapped and taken to a remote, secret NASA complex in the middle of a desert. There, they are persuaded to pretend that they are still on the mission and to be filmed travelling and then

walking on Mars. The reason for this, as is revealed to them, is that the life support in the rocket was faulty, but the NASA officials were frightened that if this prevented the mission from occurring, the loss of money and the subsequent political fallout (the launch of the mission was designed to take place during elections) would have meant the cancellation of the space program. The film turns into a thriller when the rocket disintegrates on re-entry 'killing' the astronauts, at least in the media. The NASA officials are forced to balance the reality (the real, living astronauts in the hangar) with their constructed fantasy (the fictional, dead astronauts in the news) by executing the three men. This turns into a chase as the astronauts escape into the desert pursued both by anonymous helicopters (who murder two of them, leaving the mission commander) and a truth-seeking journalist who has stumbled on the story. The film ends at the funeral of the men as the journalist and the surviving astronaut run through the cemetery thus publicly reveal the conspiracy in front of the press.

The similarities and dissimilarities, thematic and structural, between *Capricorn One* and *Wag the Dog* are striking and are worth detailing. Both tell the story of faked media events told through news-cycles and designed for political purposes. In both films, the first half is set primarily in offices, windowless conference rooms and secret film studios, while the second half (coincidentally both separated by plane crashes) takes place in open, rural spaces in America. This setting is one we see in other films in the 1990s cycle of presidential films and in the later television series *The West Wing*. In *My Fellow Americans*, for example, two ex-Presidents are stranded in rural America following a plane crash and have to find their own way back to Washington, while in the two-part episode of *The West Wing* called '20 Hours in America', three White House staff members miss the President's motorcade and are forced to hitch-hike home. In these two examples, rural America is depicted in sharp contrast with Washington and the journeys of the characters are shown to have a redemptive power. While the two ex-Presidents and the White House staff feel isolated from the centre of power, they all find on their road-trip through the 'real' America, a moral message that they are able to bring back to Washington. In *Wag the Dog*, the isolation of the rural setting compared with

the enclosed Washington meeting rooms or Los Angeles mansions is shown to be threatening rather than morally redemptive. Indeed, the tensions between rural and urban locations seem to be a recurring motif in the conspiracy film: *The China Syndrome*, *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962) and *All the President's Men* share the same enclosed interiors, while *The Parallax View* has the same contrasting settings of offices and meeting rooms and open American landscapes. Interestingly, in *Capricorn One*, the move from interior to exterior is designed to raise the tension, the thriller aspect of the film, by exposing the astronauts to danger and pursuit. In *Wag the Dog*, the movement threatens the lead characters by releasing the unhinged, dangerous William Schumann, but also by isolating the spin-doctors from their means of communications and, therefore, limiting their power.

It is also interesting to compare the two constructed events in the films: in *Capricorn One*, the conspiracy is centred on Mars, in *Wag the Dog*, the faked war happens in Albania. Critics of *Wag the Dog* have suggested that the film relies upon a 'hypocritical system of credulity' in its treatment of the modern news press.⁷⁸ One problem critics have with the film is with the fact that the spin doctors, Brean and Motss, are able to fake a war in another country without 'CNN being there the next news cycle.'⁷⁹ I would argue, however, that it is this apparent naivety demonstrated by *Wag the Dog* that is a major aspect of its humour. When directly comparing *Wag the Dog* with *Capricorn One*, Mars is replaced with Albania: a place, at least for Americans, so distant that even CNN fails to cover it. Indeed, this remoteness becomes a recurring joke throughout the film, Albania is referred to as 'shifty' and remote and Motss and Brean are able to construct fictional customs, religious events, national dishes. Whereas in *Capricorn One*, the remoteness of the conspiracy was a nod to the urban legend of the faked 1969 moon landing, in *Wag the Dog* it acts as a satire on the insularity of America itself. Further differences between *Capricorn One* and *Wag the Dog* emphasise this satire. In the former film, the plot focuses on the victims of the conspiracy, on the astronauts kidnapped and then hunted, and on the journalist representing the American public. In the plot of *Wag the Dog*, however, the 'heroes' are the creators of the faked event. Both films close with a

funeral, but in *Capricorn One* it is of the dead heroic astronaut who turns out to be alive, whilst in *Wag the Dog*, it is of the dead heroic soldier who has already been revealed to us (although not to the public in the film) as a nun-raping monster.

Wag the Dog contains many of the narrative themes of *Capricorn One*, and indeed the conspiracy genre film in general, but these themes are depicted from an opposing perspective. Because the film concentrates on the process rather than the effect of the conspiracy, it is through the outrageousness of this process the satire is channelled. Films such as *Capricorn One*, *All the President's Men* and *The Parallax View* work as thrillers for the same reason that *Wag the Dog* works as a comedy; *Capricorn One* presents a situation, a faked space mission, and demonstrates how it could potentially happen in reality while similarly *Wag the Dog* presents an unlikely faked war between America and Albania.

It is clear that the balance between reality and fantasy is a crucial one when examining *Wag the Dog*. This balance manifests itself in the film's internal relationship between its two primary generic forms, the conspiracy film (or media conspiracy film) and the political satire. As I will argue in the next section, this balance is also important in understanding the connections between *Wag the Dog* and the Clinton administration.

***Wag the Dog*, Clinton and the Media**

Wag the Dog is a film that repeatedly references the television news media: it offers the viewer commentaries on the role of the media and on the relationship between Washington and Hollywood. Additionally, it is a film that depends upon, and manipulates, these relationships in its own production and marketing. It is interesting to note how these different representations of the media in *Wag the Dog* are interconnected and, furthermore, how they move towards, or are drawn towards, the subordinate, feminised, characterisation of Clinton referred to in the last section. In this section, I want to examine how *Wag the Dog*'s generic

status as a conspiracy thriller, with satire instead of thrills, and as a pre-millennial meditation on the nature of reality, can be developed through the film's relationship with Clinton.

Wag the Dog is filmed in a similar way to *All the President's Men* with its use of television screens and imagery. The first shots of the film are of the incumbent President's campaign advert; this then changes to CCTV footage showing the arrival of the film's main character Conrad Brean arriving at the White House. In the following scene, the White House spin-doctors are shown watching stolen tapes of the rival presidential candidate's advert. The presence of television sets or television imagery throughout the film is crucial (see Figure 15). One of Brean's repeated catchphrases is 'of course it happened – I saw it on television.' The medium of television is transformed into the battleground on which the characters are fighting, and into a symbol of power. Television sets appears everywhere, from a small handheld set to a giant screen in Times Square. After the plane crash, one of the few things still working is a handheld television set playing a speech from the presidential rival. In response to this, Ames throws it to the ground in disgust:

Ames: Fuck you!

Brean: Leave it alone. What did television do to you?

Ames: It destroyed the electoral process.

This exchange reveals a connection within the film between the technology of television and what the television displays, in other words between the medium and the message. Ames is initially angry at the speech that is being shown on the set and reacts to it by destroying the television. Brean perceives this as an attack on the television and television media themselves, which is then carried by Ames' response. The pervasiveness of screens has a similar effect throughout *Wag the Dog* as it has in *All the President's Men*, creating an atmosphere of surveillance and recalling the technology of bugging. In *All the President's Men*, as in *Wag the Dog*, the main political figure is shown only on television and never on film, distancing him from the main action. In *Wag the Dog*, however, the action is narrated from the perspectives of the conspirators, as opposed to the journalists seeking the truth. Whereas in *All the President's Men*, the televised images of Nixon are a sinister reminder throughout the

film of the source of the conspiracy, in *Wag the Dog*, they serve to perpetuate the characterisation of the incumbent president as a subordinate figure. Criticism after the film's release suggested that the absence of the president was a weakness:

It doesn't help that the president is conspicuously missing from this picture. We see a shoulder here and there. We see Ames or Motss taking a call from him. But instead of creating a mystique about the chief executive (and what would be the point of that in this movie?), this manoeuvre smacks of plain old absenteeism. What a waste of comic opportunity, to gauge the president's reactions to this crazy war scheme!⁸⁰

To counter this, I would argue that each time we see the president in *Wag the Dog*, he is following the actions proscribed by the spin-doctors. For example in one scene, he is shown lending his coat to an Albanian girl to shield her from the rain, while in the previous scene, Brean is shown trying to find an airbase where it is likely to be raining in order to stage the event. The president, and indeed his White House staff, in *Wag the Dog* are all stage managed and controlled by the spin-doctors. Their appearances on television distance them from the primary scenes of the spin-doctors, but rather than making them seem omniscient, like Nixon in *All the President's Men*, they become simply another media image to be directed. On the other side, however, *Wag the Dog* features occasional cuts to news footage showing the reaction of the television news stations to Brean's attempts at deception. These operate with a different purpose to the shots of the president in the film. Rather than showing the control of the spin-doctors, the news footage cuts act as a barometer of their success, hence Brean's repeated assertion 'it must be true – I saw it on television.' Just as the politicians rely on the spin-doctors, the spin-doctors rely on the news broadcasts. These tensions between groups of characters throughout *Wag the Dog* strengthen the film's connections with *All the President's Men* but while in the earlier film, the television set is placed at the edge of the frame, in *Wag the Dog* they are almost fetishistically pervasive.

This subordination of politics to imagery, as illustrated through the film's use of televisions, is an important connection between *Wag the Dog* and the Clinton administration. The makers of *Wag the Dog* cite *The War Room* as an inspiration for their film, presumably in its detailing

of the science of political/media manipulation; but the earlier documentary also shares the same trait of sidelining the major political figure in favour of the spin-doctors. In the documentary, Clinton is shown only briefly - most of the time through television clips from news programmes, conference speeches and the primary and presidential debates. This depiction has two contradictory effects. Firstly it emphasises Clinton's nationwide media presence and his intense workload, constantly travelling and seemingly everywhere, like Nixon in *All the President's Men* but without the sinister subtext. Secondly it suggests, as in *Wag the Dog*, subordination to the spin-doctors. Members of Clinton's campaign staff are shown controlling the imagery, while the image of Clinton is shown as the result of this work behind the scenes, controlled like a puppet. The depiction of the president in *Wag the Dog* can be seen as a result of this disempowerment of the president in the 1990s. The development of the media in politics shifted the emphasis from the *politics* of government to the *imagery* of government. This has meant that the presidential candidate must be a personality as well as a politician, and Clinton, as Castonguay notes, is an ideal example of this shift.

In a similar way, *Wag the Dog* depicts the trappings of Hollywood as another aspect of its satire. Robin Dougherty notes of *Wag the Dog*:

Using video clips, demonstrations of digital editing, and close-ups of musicians recording in a studio, it amply suggests the sophisticated range of manipulative techniques employed in the marriage between Hollywood and Washington.⁸¹

I would argue that in this statement, Dougherty summarises a crucial aspect of *Wag the Dog*. He agrees with Castonguay that the film fetishises digital effects, particularly in the scene where Motss creates a virtual Albanian village in a film studio and optically inserts elements such as fire, a bridge and an imperilled kitten for dramatic effect. What Dougherty does not mention are the effects this preoccupation with manipulative techniques had on the production of *Wag the Dog*.

The satire on Hollywood in *Wag the Dog* may be enhanced by the film's relationship with Hollywood itself. *Wag the Dog*'s small budget, tight filming schedule, and its status as a brief diversion from Levinson's big budget action film *Sphere*, and the film's use of these restrictions in its marketing, gives it the appearance of an independent film, a satirical production parodying Hollywood from the outside. Critic Karen Hershenson suggests that *Wag the Dog* is part of 'a continued melding of the indie and studio worlds.'⁸² As Castonguay points out, the independent appearance of the film is misleading as it commercially relies on the Hollywood cache of DeNiro and Hoffman, whilst financially it relies on New Line Cinema, owned, ironically like CNN, by Time-Warner.⁸³ The consequence of this is, in effect, a mainstream Hollywood film, masquerading as a satirical, independent film, satirising Hollywood. This illusion is made all the more evident when looking at scriptwriter David Mamet's influence on the film. Mamet's presence within the creative team behind *Wag the Dog*, a team that includes Levinson, DeNiro and Hoffman, similarly lends the film a cultural cachet as well as influencing the general form of the film. Mamet's career as a writer prior to *Wag the Dog* was distinguished. He won the Pulitzer Prize in Drama for *Glengarry Glen Ross*, was nominated for a Laurence Olivier Theatre Award and twice nominated for Tony Awards. His effect on the film itself is to move the 'smart, talky' script of the film to the forefront, making the dialogue the driving force behind the film's narrative.⁸⁴ The film is also punctuated with long, polemical speeches, particularly by Conrad Brean and much of the film's humour comes across in the form of puns and word-games. For example the repeated catchphrases throughout the film, the lyrics of Willie Nelson's songs, the use of words that just sound funny when spoken by particular characters such as 'calico kitten', even William H. Macy's spoonerism 'when the fit hits the shan.' The prioritising of words over visual images gives the film a slightly unnatural artifice that actually works against the realism, but supports the film's claim to high culture. The dual nature of *Wag the Dog* as both a low budget satire and a mainstream Hollywood star vehicle, therefore, gives a new perspective to Pratt's suggestion that such films presented audiences with 'heightened forms of "cinematic unreality".'⁸⁵ The conflict between reality and unreality in *Wag the Dog* is an important factor

both when considering its generic context and its relationship with Clinton. As I have previously noted, the outrageousness of the film's narrative has been criticised as somehow devaluing its satire. When considering *Wag the Dog* in the context of the conspiracy thriller, a genre where believability in the conspiracy elements is vital for the success of the thriller elements, it is clear that the film's humour does detract from the central critical message of the film. I would argue, however, that *Wag the Dog*'s true success as a political satire lies in two areas. Firstly the film's satire of the power of the media and Hollywood to control reality-based political events can be seen as a direct critique of the Clinton administration. The president in *Wag the Dog* is unseen and politically ambiguous and, unlike Jack Stanton, not explicitly aligned or compared with any particular president. However, his subordinate position with regards to the spin-doctors reflects Castonguay's assertion that Clinton had the appearance of a weakened feminised president, in his words, 'a damaged masculinity waiting for repair.'⁸⁶ Furthermore, the solution to the scandal in *Wag the Dog*, namely a war, can be seen as an attempt to distract the public from the scandal with a masculine action; again when related to Clinton, this form of action offers 'a regeneration of the president's image through hypermasculine militarism, violence and death.'⁸⁷ Secondly, I would argue that *Wag the Dog* does achieve a degree of reality, but that reality is due to the congruent timings of the release of the film with the Lewinsky scandal. When *Wag the Dog* was shown, critics compared the screen president with Clinton primarily because of the similarities between the scandal in *Wag the Dog* and the Lewinsky affair. These connections can only be seen as coincidental as the Lewinsky scandal broke after *Wag the Dog* was filmed, but after the film's release, they raised *Wag the Dog* to a different cultural level. In fact, after the Lewinsky scandal became a major news story, ticket sales reportedly only went up by seven percent consistent with an overall average rise in other film returns.⁸⁸ Not only was the film marketed on the back of the scandal, but the film ultimately became a synonym for the political manipulation of the media, in other words, '*Wag the Dog*'s intertextual ubiquity points to its privileged position with the hierarchy of media culture and among representations of scandal.'⁸⁹ This ascendance of *Wag the Dog* from low budget satire to a political signifier is arguably a direct result of the

Clinton presidency. Referring to David Mamet, actor William H. Macy states that he believed the writer did not intend to put a 'political agenda' in *Wag the Dog*, but rather offer a more general commentary on the corruption of human nature.⁹⁰ I would argue, however, that *Wag the Dog* is influenced in its making by important aspects of the modern presidency and by the Clinton administration itself, and furthermore owes much of its success to real-world events meeting the filmed events in the middle. *Wag the Dog's* satire seems much more believable when considering it in relation to the state of politics and the media in the remaining years of the Clinton presidency.

One critic described *Wag the Dog* as 'a possible blueprint for the final years of the scandal-plagued Clinton administration' and it is true that the film closely resembles the details of the Lewinsky affair and the rash of US military actions in the late 1990s.⁹¹ It is clear, however, that these resemblances are a coincidental act of life imitating art. The producers of *Wag the Dog* deny any intended connection with Clinton and his administration, and it is true that the principal target of the film's satire is not the White House, but rather the media and Hollywood. In addition to this, the president in the film is not, as in *Primary Colors*, an impersonation of Clinton. But this is not to say that the film is free from any potential connections to Clinton. The film's satire on Hollywood and the media is a product of a presidency where image and personality has overtaken politics and policies, and where the roles of the politician and the Hollywood celebrity are blurred. Clinton embodies all of these aspects and, as Castonguay notes, moves from media consumer to media star on the same path as moving from presidential candidate to president. In addition to this, the absence of the president in *Wag the Dog* suggests a redistribution of power in favour of the spin-doctors and the media and this treatment of the president replicates a similar subordination in the case of Clinton. Both these crises of power, crises that Castonguay reads in term of gender, are solved by repairing the image of the presidents through masculine action.

In terms of genre, *Wag the Dog* has been placed with the 1990s White House comedies, the 1970s conspiracy thriller genre, particularly *Capricorn One* and *All the President's Men* and 'millennium-end films' including *The Truman Show* and *The Game*. *Wag the Dog's* relationships with these genres expose different aspects of the film, but in all cases it is the film's balance of reality and fantasy that is the key factor. The film was criticised for the suspension of disbelief required to believe its primary plot, that of a faked war in Albania, while the film was lauded for its uncannily prescient use of a presidential sex scandal as the starting point for its narrative. It is clear, however, that the film cherry-picks certain elements from each genre, particularly those of the conspiracy film and the 'millennium-end films', in order to give different slants on the satire. From the conspiracy film it adopts a look: the dark, subterranean conference rooms of *The Parallax View* and the same, distanced, treatment of the presidential figure as in *All the President's Men*, and a plot, a media event faked in a similar way to the Mars landing in *Capricorn One*. The satire in the film comes across through the ways that *Wag the Dog* diverges from these 1970s genre texts. Unlike *Capricorn One*, the media event takes place on Earth and clearly within reach of CNN for verification. Unlike *The Parallax View*, the dark conference rooms are the domains of the heroes of *Wag the Dog*, the characters the audience follows and through whom the plot is told. Unlike *All the President's Men*, the absence of the president is not designed to give him a sinister, abstracted role, but rather to demonstrate his subservience and his debt to his spin-doctor image makers. These crucial aspects of the 1970s conspiracy thriller genre are twisted and undercut with the result that *Wag the Dog* becomes a conspiracy satire, the suspension of disbelief would be an issue if the film was purporting to be a thriller but instead, it uses the outrageousness of the Albania war and the farcical tribulations suffered by the spin-doctors as the vital ingredients for the film's humour. Similarly, *Wag the Dog* makes similar statements about the nature of constructed reality and the role of Hollywood in this construction to *The Truman Show* and even *The Matrix*. *Wag the Dog* shares generic traits with this cluster of 1990s films that offer a cautionary warning about the irreversible insinuation of Hollywood and television into life and the subsequent confusion it may cause between fantasy and reality. In effect, films such

as *The Truman Show* gave rise to the post-millennial wave of ‘reality television’ such as *Big Brother* (2000 – ongoing) and *Survivor* (2000 – ongoing). It is by connecting these issues and anxieties to politics and the White House that shapes *Wag the Dog* and makes the film unique. Despite claims by its makers that the film was not targeting a particular president, least of all Clinton, it could be argued that the whole 1990s genre is a consequence of a merging of reality and fantasy, of politics and entertainment and of presidents and media celebrities, that is, in part, an effect of the charisma and personality of Clinton.

***The American President* (1995)**

The American President released in 1995 is directed by Rob Reiner and written by Aaron Sorkin. The film stars Michael Douglas as President Andrew Shepherd, a liberal Democrat and a widower who tries to initiate a ‘normal’ relationship with environmental lobbyist Sydney Ellen Wade played by Annette Bening. Shepherd’s attempts to start a romantic relationship with Wade, come into conflict with his political relationship with her and he is forced to choose between making a policy decision to boost his flagging polling figures and making a personal decision to keep her. In this case study I want to examine the similarities between Shepherd and Clinton. By comparing *The American President* to other films in a 1990s cycle of romantic comedies, I want to analyse how it combines aspects of the genre with what Michael Coyne describes as the ‘nostalgic phase’ of the American political film.⁹² In short, I will look at how *The American President* uses (and manipulates) nostalgic political and romantic genres and reflects the anxieties and hopes for the Clinton presidency.

***The American President* and Genre**

The American President is part of a genre of films that Tamar Jeffers McDonald calls ‘neo-traditional romantic comedies.’⁹³ The films that occupy this genre may be seen as a reaction against the correlation of romance with sex in late 1960s films such as *The Graduate* (1967) and *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice* (1969). McDonald cites several key characteristics of these

films including a de-emphasising of sex and a 'mood of imprecise nostalgia'. This nostalgia manifests itself in referential nods towards earlier 'Golden Age' Hollywood films, primarily romantic dramas such as *An Affair to Remember* (1957), in *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993) and *Casablanca* (1942) in *When Harry Met Sally* (1989). An important aspect of a number of these neo-traditional romantic comedies is their connection between typically American city locations with romance as in *LA Story* (1991), *Sleepless in Seattle* and *When Harry Met Sally*. *When Harry Met Sally*, for example, is filmed across New York including Washington Square Park and Katz Deli, while *Sleepless in Seattle* uses the two principal locations of Seattle and New York to emphasise the distance between the objects of romance, and finally has its climax on the Empire State Building. In *The American President*, we see all of these elements including references to 1940s films and a connection between location and romance, though in the case of the 1994 film, rooms in the White House replace the skylines of the cities of Seattle, Los Angeles or New York. The romanticising of the White House also recalls scenes from *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* where the politically idealistic title character tours Washington landmarks. In *The American President*, these scenes have the effect of giving the conventions of the romantic genre a political edge.

This mixture of politics and romance can be seen as a combination of director Rob Reiner's previous films such as the nostalgic *Stand by Me* (1986) and, crucially, *When Harry Met Sally*, and the films of Frank Capra such as *Mr Smith goes to Washington* (1939) and *State of the Union* (1948). Indeed, Capra, a name that Pamela Ezell suggests has become synonymous with 'patriotism and old-fashioned idealism'⁹⁴ is referred to during the film in a scene when Wade first comes to the White House and tells a security guard she is 'trying to savour the Capraesque quality' of the moment triggering a cynical reaction from her more jaded fellow lobbyist. The moment demonstrates a clash again between the romance of Wade and the politics of her cynical colleague, a clash that becomes a recurring aspect of the film. *The American President* unifies the political and romantic idealism of Capra and Reiner's

previous films and juxtaposes it with the contemporary politics concerned with image, votes and ratings.

A third influence that affects the content of *The American President* and is worth singling out is the political background of writer Aaron Sorkin. *The American President* was the third film Sorkin wrote after the military courtroom drama *A Few Good Men* (1992) and the psychological thriller *Malice* (1993) and was the first to display an overt political perspective. Shepherd, with his progressive, liberal policies regarding gun control and the environment is clearly a Democrat along the ideological lines of George McGovern, for whom Sorkin campaigned during his election fight against Nixon.⁹⁵ What connects *The American President* to the rest of Sorkin's canon of work both on film and television is its dramatisation of contemporary political issues. For example, in *A Few Good Men* Tom Cruise plays a young military lawyer defending two soldiers accused of murder and comes up against Jack Nicholson's experienced, ruthless colonel. This antagonism between the traditional and the progressive is matched in *The American President* by the debates between Shepherd and the power-seeking Republican Bob Rumson. *The American President* embeds contemporary political anxieties within a traditional, old fashioned romantic genre narrative and this, as I will demonstrate, may be seen to stem from Sorkin's ideological motivation for writing the script. *The American President* has been described variously as 'a gutsy Capraesque fantasy', 'an old fashioned star vehicle' and 'a \$63 million counterculture film.'⁹⁶ I plan to demonstrate how these at times opposing viewpoints can be manifested in a single film and how, in turn, the film connects with the Clinton presidency. The film can be read simultaneously as a traditional romantic comedy: a continuation of the late 1980s and 1990s genre, with a nod towards the classic Hollywood films of Capra and also towards a more independent and contemporary political commentary on Clinton politics.

The film was originally developed in 1989 when Robert Redford brought Reiner a script he had been involved with called *The President Elopes*. The original script for *The President*

Elopes was, as Reiner describes it, a 1930s or 1940s kind of screwball, romantic comedy which, after directing *When Harry Met Sally* in 1989, Reiner was reluctant to commit to. Reiner returned to the project after 1992's *A Few Good Men* which he directed from an Aaron Sorkin script. Sorkin was brought in to redevelop the concept of a comedy set in the White House and wrote from scratch a script that encapsulated the balance of romance and politics and recalled Frank Capra's idealistic comedies but with a contemporary Clinton-like political edge. Ironically, considering his previous involvement with films such as *All the President's Men* and *The Candidate* in the 1970s, Redford was disenchanted by Sorkin's move away from pure romantic comedy towards political reality in his script and withdrew. The vacuum in the casting of the lead role left by Redford was quickly occupied by Douglas, however.⁹⁷

Michael Douglas' role in *The American President* came after nearly a decade of appearing in films in which he plays, or is associated with, sex, greed and anger. Films such as *Fatal Attraction* (1987), *Wall Street* (1987), *Basic Instinct* (1992) and *Falling Down* (1993) show Douglas starring as characters who are criminal, sexual, avaricious, and psychologically flawed. Initially, this string of films, in which he seems to be working his way through the seven deadly sins, makes Douglas an unlikely choice for the role of Shepherd. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, he is associated with the negative aspects of the baby-boomer generation; characters that embody Douglas's *Wall Street* character Gordon Gekko's dictum that 'greed is good'. This is made clearer when comparing the casting of Douglas and his polysemy with that of Robert Redford, the original actor intended for the role. Redford's polysemy prior to the filming of *The American President* was ideal for the role of Shepherd, both heroic and liberal with films such as *The Candidate*, *All the President's Men* and *Brubaker* (1980) all reflecting Redford's pro-Democratic political opinions. Judging by his polysemy, Redford is a much closer match to the star in a film that combines romantic comedy genre with liberal politics. Interestingly, according to Sorkin, Redford declined the role because of his similarity with the political stances of Shepherd, apparently the actor felt that 'people would think that the movie was Robert Redford lecturing the country.'⁹⁸ When considering Douglas' casting in

The American President after the film's release, reviews tended to concentrate on his previous, darker roles. Douglas himself suggests that while Shepherd's politics were not dissimilar to his, his notoriety at the time for playing 'morally compromised, or even downright corrupt, characters' distanced him from the character of Shepherd enough to avoid the blurring of personalities that Redford was concerned with.⁹⁹ A final consequence of Douglas's polysemy is revealed in reviews of *The American President*. Not only is the role of Shepherd read as a departure for Douglas, it is also a form of *rehabilitation* after the excesses of his earlier roles. Several interviews with Douglas point to how he sees Shepherd as a new and positive direction, "getting a laugh is real nice. I didn't have to struggle with the moral dilemmas that compromised some of my earlier characters."¹⁰⁰

I believe Douglas' presence in *The American President* has two significant effects, therefore. Firstly the against-type casting of him rather than a more obvious choice such as Redford as the unambiguously moral Shepherd goes some way to defusing Blake's accusation that the casting of a Hollywood star conflicts with the intimacy and anti-celebrity that is so crucial in the narrative of the film. The fact that the audience had very little expectation as to how Douglas would play a romantic lead of the nature of Shepherd countered this potential for conflict by making Douglas almost a fresh face in the role. Secondly, Douglas' edgy polysemy prior to *The American President* means that the role of Shepherd becomes more than just a romantic lead, it becomes an apologia for the corrupt excesses of his previous roles such as Gordon Gekko. In Douglas' words, he had been 'the Prince of Darkness for a long time'¹⁰¹ and this negativity had also stretched into his personal life with accusations of him being a sex-addict and the separation, and later divorce from his wife Diandra. In fact, *The American President* and the role of Shepherd offer Douglas a degree of character reconstruction that Clinton would later require after his admission of the Lewinsky affair. This is made clearer when considering Douglas' role prior to *The American President*. In *Disclosure* (1994) he plays Tom Sanders, an executive with a computer firm and a family man, who is sexually harassed at work by a female senior colleague who accuses him of

sexually harassing her in what turns out to be a complex corporate power-game. Sanders is an innocent, fallible man, passed over for promotion and supported throughout the film by two strong female characters, his attorney and his wife, also a lawyer. A principal theme of the film is the confusion between corporate and sexual power and Douglas's character acts as the emasculated, disempowered victim who suffers to support this theme. In this way, the film may be seen as the bridgehead in Douglas's polysemy between his greedy, sexually voracious roles in the 1980s films *Wall Street* and *Basic Instinct* and the romantic, new-man 1990s role of Shepherd. In terms of the romantic rehabilitation of Douglas described above, the part of Tom Sanders may be described as a cleansing atonement. This is clearest when examining the trajectory of the character in *Disclosure* from naïve, relatively innocent male, to the last shot of the film of Sanders as a family man receiving an email from his children. The role of Sanders, and *Disclosure*'s place in Douglas's polysemy, effectively paves the way for the role of Shepherd by stripping back the residue left by his sexually charged, highly masculine portrayal of characters in films in the 1980s, and then reconstructing him as a romantic family man. Douglas's performance in *The American President* compared with his earlier work is also notable. Our first sight of Douglas in *Disclosure* for example is a shambolic one – his character Sanders is late for work, in a rush with toothpaste staining his tie and, crucially, being driven by his wife. In contrast, our first sight of Shepherd is of a highly controlled man. Douglas, as Shepherd walks through the corridors of the West Wing, leading his secretary whilst catching up on the business of the day. They are then joined by Lewis Rothschild played by Michael J Fox, a diminutive actor, which means Douglas stands a head taller than those around him. Shepherd, unlike Sanders, is in control, he is prepared for work, on time and well groomed. It is these signs of control that convinces the audience that Douglas is the President, a position in which it is necessary to remain focused on multiple jobs. In many of Douglas's previous roles, his characters are based on their inability to achieve this control: in *Disclosure* he is a naïve businessman out of his depth; in *Falling Down* he is a commuter failing to control his anger; in *Basic Instinct* he plays an alcoholic; in *Wall Street* he plays a man whose greed run out of control. These flaws inform and shape the characters, in some

cases providing the foundations for the plots of the films. In *The American President*, Douglas' challenge is to present a character devoid of any flaws.

The American President is a White House comedy a cycle of films made in the 1990s including *Dave* and *My Fellow Americans*. Coyne cites the film as part of a wider nostalgic phase in the political film, noting that the 1990s cycle of White House comedies all appear to comment to varying degrees on the Clinton and Kennedy presidencies.¹⁰² Coupled with its contemporary, political setting, *The American President* is a neo-traditional romantic comedy along the lines of Reiner's earlier film *When Harry Met Sally* with a 'Golden Age' influence apparent in references to the films of Frank Capra. Clearly, *The American President* shares a number of features with other films from the 1990s set in the White House. All display the same preoccupation with the idea of spectatorship and exposure; in the case of *Dave* in which an immoral President suffers a stroke and is temporarily replaced by an idealistic double, it is the innocence of the title character that exposes cynicism and corruption of the professional politician. David Haven Blake suggests in his article 'Hollywood, Impersonation and Presidential Celebrity,' the trope of an impersonated president is a crucial one in the 1990s cycle. This occurs most extensively in *Dave* where the whole plot revolves around the concept of mistaken identity. It also occurs in *The American President* when Shepherd is on the telephone to Wade who refuses to believe he is who he claims to be; instead she accuses him of being a friend impersonating the president. The impersonation of the president in this way suggests a crisis of identity and, crucially, a narrowing of the split between the office and the holder of the presidency, as Blake suggests:

All of these films join *The American President* in reflecting on the president as a cultural icon rather than as an expression of political agency. All represent the shrinking gap between the citizen and the spectator, the leader and the star, and politics and entertainment.¹⁰³

This 'shrinking gap' extends to a level beyond the narrative of the film with the casting of Jack Lemmon and James Garner in *My Fellow Americans*, Kevin Kline (twice) in *Dave* and Michael Douglas in *The American President*. In short, the choice of a *Hollywood* personality

as the leading actor in these films reinforces the confusion between the presidential personality and the presidential office, an important theme in many White House comedies, including *The American President*.

The generic influences on *The American President* pull the film in two directions: towards the 1940s through constructed nostalgia of the neo-traditional romantic comedy, and towards the 1990s through the contemporary spin-doctoring and politics. This offers an interesting take on both the romantic comedy and the White House comedy genres. In addition, I believe the film also latches on to contemporary aspects of American politics, containing a strong connection to the Clinton presidency. In the next section, I want to examine how *The American President* reacts to the Clinton presidency in the ways it expresses these generic characteristics.

The American President and Clinton

The connections between *The American President* and Clinton are strong. The film was made with Clinton's approval and preparations for the film were helped by the Clinton administration. Before filming started, Reiner spent two days shadowing Clinton around the West Wing, whilst both Bening and Douglas spent time with the president and the film itself appears to reward Clinton for his involvement.¹⁰⁴ Shepherd is clearly modelled, at least superficially, on Clinton. Like Clinton, Shepherd has a non-military (non-Vietnam), academic background and supports and pushes for gun control. As Jason Vest summarises, the political intrusion into Shepherd's personal affairs has parallels with Clinton, despite the fact that *The American President* was filmed and released before the Lewinsky scandal:

Shepherd finds the attention to his personal life objectionable, invasive and disruptive – and similar to Clinton's, who disliked the excessive public interest that accompanied his alleged extramarital affairs during both terms in office. The scandal surrounding Clinton's involvement with White House intern Monica Lewinsky, the resulting investigation by independent counsel Kenneth Starr, and the subsequent impeachment proceedings had not yet occurred when Sorkin wrote *The American President*, but the parallels between Shepherd's and Clinton's personal lives intruding upon their public roles are unmistakable.¹⁰⁵

By the time of the production of *The American President*, Clinton had already gained a reputation for alleged sex scandals. The film mirrors the invasiveness of the media during the Clinton presidency and also mirrors the negativity. The issues that arise when Shepherd's personal relationship with Wade threatens to influence his politics are crucial to the plot of the film. I would argue, however, that given the prominence of the romantic plot in *The American President*, in the case of Shepherd, it is not a case of the private life intruding into the public role as Vest suggests, it is rather Shepherd's public role, his presidency, that is intruding into his personal life. The anxiety that Shepherd and Wade have with the fact that he is president gives the film many of its comedic and dramatic moments. For example, Shepherd has problems buying flowers for Wade, but has no problem finding her telephone number with the help of the CIA, similarly, Shepherd and Wade's first date is prematurely halted when Shepherd has to bomb Libya. As reviewer John Wrathall suggests, this tension between the normality of the relationship and abnormality of the presidency is a reversal of the situation faced by Smith in Frank Capra's *Mr Smith Goes to Washington*:

whereas Capra's Mr Smith was a regular guy catapulted into a unique situation when he went to Washington, Andrew Shepherd – in a reversal that provides this very funny film with its best situations – is a unique guy (leader of the free world) trying to behave like a regular Mr Smith.¹⁰⁶

This distinction is also where the film diverges from the reality of Clinton. Clinton's dilemma was maintaining his presidential character whilst his rivals and the media were undermining his personal character. The difference between Shepherd and Clinton is clearly manifested in the nature of the relationships; the former a widower, the latter an adulterer. Shepherd's dates with Wade are on the whole non-covert and in the public arena. Their first date for example is a state dinner for the French president and it is the extravagant, public nature of the occasion, in contrast to the more normal intimate privacy, that provides the humour of the scenes. Clinton's affairs, by contrast, are just that – affairs. The allegations surrounding Clinton's infidelities, beyond the obvious immorality of extra-marital affairs, were that they were conducted in private and actively concealed. In one scene in *The American President* during a conversation with Shepherd about how a president can have a private relationship, chief of

staff A.J. MacInerney offers to have a girl smuggled in to the private residence, implying a prostitute and recalling similar rumours surrounding John F. Kennedy's time in office. Shepherd reacts with moral outrage leading to a pivotal moment in the film where he loses his temper with MacInerney, shouting a very un-presidential, but very emotional and human 'fuck you'. The difference between Clinton's and Shepherd's approaches to relationships, therefore, lies in the different ways in which they conduct them, the former in private, the latter in the open, and in their different relationship states, Shepherd is a widower, Clinton is a married adulterer. *The American President* is, in a sense, an attempt to defuse the excesses and immoralities of the Clinton presidency. Despite superficial similarities to Clinton, Shepherd's romantic situation and his way of tackling that situation sets him apart from the real president. As Thomas Doherty points out, *The American President* is:

a Hollywood liberal fantasy of what Bill Clinton would be like if he were only less like Bill Clinton and more like Michael Douglas – a romantic dude with great pickup lines, no cumbersome First Lady to crimp his style, an adorable daughter, and a kamikaze devotion to left-wing causes. Tender and empathetic even when ordering air strikes, he is sensitive but strong, of sturdy principle and good humor, as dexterous at a press conference as on the dance floor.¹⁰⁷

The background and preparation to *The American President* indicate that the film intends to be pro-Clinton, but the subtle, and unsubtle, differences between Shepherd and Clinton give the film, as Doherty suggests, a 'what if' feel, with Shepherd as a perfected version of Clinton, implicitly pointing to the fact that Clinton is far from perfect in the first place. In the following consideration, I want to bring to the fore two aspects of this presentation. Firstly, I want to examine the source of this 'liberal fantasy' in a combination of disappointment and anxiety about certain aspects of the Clinton presidency. Secondly, I want to examine the process and result of *The American President's* construction of a Clinton myth, its interpretation of the personal/political divide in American politics, the notion of presidential celebrity and the nature and function of the romance elements within the film.

In the conclusion to his retrospective of the Clinton years, Joe Klein suggests that Clinton's ultimate legacy was a positive and productive one. However, he also sums up the public

attitude to the presidency as being that of disappointment, one strengthened by contrasts between the initial hope of his election and his subsequent achievements. In Klein's words:

Clinton appeared to be promising greater things than he could deliver – in fact, nothing less than a political renaissance, a return to the days when public affairs seemed central to the life of the republic, when government was seen as a moral force, when politicians were assumed to be wise rather than corrupt.¹⁰⁸

Clinton's presidency was perceived in the end as a triumph of symbolism and political spin over 'true leadership'¹⁰⁹ and *The American President* addresses many of these perceptions. When considering Klein's assessment above, it is clear that the issues he outlines, wisdom and morality versus corruption, are crucial to both the political message and the romantic framing of *The American President*. A consequence of this is that *The American President* replicates key attributes of the Clinton presidency such as youth, power and liberal idealism, that in real life were symptomatic of the disappointment with Clinton after the Lewinsky scandal, but gives them a positive slant, in essence, the film attempts to *defuse* particular anxieties regarding the Clinton presidency.

The presentation of youth in *The American President* goes beyond simply depicting a youthful (in comparison with Reagan or George H. W. Bush) president. Michael Douglas is actually two years older than Bill Clinton, and, interestingly, three years older than the actor playing his political rival in *The American President*, Richard Dreyfuss. Both Douglas and Clinton were born in the baby boom following the Second World War, but I would argue that the use of youth is more ingrained in the fabric of the film, and also more subtle than just the age of the leading actor. The imagery of youth manifests itself in several ways in *The American President*. The White House scenes are infused with a sense of youth and youthful energy, particularly when contrasted with scenes set in the offices of Bob Rumson, Shepherd's Republican rival. The White House scenes are concerned with movement: the first scene of the film is a long, continuous shot of Shepherd walking to his office through the corridors of the White House, later to become familiar in Aaron Sorkin's television series *The West Wing*. Shepherd is shown in motion organizing his day. In contrast to this kinetic

presentation, the scenes set within the Republican offices are static the characters frequently being shown sitting, drinking and smoking; a scene that suggests an after-dinner gathering of men, which implicitly raises themes of lethargy and age. The presence of Michael J. Fox as a policy advisor to Shepherd also enhances the appearance of faded youth as Fox is famous for playing teenagers in films such as the *Back to the Future* trilogy (1985, 1989 and 1990) and *Teen Wolf* (1985) and in the television series *Family Ties* (1982-9) despite having been born in 1961. The greatest injection of youth into the Shepherd White House, however, must surely be the romance itself. Wade and Shepherd's affair is played like a teenage relationship, complete with first kiss, first date and so on. The reasons for this are explained in the film; that Shepherd, having recently been widowed like Sam Baldwin in *Sleepless in Seattle*, is out of practice with romance, but the effect is to bring a naive freshness to the situation. Indeed, the contrast between naivety shown by Shepherd in his pursuit of Wade and the assured, experienced way he deals with the political problems throughout the film is an important source of much of the humour. The relative youth of Clinton (born 1946), compared with his presidential predecessors George H. W. Bush (born 1924) and Ronald Reagan (born 1911) was initially his attraction. The idea of Clinton embodying the first of the baby-boomer generation coming to power invited parallels with John F. Kennedy, the first president to be born in the twentieth century. Indeed, Clinton's awareness of this may be found when comparing the two president's inauguration speeches, Clinton's line:

Today, a generation raised in the shadows of the Cold War assumes new responsibilities in a world warmed by the sunshine of freedom but threatened still by ancient hatreds and new plagues.¹¹⁰

may be compared with Kennedy's:

Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans—born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage—and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this Nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world.¹¹¹

Both presidents emphasise the newness of their administrations claiming their election victories as examples of a positive inheritance. In both cases, however, this youth and the

vitality that comes with it, ultimately causes anxiety. Both Clinton and Kennedy were rumoured to be adulterous whilst in power. In Kennedy's case, these rumours came for the most part posthumously, but in Clinton's case, his alleged and admitted affairs dogged his governorship and presidency. The real national anxiety concerning Clinton's presidency, however, came from a wider aspect of his personality of which his youth was only a part. Clinton's appeal, as rigorously parodied in *Primary Colors*, was his ability to relate to the population of America. His youth separated him from his immediate predecessors and associated him instead with Kennedy, but it was his ability to empathise and emotionally connect, his physical charisma, that played a crucial role in his defeat of George H. W. Bush in the 1992 presidential election. Throughout the political career of Clinton this attribute crossed back and forth between being positive and negative. In other words, Clinton's personality was always on the edge of being overly intimate and too emotionally connected, as the Lewinsky affair revealed. In this way, the attribute that gave Clinton the greatest advantage over the remote, emotionally uncomfortable George H. W. Bush, in the end became his biggest problem.

Shepherd also has a thematic link with Kennedy, inheriting the energy and apparent youth. This is enhanced by his role as a father of a young girl, not unlike Chelsea Clinton, contrasting with the grandfatherly figures of Reagan and George Bush. Unlike Kennedy and Clinton, however, Shepherd's domestic life is given a twist that leaves him free to conduct a relationship with Wade - he is made a widower: and the lack of a first lady makes Sorkin's romanticising of Shepherd possible. This is a romantic comedy that asks the question: Can the president date, and, if so, do voters have a say in whom he dates?'¹¹² There are also differences between Clinton and Shepherd in the ways in which the relationships are conducted. With Clinton, a primary anxiety seems to be the combination of the affairs he had with the political power he held. This mixture of sex and power is manifested with the frequent concerns over where and when Clinton had his encounters, and the roles of the women he had affairs with. In the case of Shepherd, it is the fact that he goes out of his way to

avoid mixing his presidential role with his personal, romantic life that comes close to jeopardizing his relationship and, interestingly, all Shepherd and Wade's sexual encounters, their first kiss, the first time they sleep together, all take place away from the West Wing and, crucially, the Oval Office, either in the president's residence or in the East Wing. The generic characteristics of the neo-traditional romantic comedy as outlined by Tamar Jeffers McDonald are crucial in understanding how *The American President* distances Shepherd from Clinton. The film, like *Sleepless in Seattle* and *When Harry Met Sally* favours romance over sex, and like those previous films, *The American President* also has a romanticised sense of place. The romantic scenes between Shepherd and Wade take place throughout the East and West Wing of the White House: the Roosevelt Room, the Oval Office, the President's residence, the China Room and the State Dining Room. All become versions of the areas of the cities such as Washington Square Park and the roof of the Empire State Building in the neo-traditional romantic comedies. After the Lewinsky scandal, a major question along with when Clinton and Lewinsky had their encounters, was where. The idea that Clinton had sexual relations with Lewinsky within the Oval Office, the physical and symbolic location of presidential power became a major source of anxiety. These scenes, including Wade and Shepherd's first date in the State Dining Room and their first kiss in the China Room, anticipate these anxieties by reclaiming the romantic White House.

The predatory nature of the republican investigation into Clinton, described in 1998 as a 'vast right-wing conspiracy' by Hillary Clinton is also prefigured in *The American President*.¹¹³ From the opening titles the political position of the film is made clear. The opening sequence is a montage of images of earlier presidents and shots of the American flag, set to stirring, orchestrated music. It is the choice of which presidents appear, and which do not, that makes the sequence interesting: the latest president shown is Lyndon Johnson, the makers of the film deciding to draw the line at 1965 and thus exorcising Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan and George Bush. The bias towards the contemporary Democratic party continues within the film: Shepherd's rival for the presidency, Bob Rumson, has been described as a combination of

‘the dour countenance’ of Bob Dole and the ‘Pillsbury Dough Boy looks’ of Newt Gingrich.¹¹⁴ Rumson is played as the ultimate, right-wing, aggressive Republican. The stereotypical, real-world conflict between the traditions of the Republicans and the iconoclasm of the Democrats is portrayed in *The American President* but is again defused by its framing. For example, Shepherd and Wade’s second date takes place within the White House residence and, in contrast with their first date, is a domestic occasion, allowing Wade to meet, and be approved of by, Shepherd’s daughter. The domesticity of the date is emphasised in several ways, most obviously in the ways it contrasts with the state dinner scenes. The scene opens with Wade joining an informal Shepherd and his daughter on ‘meat-loaf night’ and then cuts to a formal dinner party attended by Rumson and his Republican colleagues. Rumson and his friends (all male) are shown in a back room at the party drinking and smoking cigars, discussing Shepherd’s appeal and ways of opposing him at the forthcoming election (see Figure 16). The film then returns to the White House and shows Shepherd, his daughter and Wade also after dinner, playing Scrabble and discussing Shepherd’s late wife, and his daughter’s recent experiences at school. This sequence of scenes juxtaposes the domesticity of the date with the formality of the Republican dinner party. Rumson is shown as old-fashioned both in his political plotting and in the setting of his portion of the sequence. Within the scenes, the Republicans are visually associated with leather furniture, cigars and whisky; the setting suggests a male political club rather than a home. In contrast, the setting of the White House ‘meat loaf’ night associates the president with informality and family, the warmth of the setting matched by the inviting open fire behind Shepherd. The effect of these scenes, beyond the clear contrasting of Shepherd and Rumson, is ironically to devalue Rumson’s strategy to beat Shepherd. Rumson decides that the time has come to attack Shepherd on the basis of character, in other words through his personal life, now he has a ‘girlfriend’. The revelation of Shepherd’s personal life in this very domestic scene, by contrast, shows that he not only has a new girlfriend, but also a new family. It is also this scene that emphatically moves Shepherd’s love affair beyond those alleged of Clinton. As critic Frank Rich suggests not only does *The American President* kill

off the Hillary Clinton character by presenting Shepherd as a widower, it cements this exorcism by showing the Chelsea Clinton character, Shepherd's daughter, actively encouraging her father to move on and to form a new relationship.¹¹⁵ Another way of considering this situation, that offers an alternative to Rich's view, is to see Wade as a defused Hillary Clinton in the same way that Shepherd is a defused Bill Clinton. Wade and Hillary Clinton share similarities both physical and in their relationships, with Shepherd and Clinton. Wade's political role as professional lobbyist causes problems for her relationship with Shepherd in terms of conflict of interest thus raising the question of where the romance ends and the politics begins. These conflicts reflect a similar anxiety over the role of Hillary Clinton before and after the election of her husband. Her vocalising of liberal political positions during and after the campaign caused some journalists to suggest that she was closer to being Clinton's running mate than his chosen Vice Presidential candidate Al Gore.¹¹⁶

The unusually empowered status of Hillary Clinton as First Lady was variously described as both an act of old-fashioned nepotism and as an example of modern feminism, the latter by Clinton's adversaries, the former by his supporters.¹¹⁷ Wade shares the same political status as Hillary Clinton, and her involvement with the President inspires a similar media and Republican mistrust. The trajectory of Wade and Shepherd's relationship transforms her character making it softer and more maternal. By the time of the meat-loaf night, Wade is demonstrating not only her potential as a political prop for Shepherd as a First Lady, but also as a potential mother to Shepherd's daughter. Hillary Clinton's maternal nature, by contrast, seems politicised with Chelsea Clinton being used, particularly during Clinton's first campaign, as a demonstration of the strength of the Clinton family. Finally, media reaction to Hillary Clinton in the months following her husband's election seem to have concentrated not merely on how extensive her political involvement and influence would be, but also from where in the White House it would come. Against tradition, Hillary Clinton was given office space in the West Wing of the White House, the political centre, rather than the East Wing, the social centre.¹¹⁸ Speculations about, and finally the revelation of where, Hillary Clinton's

office would be seem to have been a particular preoccupation of the media. For example, writing in the *New York Times*, Gwen Ifill notes that Hillary Clinton's office, being located only a staircase away from the Oval Office, only served to perpetuate questions regarding the scope of her power and influence over Clinton. In this way, Hillary Clinton's position of power 'beside, rather than behind, the throne' takes on a physical as well as a metaphorical suggestion.¹¹⁹ Ultimately, this focus on the physical layout of the White House, and particularly anxieties over the mixing of the social and political from their traditional locations in the West and East Wings, is represented in *The American President* through the film's romanticising of the White House and is emblematic of the two opposing narrative forces throughout the film of politics and romance. As *The American President* suggests, the physical geography of the White House is significant in the way the presidency is perceived. Throughout the Clinton presidency, the question of where in the White House certain events occurred, be they Hillary Clinton undertaking, and some would say extending, the duties of the First Lady or, later, Bill Clinton conducting an affair with Monica Lewinsky, became a major obsession of the media. In *The American President* this preoccupation with location is extended to occupy the two generic influences on the film: the West and East Wings therefore become physical abstractions for the two narratives of politics and romance.

Shepherd's relationship with Wade has the effect of insulating the president's character from Rumson's attacks by being both domesticated and, subsequently normalised within the film and by being distanced from any parallels with the Clinton administration. So in the making of *The American President* and in the construction of the idealised character of Andrew Shepherd, Reiner and Sorkin represent the conflicts between the Republicans and Democrats. In particular, they engage in those debates during the Clinton administration that involved the president's character and personal life as opposed to his politics. At the same time, whilst reflecting the preoccupations of the Clinton presidency, they distance their president from Clinton by making him a widower, and by showing his daughter giving her blessing to the president's new relationship, effectively removing any moral obstacles between Shepherd and

Wade. There are conflicts in *The American President*, however, and Shepherd and Wade's relationship is, throughout the film, an uncertain one. Despite the claims of the characters such as Rumson and unlike the real world parallels of Clinton's affairs the conflicts are not focused on character flaws or personal lapses of morality, but rather on the unstable collision of the personal and the political. Wade is a professional political operative whose job involves trying to influence Shepherd's policies. The problems in Shepherd and Wade's relationship come from these conflicts of interests, from the difficulties that arise when the private and political worlds come together. In the next section, I want to examine more closely how *The American President* represents these difficulties. I want to look at how the collision between the political and the private is representative of the Clinton administration, and ultimately how aspects of *The American President* might work against the intended solutions to the difficulties as expressed throughout the film.

As I have noted, the plot of *The American President* is focused on the conflict between politics and romance. Throughout the film, both the comedy and drama find their origins in this conflict. Shepherd and Wade's relationship is threatened when Shepherd breaks a political promise and Wade becomes disillusioned with him. Furthermore, a repeated theme of the film is the comedic result of Shepherd's political power acting as an obstacle in his attempts to romance Wade. As Ian Scott notes *The American President*:

works perfectly on the two most crucial levels of 1990s' politics: it is an endearing homage to the 1930s' and 1940s' screwball comedic tradition and incorporates both Capra references and a clip of the Spencer Tracy/Katherine Hepburn vehicle *Adams Rib* for good measure; and it is also a virtuoso endorsement of personal character remaining central to political success.¹²⁰

Throughout the film, Shepherd is pulled in two directions: towards Wade and romance despite politics, and towards fighting Rumson and working with his staff despite his romance. His solution to these two influences initially is to try and retain his privacy by simply not commenting, refusing to enter a debate either about Wade or about his own character. The climax of the film is a speech in which Shepherd, realising that his media silence runs the risk of his losing both Wade and the presidency, makes a statement that, as Vest suggests, causes

him 'to stake a political position (pro-environment, pro-gun control, anticrime) from within his status as a man in love with Wade.'¹²¹ As Scott suggests, and as this scene demonstrates, Shepherd's solution to being pulled in different directions is to embrace both, to close the gap between the political office of the president and the character and personal life of the man who occupies that office. Tellingly, it is this gap which became a crucial issue during the 'metastasizing'¹²² Whitewater investigation in which independent counsel Kenneth Starr, initially recruited to probe alleged political misdemeanours during Clinton's governorship, expanded his investigation to include Clinton's relationships with Paula Jones and, later, Monica Lewinsky. Like Rumson, Starr uses the president's personal life as a springboard to attack his political character: Rumson connects Wade with flag burning and more wide-ranging liberal activism. The difference between Clinton and Shepherd is that *The American President* tries to show how in fact Rumson and Starr are correct – being a president *is* about character and personality:

instead of immersing audiences in contemporary political debates, they associate a successful presidency with a simple understanding of character. Andrew Shepherd is a "serious person"; his abusive critic is not.¹²³

The conflicts between personal privacy and political visibility that are addressed in *The American President*, raise further questions that connect with the Clinton administration. The connections between the political role of being president and the public status of celebrity are ones that I have explored in relation to Clinton previously. In *The American President*, this is complicated by both the nature and role of Andrew Shepherd, and the character and celebrity cachet of Michael Douglas, the actor playing him. In this last section, it may be useful to explore how the presence of Michael Douglas might contribute or detract from what the makers of *The American President* are trying to say about the nature of presidential celebrity. When considering the White House film in general, David Haven Blake notes that while these films generally attempt to distance the president from the frivolous aspects of Hollywood celebrity:

in their effort to convey executive character, however, the films ultimately fall back upon their larger identification of the presidency with fame. *The American President*, for example, tries to counter Shepherd's celebrity with

an affectionate, intimate portrait of his life both in and outside of the Oval Office. All this intimacy, however, comes at the cost of representing the president with the tools of the star.¹²⁴

In other words, Blake suggests that the casting of a Hollywood star such as Michael Douglas brings an aspect of the celebrity to the presidential character, regardless of the wishes of the filmmakers. In the case of *The American President* this is all the more problematic as a large portion of the film deals with the struggle of a man with an abnormal amount of power to carry out a normal relationship. The star status of Douglas could be perceived as an extra, unwelcome element in this characterisation.

It is the way *The American President* combines the two genres of the 1990s White House film and the neo-traditional romantic comedy that makes the film so interesting. As in Reiner's earlier film *When Harry Met Sally* the romance, and the disturbance of that romance, is central to the plot of *The American President*. Much of Aaron Sorkin's script was adapted to favour the romance over the politics and some material that was removed was used later in Sorkin's television series *The West Wing* (1999 – 2006).¹²⁵ The relationship between the romance and the politics in *The American President* changes as the film progresses. In the beginning it is the reason Shepherd and Wade get together, then it becomes the threat to the relationship, and the reason for much of the humour in the film, finally Shepherd realises that his relationship will only succeed when the two are reconciled, in his final speech he declares that romance and politics in effect belong together. It is the combining of romance and politics that makes *The American President* important, but it is in this combination that the crucial links between the film and the Clinton presidency are fully realised. At first glance, Shepherd is clearly a Clinton-like president: they share a physical appearance and, crucially, share similar policies and political leanings. To say that Shepherd is an idealised, romanticised Clinton would not be wrong, but it would ignore the full extent of what *The American President* achieves. In essence, the film condenses the Clinton presidency, creating a mythologized presidency that excises the negative aspects; the anxieties over sleaziness and inappropriate relationships are solved by making Shepherd a sympathetic, widowed, single

parent. I believe it goes further, however, and defuses the entire Clinton package: anxieties over the president, his wife, his youthful staff and his Republican rivals are all addressed by the film. The romance which forms the centre of the film's narrative becomes the driving force behind this defusing, not only providing, as Frank Rich suggests, a presidency free from a First Lady to allow Shepherd to date without being adulterous, but also a new version of Hillary Clinton in Wade, similar in political knowledge and appearance, but seemingly more willing to balance being a First Lady with being a wife and mother. In this way, *The American President* constructs an apologia for the excesses of the Clinton presidency and in doing so, ties together the two genres of the neo-traditional romantic comedy and the 1990s White House film.

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³ Michael Coyne, *Hollywood Goes to Washington* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008) 36

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⁵ Scott 14-5

⁶ Leslie Dick, "Review of *Primary Colors*," review of *Primary Colors* in *Sight and Sound* (October 1998): 51.

⁷ Scott 62-3.

⁸ Michiko Kakutani, "A Roman a Clef to Recent Politics," review of *Primary Colors* (novel) in *The New York Times* 19 January 1996. 29.

⁹ Michael Lewis, "Review of *Primary Colors*," review of *Primary Colors* in *New York Times* 28 January 1996. 7.

¹⁰ Alex Beam, "Review of *Primary Colors*," review of *Primary Colors* in *Boston Globe* 6 February 1996. 53.

¹¹ Beam 53; Kakutani 29.

¹² David Streitfeld, "'Anonymous' Undone by his Own Hand?" *Washington Post* 17 July 1996. 1.

¹³ Lewis 7.

¹⁴ Kakutani 29.

¹⁵ Beam 53.

¹⁶ Joe Klein, *The Natural* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2002) 27.

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¹⁹ Maureen Dowd, "Primary colors – secondary ethics." *The Denver Post* 23 July 1996. 7.

²⁰ David Haven Blake, "Hollywood, Impersonation and Presidential Celebrity in the 1990s" *Hollywood's White House*, ed. Peter Rollins and John E. O'Connor (Kentucky: Kentucky UP, 2003) 329.

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²² Blake 329.

²³ Scott 90-1

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²⁵ Klein *The Natural* 216.

²⁶ Klein *The Natural* 40.

²⁷ Klein *The Natural* 27.

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- ³⁰ Jack Mathews, "Primary Casting a Tricky Vote for Director," preview of *Primary Colors* in *The Seattle Times* 30 August 1996. 8.
- ³¹ In *Face/Off*, Travolta plays both the hero and villain.
- ³² Jesse Zigelstein, "Staying Alive in the 90s: Travolta as Star and the Performance of Masculinity." *CineAction* 44 (1997): 2-11.
- ³³ Mathews 8.
- ³⁴ Stella Bruzzi, "The President and the Image" *Sight and Sound* (July 1998): 16; Rynning 43.
- ³⁵ Martin Walker, "Clinton's Hollywood," *Sight and Sound* (September 1993): 14.
- ³⁶ Bruzzi. "The President and the Image" 18.
- ³⁷ Richard Corliss, "President Clint," *Film Comment* (March-April 1993): 70.
- ³⁸ Bill Clinton, *My Life* (London: Arrow Books, 2004) 386.
- ³⁹ Clinton 530.
- ⁴⁰ Clinton 379.
- ⁴¹ Klein *The Natural* 41.
- ⁴² Rynning 42.
- ⁴³ John Matviko, "Television Satire and the Presidency," *Hollywood's White House*, ed. Peter Rollins and John E. O'Connor (Kentucky: Kentucky UP, 2003) 338; Matviko 341.
- ⁴⁴ Matviko 344.
- ⁴⁵ Matviko 345.
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- ⁵³ Scott 78.
- ⁵⁴ Scott 91.
- ⁵⁵ Scott 92.
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- ¹⁰⁴ Max Vincent, "Politics has nothing to do with this *President*," review of *The American President* in *The Virginian-Pilot* 16 November 1995; Ann Oldenburg, "Love in the Oval Office," review of *The American President* in *USA Today* 15 November 1995; Bob Strauss. "Michael Douglas Finds Life at Top Has Its Drawbacks in *President*," review of *The American President* in *Chicago Sun-Times* 12 November 1995.
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Chapter Four - *The West Wing*

The West Wing (1999 – 2006) began on American television on September 22 1999 at a time when Bill Clinton was entering his final years as president having survived the impeachment charges brought about after the Monica Lewinsky scandal. The pilot episode was written by Aaron Sorkin (who also wrote almost all of the scripts for the first four seasons), directed by Thomas Schlamme and produced by John Wells. The series was originally conceived as a comedy drama that focused on staff working in the White House, with the President appearing only occasionally throughout the series. This format would have been similar to Aaron Sorkin's earlier series *Sports Night* (1998 – 2000) which concentrated on the staff of a sports-dedicated television network. It became apparent after the pilot episode, however, that the role of the President, played by Martin Sheen, would be a dramatically central one. As a result, the series developed as an ensemble drama that concentrated on the staff of the White House and had as its moral and political pivot, the character of President Jed Bartlet. In this section, the first of three focusing on *The West Wing*, I intend to examine the initial construction of the character of Bartlet, how it was affected by the form and particular style of the series and how this character related to the state of politics in the last years of the Clinton presidency.

***The West Wing* Seasons 1 and 2**

The connections between *The American President* and *The West Wing* are numerous. Both offer the viewer an insight into the workings of the American political system - in effect a tour behind-the-scenes of the White House. In addition to this there are similarities between the political affiliations of both the Shepherd and the Bartlet presidencies: both are Democrats and both tend towards idealistic, liberal solutions to social problems such as gun control and the environment. Indeed, there are indications, confirmed by Sorkin, that a number of early storylines from *The West Wing* come from the extended draft of *The American President*.¹ What is more interesting, however, is how the two texts differ. With this in mind, it may be

useful to examine how the form of *The West Wing* as an example of quality, ensemble television drama as opposed to a two hour, stand-alone film, has had an influence on its content.

The differences between the forms of *The American President* and *The West Wing* have a major effect on the characterisation of the presidency. *The American President* concentrated almost exclusively on Andrew Shepherd and his relationship with Sydney Allen Wade and followed a simple narrative formula derived from the genre of the romantic comedy. In essence this meant the story had a beginning: Shepherd and Wade meet and their romance is initiated, a middle: Shepherd and Wade's romance is put in jeopardy, and an end: Shepherd and Wade are reconciled. As Jason Vest notes, this Shepherd/Wade-centric formula places the supporting characters of Shepherd's staff, Wade's colleagues and Shepherd's Republican rival in subordinate roles which leave them, compared with Shepherd and Wade, underdeveloped.² In contrast, the ongoing nature of *The West Wing* allows for a much greater development of character and plot. Just as *The American President* sees Aaron Sorkin combine the formulae of the romantic comedy genre with an idealistic political narrative, *The West Wing* relies on two aspects of the modern television series. *The West Wing* is an example of 'quality' television with an ensemble cast. To consider the implications of this it may be useful to look first at the pilot episode. In her extensive study of the first few years of the series and following the critical work of Jane Feuer, Melissa Crawley applies the term 'quality television' to her study of *The West Wing*. She summarises the term as 'a show's production values, narrative aesthetics and success at reaching a high-income audience.'³ Crawley sees *The West Wing* as part of a family tree that contains *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977), a comedy with an ensemble cast set in a TV station. This family tree also includes *Lou Grant* (1977-1982), a drama spin-off from *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Hill Street Blues* (1981 – 1987), an ensemble drama set in a police station and *St Elsewhere* (1982 – 1988), an ensemble drama set in a hospital. More recently Crawley cites *ER* (1994 – 2009), like *St Elsewhere*, a hospital drama with an ensemble cast and John Wells as executive

producer, who went on to perform the same role with *The West Wing*. Crawley connects these programmes by demonstrating how they are all a result of television networks targeting a particular audience, the programmes' successes having been measured on a demographic basis rather than on overall, national audience ratings. This shift from trying to get as many viewers as possible to trying to get the *right* type of viewer, results in more complex narratives and themes. John Thornton Caldwell suggests that a programme's style and look is a crucial factor in the recognition of a quality programme.⁴ For example, series such as *Hill Street Blues* and *ER* each have their own in-house style; a particular way of being shot, lit and scripted, regardless of different writers and directors. All these quality programmes share common characteristics. Feuer summarises these characteristics in relation to *The West Wing* which she sees as:

A prominent descendant of TV's quality drama tradition, with the workplace setting (The White House), the serialised narratives, the large ensemble cast and hyphenate-auteur Aaron Sorkin's distinctive voice.⁵

Feuer summarises 'quality television' in three ways: the setting, the type of narrative, the type of cast and the prominence of an authorial voice. When looking at the pilot episode of *The West Wing* it is clear how these different elements translate onto the screen and how the series' visual and narrative style is formed from the very beginning and equally how this visual style promotes an aura of presidentiality around the character of Bartlet. The first episode concentrates on the White House staff's attempts to defuse various political time-bombs. Sam Seaborn, the White House deputy communications director, has 'accidentally' slept with a prostitute. Josh Lyman, the White House deputy chief-of-staff has lost his temper and insulted a conservative Christian, Mary Marsh, during a television interview and is worrying about losing his job. Meanwhile the White House staff have to deal with over a thousand Cuban refugees trying to reach Florida and incoming reports that the President has fallen off a mountain bike. The pilot is constructed around the staff's attempts to solve these issues and the best ways to communicate them to the news media before the President returns with his judgement on Josh's job. This episode sets the tone and pace for the future series. The storylines are complex, multi-layered and seemingly unconnected. Each staff member is

given screen-time to establish his or her character though, interestingly, Bartlet does not appear until the last scene. Throughout the pilot, however, Bartlet is repeatedly referred to. For example, the first things the audience hears about the President is that he has fallen off a mountain bike after riding it into a tree and that he is 'pissed as hell' at Josh for his televised jibe at Mary Marsh. Leo McGarry, the president's chief-of-staff refers to Bartlet as 'a klutz' and 'a geek' which causes Mrs Landingham, the President's secretary to rebuke McGarry for saying this in the Oval Office. All these comments construct a character for the absent Bartlet that contains a variety of aspects: powerful, angry, clumsy, revered, furthermore they all come from a continuous scene, or rather a set of scenes, with little editing. The steadicam follows McGarry as he arrives at work and makes his way through the West Wing having conversations with members of staff until he arrives in the Oval Office. This scene is similar to the opening shots of *Thirteen Days* which show Kenny McDonnell performing a similar journey from home, to West Wing to Oval Office. In a similar way, the viewer is initially uncertain as to the prominence of McGarry. Gradually it becomes clear as he efficiently deals with each character he engages with during his walk, that he is an important member of staff, and this escalation of power reaches a peak as McGarry is shown to be on a personal, informal level with the President himself. Mrs Landingham's castigation prevents McGarry from overreaching his power, particularly in the sacred space of the Oval Office. As Trevor and Shawn Parry-Giles note, '*The West Wing*'s concept of the presidency is a vision of the office, and the individual who occupies it, as simultaneously heroic and human, romantic and flawed.'⁶ This scene, and indeed the whole pilot, uses the absence of Bartlet and the requirement of the opening episode of the series to characterise each member of an ensemble cast as a way of presenting the President, the series' central character, without over-exposing him. Another crucial theme these opening scenes introduce is that of chaos and the complexity of the work in the West Wing.⁷ In the pilot, this chaos is most clearly seen in the disparate nature of the different problems facing the staff, a mixture of personal and political crises. It is also in the ways in which these crises are communicated to the viewer within the style of the series, the ways they are presented, scripted and shot, that much of the chaos is

represented. As well as introducing the ensemble cast, the pilot sets the stylistic tone for the series. Crawley cites three members of the production team; writer Aaron Sorkin, director Thomas Schlamme and cinematographer Thomas Del Ruth as being crucial in the inception of *The West Wing* style.⁸ Sorkin's writing style is characterised by critic Greg M Smith as an alternation of 'rat-a-tat interchanges with florid speech making'. He suggests that one way Sorkin succeeds in relaying so much information to the viewer is by devoting long scenes to multiple plot elements, as he suggests, 'historically, dramas devoted an entire scene to communicating a single new plot development, and thus the show moved forward one step at a time, one scene at a time'. Conversely Sorkin's method is to 'break single scenes into separate dramatic mini-scenes that are unrelated to each other in terms of narrative but which share the same time and space.'⁹ In the opening scene of the pilot episode this narrative style has several positive effects. Firstly, Leo's journey around the West Wing offers a chance for the viewer to be introduced to each character in reference to a fixed point; in other words, Leo's character is defined by his rapid conversations with staffers and vice versa. Secondly, Leo's tour allows the makers of *The West Wing* a chance to show off a significant asset of the series, that of the elaborate set. Allowing the viewer an uninterrupted journey from the lobby of the White House all the way to the Oval Office, demonstrates the fact that the series is made using a large, lavish set rather than a sequence of isolated rooms that cutting between shots would suggest (see Figure 17). This gives the series a feeling of place and permanence from the beginning and is equally an important first step in the construction of presidentiality before the introduction of Bartlet. Finally, the unbroken scene, while relaying plot information increases the complexity and the feeling of chaos. Sorkin's dialogue frequently turns without warning from one subject to another, a source of much of the humour of the series but also as Greg Smith notes, reflective of the complexity of the series' plotting.¹⁰ Schlamme and Del Ruth's direction and staging of Sorkin's dialogue serves to enhance all of these elements. As Crawley notes, the use of steadicam in the show, a characteristic of Del Ruth who also worked on *ER*, allows the scenes to proceed with the pace that the dialogue requires without drawing attention to the movement of the camera. At the same time, the use

of 'hot lights' gives the corridors of the West Wing patches of light and dark which contributes to the pacing and the drama of the scenes whilst giving the White House a sense of romanticism.¹¹ The interweaving plots coupled with Sorkin's methods of alternating between them and Schlamme and Del Ruth's methods of shooting and staging give the pilot a sense of the chaos and complexity behind the scenes at the White House. Throughout much of the episode, Bartlet is physically absent, but constantly referenced. The nature of his appearance in the last scene of the pilot offers, I believe, a template for the first two seasons. Up to the last scene, Bartlet has been described disparately as both a 'klutz' and a 'geek', and so angry that he had ordered Leo McGarry to fire Josh Lyman. It is only at the end of the episode that the viewer is able to see how these different characteristics come together to embody one man. The climax of the episode occurs when Josh is ordered by Toby Ziegler to apologise to Mary Marsh for his televised jibe. Josh reluctantly swallows his pride and agrees to the meeting to take place with him, Toby and C. J. Cregg. Rapidly the meeting descends into a shouting match, though unexpectedly caused by Toby's reaction to what he perceives to be an anti-Semitic comment by Marsh. This is followed by a further argument about the First Commandment:

Toby: No, If I'm gonna make you sit through this preposterous exercise, we're gonna get the names of the damn commandments right.
Mary Marsh: Okay, here we go.
Toby: "Honor thy Father" is the Third Commandment
John Van Dyke: Then what's the First Commandment?
And from the doorway, a man, standing with the help of a cane speaks.
Man [Bartlet]: "I am the Lord your God. Thou shalt worship no other God before me."¹²

Immediately the argument is resolved and ended partly due to the fact that Bartlet has answered Van Dyke's question, but also because none of the other characters are allowed to argue with the president. Bartlet's words produce an amusing confusion between the president and God, one which is emphasised by the fact that everyone stands to attention. Bartlet follows this opening line is with a speech that in the words of Heather Hayton sees him turn from 'a folksy and clumsy man' using a crutch for support to 'something out of *The Terminator*.'¹³ The speech, the longest unbroken dialogue in the pilot, begins with a personal

story in which Bartlet admits that he gets clumsy when he gets angry. Bartlet then describes what made him angry enough to ride a mountain bike into a tree. Surprisingly the reason was not Josh's mistake, as the viewer has been led to believe throughout the episode, but the fact that Bartlet's granddaughter has been sent a mutilated doll by an extreme Christian group. Bartlet then orders the Christian group from the White House. Hayton sees this speech as providing the foundation for a dual identity for Bartlet, a version of the "king's two bodies". In the speech Bartlet gives a powerful presidential reaction to an argument from the point-of-view of an outraged grandfather. Hayton points out that this merging of Bartlet as the father of his children with President Bartlet as the father of the country is repeated throughout the series, but is conceived with this speech. Crawley also sees this merging as crucial, but within her study of *The West Wing* it is the more general fusion of the righteously personal with the idealistically political that both develops the appeal of Bartlet and forms the popular backbone of the series. Furthermore, Bartlet's vehement rejection of the religious right whilst simultaneously demonstrating his own scriptural knowledge allows Sorkin to assign his president a liberal, left-wing leaning and to demonstrate his idealistic refusal to be 'cowed by religious interest groups.'¹⁴ In the context of the pilot, however, what is immediately evident is the effect the introduction of Bartlet in this scene has on the pacing and style of the episode. Bartlet's dialogue is given space without interruption and without the rapid subject shifting characteristic of Sorkin. It takes place in the Mural room, softly lit with lamps in contrast with the overhead lights of the corridors, giving the scene a more domestic feel. During his speech the remaining principal members of the ensemble cast, Leo and Sam, join the staff in the Mural room. When the speech is over, the pace returns briefly to the earlier walk and talk style as the staff make their way to the Oval office only to be rebuked by Bartlet for ignoring him. Bartlet then closes the episode in the Oval office, lit in a similar way to the Mural room with lamps and natural light from the windows. During his final speeches of the episode, Bartlet summarises the storylines and connects the Cuban refugees with the staff's preoccupation with their personal lives. During these scenes, the pacing of the episode slows, the cast is brought together and, for a while, only one voice, that of Bartlet, is heard. The

effect this has is to emphasise Bartlet's ability to unify his staff and to tame the chaos of the work of the White House. These scenes provide the viewer with answers to various questions raised throughout the episode and with connections between the apparently unrelated storylines. The appearance of Bartlet is a primary catalyst in the resolution of the chaos. As Shawn and Trevor Parry-Giles indicate, this chaos is a key characteristic of *The West Wing*, as they put it, 'central to the mimesis of *The West Wing* is its characterisation of the presidency as primarily concerned with the management of chaos and uncertainty.'¹⁵ The pilot episode provides a contained example of how this chaos is expressed, coming to a degree from the need to introduce a large ensemble cast and from Sorkin's characteristic multi-layered dialogue and how this chaos is managed through the introduction of Bartlet.

The Characterisation of Bartlet

Melissa Crawley's book *Mr Sorkin Goes to Washington* is a study of the first four seasons of *The West Wing* that, amongst other things, considers the success of the series in creating a fictional presidency. This in part, argues Crawley, is due to the ways in which the series emulates a particular perception of politics. She begins by examining how American children first acknowledge politics and the president within a framework which is emotional rather than cognitive, and how this approach to the presidency creates presidential 'schemas', effectively emotional associations.¹⁶ *The West Wing*, Crawley suggests, accesses this childhood emotional reaction and through its fictional presidency, recreates the presidential schema. To do this, the series connects the political aspects of the Bartlet presidency and the presidential figure with the personal aspects of Bartlet. An important way Sorkin achieves this is with the characterisation of Bartlet as a paternal and moral presence throughout the series.¹⁷ Crawley's thesis is persuasive and is worth expanding upon. What is visible of Bartlet's presidency throughout the series tends to be the emotional responses to his actions rather than the wider political implications. For example, as I have demonstrated, in the pilot episode the climax is based around Bartlet's emotional responses to the Christian pressure group whereas the political problem of the refugee Cubans is resolved, we assume, off-screen after the end of

the episode. In this section, I intend to explore the ways in which the character of Bartlet is constructed in the first few seasons of *The West Wing*, beginning unlike Crawley, by looking at how the choice of actor for the role of Bartlet, particularly in an ensemble series, influences the portrayal of presidentiality.

Martin Sheen was chosen by Aaron Sorkin to play President Bartlet from a list of potential actors including Alan Alda, Jason Robards and Sidney Poitier.¹⁸ The original intention of Sorkin was for Bartlet to appear in only a few episodes of the first season, in Aaron Sorkin's words:

At the beginning the President wasn't supposed to be in the show at all. I wanted to get away from *The American President*. I didn't want to do that again. If the President is a character, he's going to take up all the oxygen in the room.¹⁹

Ultimately it was decided that after the success of Sheen's performance in the pilot, and the realisation that it would be unrealistic for White House staff not to be in constant contact with the President, the character of Bartlet would become the series' principal character. It is interesting to note how Sorkin's fears of a character becoming dominant in an ensemble drama affects the presidential framing of Bartlet. It may be useful to look briefly at Sheen's career to highlight what qualities he brings to the characterisation and position of Bartlet within *The West Wing*. Sheen's film and television career has been a broad and varied one and has included several political characters including both John and Robert Kennedy, President Greg Stillson in *The Dead Zone* (1983) and White House chief-of-staff A. J. MacInerney in *The American President*. It is this last role that provides the closest connection between Aaron Sorkin and Sheen. Comparing Sheen to the other cast members of *The West Wing*, it is clear that his polysemy of film roles sets him apart. John Spencer who plays Leo McGarry, Bradley Whitford who plays Josh Lyman, Richard Schiff who plays Toby Ziegler and Allison Janney who plays C. J. Cregg, all have backgrounds as minor or supporting characters in television and films, often favouring the stage over the screen. The casting of Sheen, therefore, might threaten, as Sorkin suggests, to overwhelm the rest of the cast, but his

screen career as a character actor in movies rather than on television sets him apart from the rest of the cast, and consequently sets Bartlet apart from the rest of the White House staff. Another aspect of Sheen's career that has an impact on the character of Bartlet is his political views, those of a 'time-served left political activist.'²⁰ Sheen, like actors such as Warren Beatty is well known for his left-wing campaigning. In his role in *The West Wing*, Sheen brings a combination of this political notoriety, albeit toned down for the less radical Bartlet, with his standing as a film actor. In a way, Sheen's idealised liberalism coupled with his respected celebrity status provide a bridge between the optimism and charisma of the Kennedy presidency and Bartlet, bypassing the spin and cynical political manoeuvring of the Clinton era. The media experience of Sheen with his varied and long Hollywood career means that his proximity to the younger or less famous cast members enables him becomes a paternal presence. This is compounded by the relationship between Sheen and the 1980s 'brat-pack' actors, including his sons Charlie Sheen and Emilio Estevez, and their childhood friend, Rob Lowe. This paternalism, as I shall demonstrate, is a vital facet of Bartlet's characterisation, and crucially another example of Sorkin's distancing of his fictional president from the figure of Clinton.

The trope of Bartlet as father is one that occurs repeatedly throughout the first seasons of the series. Crawley examines these different parental aspects within her study and it may be useful to expand on her discussion. It is clear that Bartlet embodies multiple and multi-layered aspects of the image of the father. In Crawley's view, Bartlet is framed throughout the first seasons as a father figure to his staff. Four of the cast, Josh, Sam, C. J. and Toby all share a sibling relationship throughout the series and their frequent bickering is controlled and moderated by the presence of Bartlet. In the pilot and other episodes such as 'Celestial Navigation', Bartlet appears at the end to castigate and co-ordinate his staff - as critic Laura Lippman states, 'critics call "The West Wing" a workplace drama, but it can also be seen as a family show - "President Knows Best," in which a lovable, if remote, father figure solves the problems of his adolescent brood.'²¹ The paternal relationship between Bartlet and his staff is

cemented with the introduction of Charlie Young, Bartlet's 'body man', in the episode 'A Proportional Response'. Rapidly Bartlet becomes protective towards Young, an orphan looking after his younger sister, encouraging his further education and only mildly objecting when Young starts a relationship with Bartlet's youngest daughter Zoey. The intimacy between the two characters, Young and Bartlet, is manifested in gestures such as the one in the second season episode 'Shibboleth' when Young 'inherits' from Bartlet a carving knife, a family heirloom passed from father to son. It is also shown in the unique access that Young has to the residential area of the White House. Bartlet's character is built on a foundation of fatherhood. Sorkin based Bartlet's key characteristics on his own father:

A lot of the inspiration for Bartlet comes from my father, who is very much of another world. He's seventy-six now. He's a lawyer, a terribly wise and gentle man with a kind of "Aw, Dad" sense of humor. He's devoted to his family and filled with emotion about great men and women and events gone by. At times I'm writing my father, at times I'm simply writing a character I think my father would like.²²

For Sorkin, the character of Bartlet is a clear example of idealised fatherhood, but one that, as Crawley suggests, is balanced with the character's role as idealised President. Throughout the series, these two aspects are shown often in conflict, reaching a climax at the end of season four when Bartlet is forced, temporarily, to relinquish his Presidency when his daughter is kidnapped. This conflict is part of a wider theme that builds throughout the first seasons as Bartlet struggles with tensions between his personal and presidential life, tensions that frequently form the narrative backbone of episodes. Examples of this struggle include Bartlet's anger at the murder of a member of staff in an act of terrorism ('Proportional Response') conflicting with his command of the US military, revelations concerning his health ('He Shall, From Time to Time') conflicting with his ability to work, his Catholicism ('Take This Sabbath Day') conflicting with his decision whether or not to pardon a prisoner on death row. Crawley suggests, however, that Bartlet's paternal relationship with his staff and children is part of the process that allows the viewer of *The West Wing* an accessible route to associate the character with the imagery or schema of presidency. Through these personal traits, Crawley argues, Sorkin invites the viewer to see Bartlet as a presidential father-figure

as well as a personal one, in short, a father of the nation.²³ Bartlet's paternal framing also serves to contrast the fictional president with Clinton, the incumbent at the time of *The West Wing*'s debut. The view of Clinton as a father-figure was particularly compromised after the Lewinsky scandal where the relative proximity of Lewinsky's age to Chelsea Clinton (22 compared with 15) damaged Clinton's position as father. As I will show in the next section, the idealised paternal presence of Bartlet compared with the troubled one of Clinton is only part of a network of comparisons, and a wider complex relationship between the real and the fictional that Sorkin uses in the characterisation of his president.

***The West Wing* and Clinton**

When *The West Wing* was first broadcast the reaction of reviewers was to compare the fictional Bartlet White House with the real Clinton White House. Tom Shales, for example, writing in the *Washington Post* on the day the show piloted, suggested that *The West Wing* was indebted to the Clinton era and was the natural successor to the White House film genre of the 1990s.²⁴ Connecting the series with aspects of the Clinton era is understandable but, as I shall argue in this section, unlike the presidential characters in *Primary Colors* and *The American President*, the figure of Bartlet is not simply a satirised or romanticised Clinton. Instead, I believe the series reacts to the figure of Clinton in a different, more remote way. Through the first two seasons of *The West Wing*, Sorkin uses the remoteness of the series with the personality of Clinton to enhance the idealism inherent in the character of Bartlet. Firstly, it may be useful to note the ways in which *The West Wing* is connected with the Clinton presidency.

From the very beginning, *The West Wing* has been connected with the Clinton presidency. Initially, Sorkin proposed the idea at the same time the Lewinsky scandal was breaking and the series was delayed by a year. When the series began production it used Clinton's press secretary Dee Dee Myers as advisor. In addition to this, Clinton's communications director George Stephanopoulos' memoir *All Too Human* and the Clinton campaign documentary *The*

War Room were used as research for plots and style.²⁵ Many critics trace the source of several characters from both *The West Wing* and *The American President* back to Clinton staff. For example Sam Seaborn has been paralleled with George Stephanopoulos or Jake Siewert, C. J. Cregg with Dee Dee Myers and Josh Lyman with Paul Begala or James Carville.²⁶ Critic Tom Shales suggests that the series was a natural addition to the 1990s cycle of White House set films such as *Wag the Dog* and *The American President*. Furthermore, he directly connects this with Clinton's cordial relationship with Hollywood, and contrasts it with the dearth of screen presidents during Reagan's leadership. In all these ways, *The West Wing* is steeped in the imagery, characters and mood of the Clinton presidency. This view, however, is at odds with Sorkin's denials of connections with Clinton made at the time the series began. Sorkin, instead appears to distance his series from being seen as a parody, parallel or satire of the Clinton administration.²⁷ The relationships between the series and Clinton do not necessarily contradict Sorkin's claim, however. *The West Wing* does use the trappings, events and imagery of the Clinton White House while at the same time avoids the direct parodying of Clinton seen in *Primary Colors* or the satirising in *Wag the Dog*. Similarly, the character of Bartlet in his physical appearance and in his personality is so dissimilar to Clinton that Sorkin avoids the same comparisons with the incumbent president that occurred in *The American President* with the character of Andrew Shepherd. Bartlet, unlike Clinton is a liberal Democrat from New Hampshire, a northern state. Instead of a legal background, Bartlet has a classical education and an academic profession, prior to entering politics, as a Nobel prize-winning economist. He is older than Clinton, a grandfather whose three daughters no longer live at home (his youngest daughter, Zoey Bartlet is shown entering university during the first season). His wife is a more traditional first-lady than Hillary Clinton, initially choosing to continue practising as a doctor and, in the early seasons of the series, tends to have little influence over the policies of Bartlet's administration. Bartlet's method of management also seems less informal than Clinton's, more paternal than fraternal. Finally, Bartlet, unlike Clinton after the Lewinsky scandal, is shown to be a constant and dependable father-figure, to

his family, to his staff, and to the country. At times throughout the series Bartlet fails in one of these roles, but it is usually as a result of a conflict between his job and his personal life.

One important way in which Sorkin distances the first four seasons of *The West Wing* from the Clinton White House is through the series' policy of avoiding references to any president since Dwight D. Eisenhower.²⁸ The choice of Eisenhower as a cut-of-point is interesting in itself. This policy effectively exorcises not only Clinton, but also Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan and Bush from the series. The most obvious effect this has on the series is to prevent Bartlet being directly compared with these recent Presidents. This allows Sorkin to cherry-pick the best attributes of these figures for the character of Bartlet without directly referencing them. In Sheen's words, Bartlet 'has the intelligence of Clinton, the heart and passion of Jimmy Carter and the energy and foresight of John Kennedy.'²⁹ In doing this, the character of Bartlet becomes an amalgam of all the positive aspects of the last forty years of presidents without being eclipsed by them. Tellingly, Sheen's statement implicitly suggests that while Clinton has a political intelligence worth replicating in Bartlet, it is the earlier democratic incumbents of the White House that supply the character with morality and emotion. Similarly, by deleting Nixon from his *West Wing* history, Sorkin also eliminates the scandal of Watergate and the slow defeat in Vietnam, together with the subsequent political cynicism that they caused throughout America. In effect, Bartlet is unencumbered by both the charismatic appeal of Kennedy *and* the mistrust of Nixon. The second consequence of avoiding the presidents from the 1960s onwards, is to disassociate Bartlet from the prevailing connections, since the Kennedy presidency, between the success of the Presidents and their success in using the mediums of film and television. As Stella Bruzzi notes in her study of the connections between presidents and their images, it was the Kennedy White House that first used the visual media and the first to actively manipulate or 'spin' the image of the figure for political gain.³⁰ This preoccupation with the importance of the image of the president reached a climax with the Clinton presidency, as Crawley suggests, after the apparently perfect alignment of presidential reality and presidential performance displayed by Kennedy and the

erosion of this alignment by Nixon, 'Clinton's screen image dissolved the distinction until president became equal to performance.'³¹ This distancing of Bartlet from spin is iterated within the series. In the first episode of season two 'In the Shadow of Two Gunmen: Part 1', Bartlet is recovering from being shot at the end of the previous season, whilst Josh remains in critical condition. The aftermath of the shooting is intercut with flashback scenes set during Bartlet's campaign showing his staff being recruited. In a reinforcement of the messianic introduction of Bartlet in the pilot episode, Josh Lyman and Toby Zeigler are presented as apostle figures recruiting Sam Seaborn and C. J. Cregg respectively. Josh is persuaded to join Bartlet's staff when he hears him give a question and answer session to New England dairy farmers. When asked to justify why he voted against a measure which would have benefited his audience by raising the price of milk, Bartlet admits that he 'screwed' them with his vote, but goes on to demonstrate how his vote has had wider beneficial effects at a national level. This scene serves to demonstrate Bartlet's ability to frame local issues nationally but also shows him telling the truth and not attempting to evade the question. Josh is shown to be convinced by Bartlet's honesty and in the subsequent episode goes to Sam and confirms that he believes Bartlet is 'the real thing'. 'The real thing' is somewhat ambiguous in this context meaning not only a candidate who could potentially win the presidency, but also a candidate who was a genuine presidential character, one who had the potential to be both a marketable candidate and a morally successful president. Toby then recruits C. J. Cregg by similarly confirming that Bartlet is 'a good man'. These flashbacks perform a similar function to the absence of Bartlet in the pilot episode, allowing the presidential candidate to be characterised at 'arm's length' through the reactions of his staff. Showing Lyman and Zeigler evangelising Seaborn and Cregg reaffirms Crawley's view of Bartlet as a moral preacher:

Sorkin's mix of secular and spiritual language connects the mission of government with the mission of faith. He frames Bartlet as the head of this mission, a role that easily shifts to that of moral leader guiding and instructing his followers.³²

As Crawley suggests, this transmission of moral and political truth coming from Bartlet reaches a head in the season two episode 'In this White House' with the introduction of

Ainsley Hayes, a Republican lawyer who is convinced by Bartlet to join his staff. It is also telling that all the characters who are 'evangelised' by Bartlet join his staff after leaving professions that, in Loren Quiring's words are causing them to lead 'morally fatiguing lives.'³³ Seaborn is shown as a lawyer who, in his words, is 'protecting oil companies from litigation', while Cregg has just been fired from a public relations job marketing bad films in Hollywood. Both these occupations, legal and marketing encapsulate the essence of political spin, the manipulation of image and the creation of message. Importantly, they also form the cornerstones of the Clinton presidency; Hollywood accounts for some of his early appeal, while Clinton's previous life as a lawyer serves him well during the Lewinsky scandal, allowing him, to a degree, to avoid giving embarrassing answers when questioned. Bartlet by being the 'real thing', characterised as the antithesis of Clinton, saving his staff from lives of spin and evasion.

There are numerous reasons why Sorkin may have chosen to distance his idealised president from the figure of Clinton, despite having previously presented a Clintonesque character in the form of Andrew Shepherd. Trevor and Shawn Parry-Giles have described the state of American politics prior to the debut of *The West Wing* as characterised by a robust economy, 'remote and occasional' terrorism and a presidency in 'considerable flux'. Clinton's impeachment, they suggest, was more a symptom than a cause of a shift in the nature of the presidency over the course of the twentieth century towards a 'rhetorical presidency', diminished in power and reliant on spin. The Clinton presidency occurred at the culmination of this shift and, particularly after the Lewinsky scandal, resulted in a general anxiety concerning the nature of presidency itself.³⁴ In the case of *Primary Colors* and *The American President*, the decline of the nature of the presidency was narrated by isolating extreme aspects of the character of Clinton and satirising or romanticising them. By the time *The West Wing* was made, Sorkin instead chose to create a fictional president who is in many respects Clinton's opposite. Critics of the programme commenting after the pilot episode suggest however that *The West Wing* is inseparable from the political idealism of the Clinton White

House. Chris Lehmann, for example, suggests that *The West Wing* 'lodges the structure of his [Bill Clinton's] personality firmly in our collective unconscious, even while strategically erasing its substance,'³⁵ while a number of critics suggest that Sorkin's model for the Bartlet White House may be found in the early years of the Clinton era.³⁶ These critics refer to *The West Wing*'s clearly idealistic, left wing liberal agenda and imply that Sorkin effectively 'airbrushed' Clinton from the Clinton presidency and replaced him with Bartlet. In many ways this is true: Sorkin does at times appear to be attempting to 'reboot' the Clinton presidency, but whereas in reality, the president's performance, in Melissa Crawley's words 'failed the myth,'³⁷ Bartlet is insulated against this failure by being a fictional character. For example, during the first season, Bartlet is revealed to be suffering from Multiple Sclerosis (MS), a fact that he failed to disclose to the public or his staff. This failure constitutes Bartlet's scandal: just as Kennedy had the Bay of Pigs, Nixon had Watergate, Reagan had Iran-Contra and Clinton had Lewinsky, Bartlet has MS. Sorkin protects Bartlet's idealised position partially through the choice of a scandal relating to a health problem rather than a political error or an immoral sex act. The scandal is revealed in the first season episode 'He Shall from Time to Time', when Bartlet is preparing for his first State of the Union address whilst suffering from the flu. The stress of the occasion, coupled with the effects of the flu, cause Bartlet to collapse during the opening scene. The rest of the episode is split between Bartlet's staff redrafting the speech and Bartlet's revelation to McGarry that he suffers from a potentially degenerative illness that may at times impair his concentration and co-ordination. The scandal of Bartlet's MS, that he failed to reveal it during his campaign, is subsumed by his emotional, bed-ridden confession to McGarry, and by the fact that Sorkin chooses to show Bartlet as vulnerable. The focus of the episode ends up concentrating on Bartlet's bravery in coping with his illness and his friendship with McGarry, rather than the potentially impeachable withholding of his medical condition. Indeed, as the series progresses, and as his illness is revealed to other staff members and ultimately the public, Bartlet's MS becomes a demonstration of his ability to elicit loyalty, culminating in his re-election despite the scandal. Sorkin associates Bartlet with a timely element of the Clinton presidency but insulates his

president from scandal through his framing of the story. Bartlet's scandal, like the political ramifications of the Lewinsky affair, is one of concealment, but whereas Clinton continued to conceal and obfuscate even as the scandal broke, Bartlet's revelations are framed in a more sympathetic way. From the choice of the scandal to the internalised framing of its disclosure, Sorkin inverts the Lewinsky affair by using the MS storyline to expose Bartlet's emotional depths.

From the start of the series Bartlet shares a complex relationship with Clinton. Sorkin presents the Bartlet White House in a way that is clearly influenced by the Clinton administration. As Shepherd's White House in *The American President*, the Bartlet staff are all young and many of them share similar characteristics to Clinton staff. Unlike in *The American President* however, Sorkin chooses to avoid inviting a comparison between Bartlet and Clinton. The two personalities seem physical opposites with differing occupational backgrounds and family lives. What Sorkin seems to do instead, is to reference problematic aspects and events pertaining to the Clinton era throughout the series such as the Lewinsky affair. Having done this, he demonstrates how Bartlet's reactions to these elements lead to idealistic solutions. To do this, Sorkin protects Bartlet from criticism by highlighting his antipathy towards spin, by framing the problems to either elicit, in the case of the scandal, sympathy or, in the case of Bartlet's military actions, respect from the audience. Bartlet is, in the words of Myron Levine, 'an antipolitician' thus enabling Sorkin to 'use the viewing audience's prevailing anti-Washingtonianism to paint a positive portrait of a liberal presidency.'³⁸ By doing this, Sorkin creates a presidential figure that rather than presenting an idealised Clintonesque character, in a sense offers a revisionist restart of the whole Clinton era.

Sorkin's success in his creation and characterisation of Bartlet is most clearly displayed when considering the success of the show. Not only did the first two seasons achieve high ratings, topping 25 million viewers for the episode 'In the Shadow of Two Gunmen pt 1',³⁹ but also the characters of Bartlet and his staff entered the public consciousness as political icons. The

high rating during the second season coincided with the Bush-Gore presidential election and in the media, the figure of Bartlet, and occasionally Sheen himself, frequently became an ideal third candidate.⁴⁰ The cast and crew of the series also made trips to the White House during Clinton's final year, the democrat President keen to associate himself with the uber-democrat Bartlet. After Clinton's successor George W. Bush was elected, the popularity of *The West Wing* was used in a different way, for example the President allowed a documentary called *The Bush White House: Inside the Real West Wing* which aired just before the *The West Wing* itself. This move prompted Sorkin to criticise the network suggesting that such a juxtaposition was a 'valentine' to Bush.⁴¹ The popularity of *The West Wing*, both with its ratings and with its insinuation into the political consciousness of America owes a great deal to Sorkin's skilful characterisation of Bartlet. Through Bartlet and the visual and narrative style of the series, Sorkin constructs a fictional but realistic presidential mythology conceived in the 'dubious executive morality'⁴² of the post-Lewinsky Clinton era that retains a connection with the real White House without compromising the romantic idealism of the character. In this way, Sorkin successfully reconstructs the presidency, but unlike Shepherd in *The American President* which seems to be an attempt to heal the Clinton figure; with Bartlet, Sorkin amputates Clinton from his own era. Shepherd may have been Clinton if he had been 'less like Bill Clinton and more like Michael Douglas,'⁴³ but Bartlet is like Clinton without the corruption and comparisons with Nixon.

***The West Wing* Seasons 3 and 4**

By the end of the second season, *The West Wing* had achieved both high ratings and critical acclaim. It had won Emmy Awards, Golden Globes, Screen Actors Guild awards, and Aaron Sorkin had won a Humanitas award in 2000 for the episode 'On This Sabbath Day'. Over the first two seasons the format and the cast of the programme and also the character and presentation of President Bartlet remains constant. Throughout seasons three and four criticism of the programme increased while the ratings began to fall. In this section, I examine

the directions in which Sorkin takes the series and the character of Bartlet. I reveal how the changes Sorkin makes to *The West Wing* can, in part, be traced to both the victory of George W. Bush over Al Gore in 2000 and to the political shift of America as a result of the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001. While considering these changes to the format of the series, I also suggest why *The West Wing* started to decline in popularity both critically and commercially. At the close of the second season, Bartlet is shown trying to decide whether to stand for re-election. He has revealed his Multiple Sclerosis to his staff and to the American public and his secretary, Mrs Landingham, a mother-figure to Bartlet through the first two seasons, has been killed in a road traffic accident. The third season narrates the consequences of these events as Bartlet begins campaigns for the re-election while his staff initially come to terms with Bartlet's concealment of the MS, and then try to find a way of defusing the scandal. The fourth season narrates the continuing campaign, concluding with Bartlet's second inauguration halfway through the season, and the departure of Rob Lowe's character Sam Seaborn. In addition to this, both seasons concern the terrorist activities of a fictional middle-eastern state called Qumar. Late in season three in the episode 'The Black Vera Wang' it is revealed that the Qumari Defense Minister, Abdul Shareef has been directly responsible for funding a terrorist plot to blow up a military base below the Golden Gate Bridge. The season climaxes at the end of the episode 'Posse Comitatus' with Bartlet's decision to have Shareef assassinated against international law. Season four picks up this plot line with the drawn out revelation of the truth behind America's involvement in Shareef's death.

The overall effect on Bartlet's character, as J. Elizabeth Clark suggests, is that of increasing fallibility. This fallibility is expressed, as Clark notes, in Bartlet's struggle to maintain a liberal political stance while tackling issues such as international terrorism using increasingly conservative tactics.⁴⁴ This weakening of Bartlet's character also extends into other ongoing storylines throughout seasons three and four. His decision to stand for re-election in spite of his MS angers his wife and causes marital difficulties that threaten to affect the campaign. His

marital problems are matched by a gradual erosion of the different family groups in the series, for example the departure of Sam Seaborn and the death of Landingham. This reaches a climax at the end of season four when Bartlet's daughter is kidnapped by terrorists. The campaign also gives Sorkin the opportunity to explore Bartlet's personality and character in different ways. As the president's staff work at creating and enhancing a public perception of Bartlet ready for the election, Bartlet's inner psychological space is explored. During the stories that cover the campaign, a recurring theme is that of a conflict between Bartlet's likeable 'folksy' charm and his Nobel-prize winning intelligence. This conflict described in the episode 'The Two Bartlets' is resolved partially by showing the President meeting a psychiatrist. These two seasons begin to expose flaws in the character of Bartlet, in his health, his family, his politics and his psychology. While these frailties and flaws of the character of Bartlet are being developed, in the real world, the trauma of 9/11 and the immediate expectation of a political response created a shift in the perception of the idealised presidency. In the next section, I want to explore the ways in which, through the changes to the format and characters of the series, *The West Wing* reacted to the mood of America after the election of Bush and after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and how these events altered the way Sorkin defines both the character of Bartlet and the wider political world of his fictional White House.

***The West Wing* and 9/11**

In the weeks following 9/11 a number of cultural critics debated the implications of the attacks on popular culture. The effect on television series was immediate, particularly as the attacks occurred in the autumn, traditionally when new series begin. In the case of series premiered on both NBC and CBS, 9/11 caused the opening episodes of programmes such as *Friends* (1994-2004) and *The West Wing* to be delayed, partially out of national respect and partially to make room for extended news coverage. The delays, however were only the beginning of the debate. At the time, a great deal was written about how various series would need to adapt to the change in America following 9/11, if, in the words of one critic, the

American public now wanted ‘mere distraction or enlightenment’ from their popular culture.⁴⁵ The effect of the attacks on popular culture was such that there was an assumption that any series, particularly contemporary drama, would need to change in some way to suit the new melancholy of post-9/11 America. Critic Eric Mink suggested ways in which particular types of programmes might adapt and how viewers might react differently to series. For example, series that depict New York emergency services such as *NYPD Blue* (1993-2005) and *Third Watch* (1999-2005) might gain in popularity,⁴⁶ whereas anti-authority series such as *The X-Files* (1993-2002) and *Dark Angel* (2000-2002) might find that they fail to grasp the popular mood. A series such as *The West Wing* faced a particular problem, argues Mink, as the attacks had, for the American viewer, ‘fundamentally changed how we perceive the real White House; viewers might need a few extra weeks’ rest before they’re ready to care again about the fictional Bartlet administration.’⁴⁷ Indeed as one critic suggested, there was now a possibility ‘that on any Wednesday night, an episode dealing with Bartlet’s re-election campaign may be interrupted by Bush going on the air and announcing a military action has begun.’⁴⁸ Critics such as Mink and Ken Parish Perkins foresaw the problems that Aaron Sorkin might face in reconciling his fictional political world with a real political world that had suddenly increased in importance and visibility.

Unlike most series premiering in the autumn of 2001, through *The West Wing*, Aaron Sorkin attempted to acknowledge the terrorist attacks of September 11 by writing a special episode that would be produced and transmitted before the start of the series proper. This episode ‘Isaac and Ishmael’ was written in a week, made in two weeks and may be considered *The West Wing*’s first response to 9/11. Sorkin wrote the episode intending it to stand apart from the series. The episode opens with the cast of the series talking to the camera explaining the digression from the series’ ongoing plots and displaying a charity telephone number for donations. The episode that followed took place entirely within a White House which has been ‘locked down’ owing to a terrorist threat. The plot is split in two between a group of students being lectured to by members of the cast, and an interview between Leo McGarry

and a Muslim employee of the White House suspected of being a terrorist. The episode acts as a morality play as Josh Lyman leads a discussion with the students calling on other members of staff to make contributions. The discussion covers topics including Islamic extremism and the perceived hatred of the American way of life. At the same time, McGarry is shown interrogating the member of staff and, ultimately, falling into assuming the preconceptions outlined by the discussion. As Trevor and Shawn Parry-Giles suggest, McGarry becomes ‘the voice of American civic nationalism,’⁴⁹ representing an insular, defensive reaction to terrorism. At the end of the episode the suspect is revealed to be innocent and, as McGarry apologetically admits, suspected principally because of his race, religion and appearance. In contrast with these scenes, the shape of the debate that Lyman has with the students is interesting. The whole episode seems constructed around questions, both the threatening, interrogative questions of McGarry, but also the more moderate, balanced questions that Lyman asks the students. These latter set of questions seem to acknowledge real issues that existed in America after 9/11 and frequently seem to suggest a different approach to the problem of Islamic fundamentalism from George W. Bush’s ‘polarized, nationalistic vision.’⁵⁰ Indeed, several of the debates that Lyman opens with the students are framed in a rhetorically similar way to Bush’s addresses to the nation. For example, Lyman suggests that Islamic extremists are to Islam what the Ku Klux Klan is to Christianity while Bush in his address to Congress on 20 September 2001 states that ‘Al Qaeda is to terror what the Mafia is to crime.’⁵¹ The differences between these two analogies are clear, Lyman’s serves to isolate and marginalise the terrorists, while Bush’s does the opposite, warning that the Islamic fundamentalists are a powerful, Mafia-like network. In this way, Sorkin seems to be proposing a different, more moderate and considered reaction to 9/11. At the same time, he implicitly tackles Bush’s approach by offering an alternative to tackling international terrorism that is more nuanced and less single-minded. Parry-Giles suggests that Sorkin is, in fact, offering an ‘alternative “presidential response” to terrorist violence.’⁵² With this in mind, it is interesting to observe the role Sorkin’s fictional President Bartlet has throughout the episode. Bartlet appears briefly for only one scene to answer a question concerning

martyrdom and is absent for the rest of the episode. Instead it is Lyman who leads the debate with the rest of the cast contributing with ideas and arguments. The absence of Bartlet has a number of implications on the approach to terrorism in the series. It has the effect of protecting Bartlet from the reality of 9/11 and from the expectation on Sorkin to replicate a presidential voice within his discussion of terrorism while in the real world, Bush is reacting to the situation. Before the transmission of 'Isaac and Ishmael', there was a great deal of speculation regarding how *The West Wing* would react to 9/11. Mostly this speculation considered the problems faced by Sorkin in presenting a fictional president at a time when so much of America was focussed on the real president. As Alan Pergament summarises:

Before Sept. 11, President Josiah Bartlet (Martin Sheen) and his staff were considered examples of what the nation longed for – caring leaders who stood up for what they believed in. However, the fictional crises the Bartlet administration faces pale by comparison to the very real ones facing President George W. Bush.⁵³

By keeping Bartlet away from the bulk of the discussions throughout 'Isaac and Ishmael' Sorkin offers interpretations of terrorism and proposed methods of tackling the terrorist threat, but shows how these ideas are formed from debate and discussion rather than by an individual presidential response. By keeping Bartlet out of these debates, Sorkin insulates the character from comparisons with Bush. Over the first two seasons of the series, the character of Bartlet has been constructed as a figure of almost unlimited intelligence and infallibility. Sorkin, therefore, is faced with the dilemma of how to illustrate the questions he feels need debating after 9/11 without diminishing their complexity and without providing simple answers. To this end, Sorkin structures 'Isaac and Ishmael' with questions rather than answers, attempting in the words of one critic to explore the 'emotional terrain' of America after 9/11 rather than to suggest a viable reaction to the attacks.⁵⁴ Reading the episode in this way, it may seem that Sorkin is, in a sense, keeping out of Bush's way, merely attempting to demonstrate the complexity of terrorism and even showing the difficulties facing Bush as he attempts to react to 9/11. Another way of looking at the episode, however, suggests Sorkin is in fact attempting something more subversive and argumentative. Parry-Giles reads the episode as an implicit criticism of the Bush administration's reaction to the 9/11 attacks. By structuring the plot of

'Isaac and Ishmael' around questions rather than solutions, by decentralising the presidential character of Bartlet and by focussing on the complexity of the subject matter:

what results is that much of the subplot's remaining action involving the students concerns a more nuanced and detailed discussion of the origins of terrorism, its roots in ancient and contemporary history, and its highly contingent and complex quality. The discussion refutes implicitly the explanation of terrorism articulated by George W. Bush in the wake of 9/11.⁵⁵

The poly-vocal approach of Sorkin in 'Isaac and Ishmael' acknowledges the complexity of the problem of terrorism, that to understand it requires several different perspectives rather than just one, and opposes the monolithic approach by Bush.

'Isaac and Ishmael' may be read in several ways. Charitably, it can be seen as an attempt by Sorkin to provide a response to 9/11 that emphasises complexity, moderation and debate as opposed to unilateralism, fear and, ultimately, further violence. Less charitably, it may be seen as Sorkin's attempt to encapsulate a response to 9/11 within a single episode. The way 'Isaac and Ishmael' is separated from the ongoing series, emphasised by the statements made by cast members before it starts, suggest that Sorkin is attempting to protect the idealistic Bartlet White House and the series as a whole from the changing public attitudes towards Bush. To this end, as one critic notes, Sorkin crosses 'his own barrier of reality' to tackle 9/11.⁵⁶ Either way, the episode seemed to provoke a greater amount of negative than positive criticism, particularly towards the episode's preachy didacticism.⁵⁷ What is interesting to note is that while the series proper began a week after 'Isaac and Ishmael', issues raised in the episode were not simply put to one side. Instead the various themes of complexity and moderation permeated the subsequent seasons together with an increasingly explicit criticism of Bush.

The two seasons following 'Isaac and Ishmael' are principally structured around Bartlet's run for re-election. This narrative allows Sorkin to explore the popularity of Bartlet and to anticipate what might make Bartlet unpopular. It also encourages him to increase the dramatic tension within the series by placing obstacles between Bartlet and re-election, such as the

revelation of his MS, the concealment of his assassination of Shareef and tensions in his personal life. Finally, the re-election campaign means that Sorkin introduces a Republican rival to Bartlet in the form of Robert Ritchie. After 9/11, critics suggested that Sorkin would have a problem presenting such an idealised, liberal White House in an America at war. It was felt that the pre-planned re-election campaign would feel ‘piddling’ in the middle of a terrorism crisis.⁵⁸ I believe ‘Isaac and Ishmael’ was an attempt to offer an immediate reaction to 9/11 and implicit criticism of Bush, and as the two subsequent seasons progressed, Sorkin continued and expanded upon themes he raised in the stand-alone episode. In the next section, I want to explore how these wider elements of seasons three and four can be traced to both George Bush and to the changing attitudes of the American nation after 9/11. To do this, I will compare *The West Wing* with a contemporaneous series, *24*, to compare the depictions of the presidency on screen in the first years following 9/11.

The West Wing and 24

The concept behind *24* is that each season takes place in real time over the course of a single day. The series focuses on Jack Bauer, a counter-terrorism agent who is placed under increasing stress as each season his personal and professional life come under threat and he is forced to make difficult, sometimes illegal, decisions frequently leading to violent actions. The first season, transmitted at the same time as the third season of *The West Wing* concerns a conspiracy to assassinate a black presidential candidate, David Palmer. Tellingly, as in the climax to the first season of *The West Wing*, the assassination of a presidential character is seen as the ultimate terrorist atrocity before 9/11. The second season, by contrast, concerns the threat of an atomic bomb being detonated in Los Angeles. At this point in the series, Palmer has become president, but his reluctance to retaliate by attacking three Middle-Eastern countries causes him to be temporarily ousted from power. The differences between *The West Wing* and *24* are marked, especially in each series reaction to terrorism and 9/11 and in the characterisation of the presidential figure. *24* tackles terrorism directly and Jack Bauer, the series hero, is in direct contact with terrorists, on the ‘front line’. Similarly, Palmer is

frequently in direct contact with Bauer, over the series' ubiquitous mobile phones, using Bauer as an unofficial agent. Whereas *The West Wing* approaches terrorism cautiously, reacting to the confusion of 9/11 in a measured, cerebral way with questions and debate, *24* approaches it headlong and with guns. Palmer is no Bush, but he is certainly no Bartlet. Whilst he reacts to the emergency situations without the consideration and intellectualising of Bartlet, to a degree, this is due to the format of the series. *24*'s real time format encourages and necessitates pace, and this places it on a different narrative level to *The West Wing*. Palmer is, therefore, in terms of influence, subordinate to Bauer. Palmer spends the second season of *24* effectively isolated in a nuclear bunker, surrounded by conspiring and untrustworthy staff. Compare this to Bartlet in *The West Wing* episode 'Posse Comitatus' who, through Leo McGarry on a mobile phone, is made to seem as if he is in direct control of the assassination of Shareef. The sub-plots involving Palmer throughout the first two seasons of *24* always stem from a crisis of power, in the first season he is lied to by his wife and family, in the second he is conspired against by the Vice-President and his staff. By contrast, the whole ethos of *The West Wing* rests on the familial closeness and loyalty of Bartlet's advisors. This difference can be seen in the two series' contrasting uses of the 25th Amendment. In *24* the President is unwillingly ousted from power for failing to react to a terrorist situation, whereas in *The West Wing*, Bartlet voluntarily steps down out of a fear of reacting inappropriately. Palmer's race is also a contrast with Bartlet, though on the surface not explicitly referred to, as critics suggest, the actor Dennis Haysbert 'doesn't play the first black president in "24"; he plays the president.'⁵⁹ The presentation of a black president becomes more common in films in the 1990s and 2000s. In films such as *The Fifth Element* (1997) and *Deep Impact* (1998), the race of the president is chosen to enhance the futuristic quality of the production. In the same way, while Palmer's blackness is not a direct issue in *24*, it does add to a wider trend of modernity throughout the series and this contrasts with the old-fashioned, techno-phobic, white Bartlet. *The West Wing* fetishises Bartlet's attachments with the past: his knowledge of history, his Catholicism, his links with the founding of New Hampshire whereas *24* fetishises newness and change. The format of *24* encourages, and in

many ways necessitates, this feeling of constant change through its pace and constant presentation of a series of events that run out of control. This, in turn, influences the series' political stance. Whereas *The West Wing* promotes moderation and caution, as demonstrated in 'Isaac and Ishmael', *24*, as one critic noted tends to veer politically from far-right to far-left with its combination of political leaders making tough, violent decisions and its cynical depiction of corruption around the presidency and, in later seasons, of the president himself.⁶⁰ Comparing the positive critical reaction towards the post-9/11 influenced second season of *24* to the poor reaction towards 'Isaac and Ishmael', it is tempting to suggest that the former series' depiction of political extremes and uncompromising anti-terrorism officers captures the public mood in America more than debate and moderation and reflected the aggressive reaction of Bush to the terrorist attacks. In short, it appeared that the American public was beginning to favour Bush's hard-line approach to international terrorism over that postulated in *The West Wing*. After the initial reaction of *The West Wing* to 9/11 in 'Isaac and Ishmael', the series returns to normal developing a storyline based around the re-election of Bartlet. In the next section, I examine how this fictional campaign responds to the post-9/11 popularity of the Bush administration.

Bartlet, Ritchie and Bush

Prior to 9/11, George W. Bush was a president with generally low popularity ratings after a close and controversial election victory over Al Gore. Although 9/11 boosted Bush's popularity, Stella Bruzzi points out that a general shift had taken place from disillusionment felt during the Clinton presidency to an attitude of partisan contempt as demonstrated by Michael Moore's documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004). Moore's film summed up a liberal attitude towards Bush, characterising the President as a figure who combines 'inelegancies of speech' with being the 'figurehead for a larger, more powerful regime.'⁶¹ This liberal contempt towards Bush slowly becomes apparent in *The West Wing*, albeit in a diluted form. The character of Bartlet runs for re-election, a storyline that gives Sorkin the opportunity to psychoanalyse the character of Bartlet and to create a fitting Republican rival in the form of

Ritchie. In this section, I want to examine how the change in Bartlet and the characterisation of Ritchie are indebted to the increasing popularity of Bush and the subsequent, increasingly forthright liberal backlash to this popularity.

The choice of depicting a fight for election between Bartlet and a Republican rival fits with the timeline of the series. Season one is set during the first year of Bartlet's first term in office and each season that follows is set one year after the last. With this in mind it seems obvious that an election would take place during the fourth season and as candidates generally declare themselves a year prior to the election, season three would be concerned with Bartlet's primary campaign. Despite this, critics at the time questioned Sorkin's decision to prioritise the campaign and election asking:

why is Sorkin even doing a major election arc? No matter who the opponent is, the audience knows that Bartlet's going to win. NBC isn't going to fire the entire cast in midseason and start over. This victory's a done deal; better that the show just treated it that way by making Bartlet's opponent a no-hoper (à la Mondale in 84) and leaving the campaign in the background.⁶²

It was certainly the case that Sorkin faced particular problems in presenting a presidential campaign that would work on a dramatic level. He spent the first two seasons constructing Bartlet as both the ideal President and as the hero of the series and, as Alan Sepinwall suggests, the character of Bartlet is not one that can be retired without completely changing the series and the cast. To solve this, Sorkin chooses not to present the campaign as a potential for Bartlet to lose, but instead as an opportunity to further develop and expose different aspects of Bartlet's character. With this in mind Sorkin introduces Robert Ritchie, Bartlet's opponent, as a contrast to Bartlet. The themes that Sorkin highlights throughout the campaign are not particularly related to the competition, but rather to the morality and ideology of the race for the presidency.

As Ian Scott points out, the election film has become a sub-genre in its own right that, by the 1990s, had become populated by satire such as *Bob Roberts* (1992), *Bulworth* (1998) and *Primary Colors* (1998).⁶³ These films raised questions about the lack of morality and values

in American politics and the predominance of style over substance. In *The West Wing*, particularly in season four, Sorkin tackles these issues in a way that appears to attempt to distance the series from the genre of political campaign satire and to access a more old-fashioned way of presenting elections. The first episode of season four sets the tone for the campaign that follows. '20 Hours in America' is set at the beginning of the campaign, after the introduction of Ritchie. The main plot of the episode concerns Toby, Josh and Donna who have been left behind after a campaign speech in Indiana and are forced into conducting a road-trip across the state to get back to Washington. Along the way they encounter a number of people who help them. For much of the two-hour episode, the two men are annoyed by the set-backs to their journey and by the concerns of the people they meet. By the end, however, Josh and Toby, prompted by Donna, come to realise that whilst they have been arguing about how Bartlet should be spun to appeal to the Americans, they have been ignoring the voices of the citizens. Sorkin, therefore, opens the fourth season not with a cynical satire, but with a moralising parable. Toby and Josh spend the episode worried about being away from the campaign and isolated from the White House but find that in fact, their journey has been a positive, if not essential, influence on how they perceive their jobs. The presentation of the episode as a road-trip across rural America adds to this shift in perceptions by tapping into a pre-existing, old cultural genre, that of the road-movie, with a principal thematic convention of self-discovery.⁶⁴ At the same time, the episodes are stylistically removed from the rest of the series, normally set in the White House, and thus signal an exception to the series' formula. With this episode, Sorkin stresses change both within Josh and Toby but also within the series. The series in a contained way has, in the words of Pamela Ezel demonstrated, 'a Capraesque notion of honesty as the best policy [celebrating] the common man for his wisdom and tolerance while turning away from the establishment elite'⁶⁵ and throughout this episode, Sorkin graphically illustrates this. Furthermore, by opening the season emphasising rural and small-town America, Sorkin is promoting a shift from the satire of the 1990s campaign genre towards a more idealised, old-fashioned approach to the Presidential election. Sorkin's approach to the campaign genre is less cynical and less rooted in style, appearance

and spin, and seems to be one that is more reminiscent of the Kennedy campaign documentary *Primary* (1960) than the Clinton documentary *The War Room* (1993). This shift is also noticeable in Sorkin's characterisation of Ritchie, and in his continuing character development of Bartlet.

The character of Ritchie is physically introduced in the last episode of season three, 'Posse Comitatus', but is referred to throughout the latter half of the season. Ritchie is presented as the Governor of Florida, a plain speaking, apparently uncomplicated man contrasting with Bartlet's polymath intellectualism and complex moral integrity. In terms of his politics, Ritchie's character is presented as a stereotypical Republican just as Bartlet is an idealised, stereotypical liberal Democrat. The way Ritchie's personality is constructed in the episodes prior to his appearance in 'Posse Comitatus' emphasises his lack of intelligence in comparison to Bartlet. Bartlet's description of Ritchie, 'I think we might be talking about a .22 caliber mind in a .357 magnum world' from the episode 'The US Poet Laureate' serves a dual function of noting Ritchie's lack of intelligence but also implicitly, through its use of the language of weaponry, connecting Ritchie with the Republican love of guns and suspicion of gun-control. Similarly, the choice of Florida as Ritchie's governorship recalls the 2000 election when that state, governed by George W. Bush's brother Jeb Bush, became the nexus of disagreement between the candidates. Sepinwall criticises this depiction of Ritchie arguing that the character was 'such a blatant dig at President Bush and his perceived stupidity that they might as well have cast Will Ferrell in the part.'⁶⁶ Sepinwall suggests that the extent of the parody of Bush in the character of Ritchie was such that he could have been played by a Bush impersonator. As a character, Ritchie does not develop beyond being a cipher of Republicanism, unilateralism and plain speaking. I believe the shallow depiction of Ritchie is an intentional device to contrast with Bartlet's depth of character. This contrast picks up a narrative thread began in the middle of season three in the episode 'The Two Bartlets' considering Bartlet's appeal to the electorate. In this episode, the 'two Bartlets' of the title are the two sides of the President's personality. Firstly, his intellectual, Nobel laureate-winning,

uncompromisingly liberal side and secondly, the folksy, eager-to-please side that his staff label 'Uncle Fluffy'. Toby, recognising the importance of the former side and the potential detriment of the latter, tackles Bartlet on these aspects of his public and private persona. This ultimately leads to Bartlet undergoing psychotherapy to explore the underlying reasons for his occasional unwillingness to use his intellectualism as a political weapon. This character analysis is prompted by the campaign, but it is also an extension of themes expressed in 'Isaac and Ishmael' concerning the dangers of monolithic political strategies and unilateralism. The character of Ritchie is designed to both represent the opposite of Bartlet, but also to give Bartlet a target that cannot be defeated by his folksy, genial side. The success of Sorkin in creating a credible opponent for Bartlet is questionable. As Sepinwall suggests:

The American voter's preference for plain talk over refinement isn't a bad idea for a political drama, especially one by a writer like Sorkin, who has made love of erudition a pet theme going back at least to his script for *The American President*. But Ritchie isn't a character; he's a straw man for Bartlet and the other regulars to knock down with ease.⁶⁷

The problem with Ritchie as a character is, as Sepinwall notes, that he is a cipher and that his only function is to be denigrated by Bartlet and his staff. Ritchie's lack of character is, in part, due to his absence for much of the series, he appears in only two episodes. To a degree, this criticism is valid, as are Sepinwall's earlier comments concerning that lack of dramatic tension in a presidential contest where the winner is not in doubt. In Sorkin's defence, however, it is clear that the competition of the campaign is not a primary dramatic motive of the series. This is made clear by Ritchie's absence, but also by the lack of significance placed by Sorkin on the election result. The episode in which Bartlet wins re-election, 'Election Night' takes place relatively early in the fourth season, while the result of the election has seemingly already been guaranteed at the end of the previous episode 'Game On' which shows Bartlet comprehensively beating Ritchie in a debate. Instead Sorkin replaces the uncertainty of the election result with the uncertainty of which side of his personality Bartlet chooses to exercise during the final stages of the campaign. For Sorkin, it seems, the primary narrative is concerned with Bartlet's struggle with the different aspects of his own personality, in other words Bartlet versus Bartlet rather than Bartlet versus Ritchie. The

characterisation of Ritchie, therefore, is telling in the ways it helps Sorkin expose the themes he began to outline in 'Isaac and Ishmael': the importance of debate and intelligence, the complexity of politics and the need for multi-faceted approaches to political problems such as terrorism. This is made clear as Bartlet's staff struggle to compose a ten-word statement to explain a complex economic point for Bartlet to use in the debate in the episode 'Game On'. In the end they fail and it is Ritchie who comes up with the condensed, simplified précis. This backfires for the Governor, however, as Bartlet defeats Ritchie in the debate by ruthlessly exposing his ignorance. The moral of the episode is that most problems faced by the White House cannot be summarised in ten words.

The Bartlet versus Ritchie campaign, therefore, may be interpreted in various ways. To start with it is an example of Aaron Sorkin reconditioning the genre of the political campaign film from the cynical satire of the 1990s. I would also suggest that the story arc of the campaign throughout the two seasons of *The West Wing* was less concerned with which candidate would win the election, but rather a continuing theme of developing Bartlet's character. Ritchie becomes a cipher of Republican figures, crucially Bush and, to a more superficial degree, Reagan, but Sorkin chooses not to explore his character. Because of this, Ritchie remains an underdeveloped personality, a simple binary opposition to inspire examination and reinterpretation of Bartlet. Crucially, the concentration of the election narrative on the character of Bartlet and on the theme of a conflict within Bartlet between his folksy appeal and his intellectual accomplishments, is part of the same pre-occupation that shape Sorkin's reaction to 9/11.

Paradoxically, Sorkin continues to focus on the flaws in Bartlet's presidency while presenting the victory of Bartlet over Ritchie. As the seasons progress, Bartlet is shown becoming more and more physically, politically and psychologically vulnerable. The final episode of season four, 'Twenty Five' sees the culmination of this gradual deconstruction of Bartlet's presidency. The episode climaxes as Bartlet's daughter Zoey is kidnapped, an occurrence

Bartlet himself predicts early in the first season. Recognising that he would be unable to react to the kidnap in a way required of a President owing to his personal involvement, Bartlet decides to invoke the 25th Amendment and temporarily relinquish his presidency. Unfortunately, at the moment he does this Bartlet is without a Vice-President, so is forced instead to give control to a Republican rival, the Speaker of the House, Glenallen Walken. This moment is interesting for several reasons not least that it places Sorkin in the position of developing a Republican presidential character for the second time in the same season. Walken is depicted as a hawkish Republican and initially appears, like Ritchie, to be intellectually subordinate to Bartlet. The shock that comes from Bartlet's sudden handover of power to Walken is rooted in the fact that despite defeating Ritchie, a Ritchie-like candidate has still become President. In this way, the dramatic, though clearly temporary accession of Walken to the presidency, is another example of the increasing frailty and vulnerability of Bartlet. When considering the narrative twist in the context of the series reaction to 9/11, however, it becomes clear that Walken is not quite a direct equivalent of Ritchie. Over the course of the episodes in which he appears, Walken is presented as a viable alternative to Bartlet and, through his management of the crisis of the kidnapping of Bartlet's daughter, a viable alternative to Bartlet's approach towards military action. Interestingly, because of the time he is on screen, Walken is characterised not, as with Bartlet, by his long term actions but by his immediate response to the crisis situation. Another effect of his short screen time is that the scriptwriters rely on physical quirks to build his character. John Goodman plays Walken as the physical opposite of Bartlet, large and brash with a Midwestern accent and comes complete with a pet dog. As Walken and Bartlet appear at a joint press conference in the season five episode '7A WF 83429', Lyman notes that Bartlet 'looks small' next to his temporary successor. Later during another press conference, Donna Moss suggests that Walken appears 'presidential'. In this way, presidentiality is produced through Walken's physical presence and blunt mannerisms as opposed to Bartlet's intellectual rhetoric. This physical style of presidency aligns Walken with real world presidencies such as Theodore Roosevelt or Harry Truman, while Bartlet is more profitably compared with frail, cerebral

Franklin Roosevelt. What is interesting is that Walken is not presented in a particularly negative light in the series. When Moss refers to him as presidential, it is at the same time a source of apprehension for the threatened Bartlet staff, but also a seal of approval. Walken's physical style is the right type of temporary presidency for the crisis of Zoey Bartlet's kidnapping. His reappearance in the episode 'The Stormy Present' later in the fifth season, presents him outside of a crisis situation as an almost comedic, Falstaffian figure. It is here that Bartlet is shown to recapture the qualities of the presidency.

For most television series made soon after 9/11 the choice was either to acknowledge the attacks or to actively ignore them. For Aaron Sorkin and *The West Wing* the expectation was greater. Over two series, *The West Wing* had characterised the ideal Democrat president: intelligent, honourable and honest. After 9/11, critics began to question how Bartlet and the liberal world that the series advocated would appeal to an America suddenly at war. Sorkin's immediate solution was 'Isaac and Ishmael', an isolated episode that advocated moderation, debate and caution; most of all, though, it emphasised an internal reaction to 9/11 as opposed to an external one such as war. At first it seemed that this episode was designed to be the one necessary reply to 9/11 before the series continued as normal. Gradually, however, issues and themes raised in the episode started to percolate into the series. The Bartlet/Ritchie election is the clearest example of these new sets of themes. As in 'Isaac and Ishmael', the campaign concentrates not on the fight between Ritchie and Bartlet, but instead on the internal fight between Bartlet's two political faces, in the words of Toby Ziegler from the first season episode 'The Crackpots and these Women':

This is the perfect metaphor. After you're gone and the poets write *The Legend of Josiah Bartlet*, let them write you as a *tragic* figure. Let the poets write, "He had the tools to be a leader of men, but the voices of his better angels were shouted down by his obsessive need to win"

The campaign of season three and four offers a literalisation of this statement as Bartlet is forced by Toby to psychologically confront his need to be popular and to win. This in turn becomes a meditation on the conflict between the complex world of politics and the appeal of

politicians that are plain-spoken. Indeed, this debate concerns the very nature of presidentiality. The Bartlet versus Ritchie campaign demonstrates how presidentiality can be achieved through rhetoric and intellectual debate just as well as physical presence and folksy charm. Ritchie is, as Sepinwall suggests, 'a straw man', but I would argue that his presence is not intended to be as an opponent to Bartlet, but rather as a device to highlight the danger of anti-intellectualism in politics. By contrast, Walken is presented as a version of Ritchie that is suited to a crisis presidency and this continues the debate over the different sorts of presidentiality. As I will demonstrate, this debate continues throughout the rest of the series as Bartlet's brand of presidentiality is tested by the introduction of other viable presidential candidates.

During their first on-screen encounter in the episode 'Posse Comitatus' Bartlet accuses Ritchie of turning 'being un-engaged into a Zen-like thing', while the episodes that focus on Zoey Bartlet's kidnapping shows the success of a president who is both physical and aggressive, *and* engaged. Both Bartlet and Walken are idealised models of two different styles of presidency and two different models of presidentiality, but through his inability to compete with Bartlet, it is Ritchie who becomes the most explicit criticism of George W. Bush seen in the series.

***The West Wing* Seasons 5, 6 and 7**

The end of season four of *The West Wing* marked the end of Aaron Sorkin and Thomas Schlamme's involvement with the programme. From season five until the end of the series, producer John Wells took over from Sorkin as the show runner, the person who made the decisions about the form and trajectory of the plotlines and the overall style of the series. The departure of Sorkin as writer was a particularly shocking loss to the series owing to his distinctive style. As actor John Spencer noted whilst Sorkin was still involved with the series, 'There is one irreplaceable element in *The West Wing* and it ain't the eight [primary cast

members]... ...It's the guy who sits in that office and writes 22 episodes a year.'⁶⁸ In this section, I want to examine the different ways *The West Wing* adapted to the absence of the 'one irreplaceable element'. I want to look at how the approaches towards coping with the lack of Sorkin's characteristic voice and style affected the series particularly through its presentation of presidential figures. Finally, I want to look at how *The West Wing* fared as a series under threat during the final three years of its production. The last three seasons of the series also mark a period where discussion of the programme begins to focus on the declining critical and popular fortunes of the series. This shift seems initially to be because of the waning ratings of the series but ultimately because of the attempts to re-energise the format in seasons six and seven with new cast members, concept episodes and a different style.

Season Five

The departures of Aaron Sorkin and Thomas Schlamme become particularly evident as the last two seasons of the series progress. The process of producing season five by contrast appeared to have been one of striking a balance between retaining the style and feel of Sorkin whilst simultaneously progressing the series. Wells addressed this balance in interviews at the start of the fifth season commenting that 'our hope would be that you don't sense that it's *very* different.'⁶⁹ At the same time, his brother and co-executive producer Llewellyn Wells commented that 'there may be a slightly different take on things, maybe a bit more plot-driven' and 'there will be some changes in the way the characters sound, but they'll be subtle changes.'⁷⁰ These two aspects of *The West Wing*, maintaining the distinctive dialogue within each episode whilst shifting the emphasis of the plots towards concentrating on the personal lives of the White House staff are actually continuations of a trend that can be seen over the previous seasons. For example the fourth season episode 'The Long Goodbye' concentrates entirely on C. J. Cregg visiting her father who is suffering from Alzheimer's Disease and contains no continuation of political storylines. Similarly, season five continues the plotline of Bartlet's developing fallibility and, as J. Elizabeth Clark notes, the character is shown to be increasingly frustrated by having to 'sacrifice his personal principles for what he believes to

be the higher cause.’⁷¹ Season five was criticised at the time for ‘listless plotlines’ and it may be that this criticism is not without merit.⁷² The ongoing themes that Sorkin initiated in seasons three and four came to a climax when, after his daughter was kidnapped by terrorists, Bartlet invoked the 25th Amendment and temporarily handed power over to the Republican Speaker of the House, Glenallen Walken. Sorkin left the series with Bartlet in this state, powerless and impotent so the beginning of season five depicts the outcome of the kidnapping and the return of the characters, including Bartlet, to their former position within the series. The rest of the season appears to hold the characters in this state and almost appears to experimentally assess whether Sorkin’s series can be replicated without his characteristic scripting. The kidnapping that provided the cliff-hanger at the end of season four also provided a climax to both the development of Bartlet’s infallibility and to the story began in ‘Posse Comitatus’ in which Bartlet agrees to the covert assassination of a terrorist. These themes are continued anti-climactically throughout season five, anticlimatic because the themes have already reached their natural conclusion at the end of the previous season. A way that season five does differ from its predecessors, however, is in its relationship with the real world. In its fifth season *The West Wing* staff deal with crises and situations in, amongst other places, North Korea (‘Han’), Saudi Arabia (‘The Stormy Present’) and Israel and Palestine (‘The Warfare of Genghis Khan’, ‘Gaza’ and ‘Memorial Day’). This contrasts with the fictional construction of Qumar in the third and fourth seasons bringing the series into closer proximity with the real world and with current affairs. As Clark suggests, ‘The more realistically *The West Wing* portrays politics, the further it strays from a successful, idealised left agenda, the more difficult it becomes to engage viewers in the fantasy of democracy.’⁷³ This movement in the series towards reality is countered by a preoccupation with the past during the season. For example, the introduction of another of Bartlet’s daughters in ‘Abu el Banat’ or the episode ‘The Stormy Present’, in which Bartlet attends the funeral of one of his predecessors and is accompanied by both ex-President Walken and ex-President Newman played by James Cromwell. The intended effect of this is clearly to expose for the first time in the series how Bartlet reacts to other presidential figures and to highlight the influence of past

presidents on the actions of incumbent presidents. This continues a theme instigated in the previous season when the idealised presidentiality of Bartlet is tested by the introduction of another viable presidential figure in the form of Walken. The episode effectively reverse-engineers a fictional White House before Bartlet takes office. Prior to this, Bartlet's position in the sequence of real presidents is somewhat ambiguous, the series avoiding reference to any president after Eisenhower, real or imaginary. In 'The Stormy Present', the exposure of Bartlet's lineage constructs a fictional history that actively distances the series from reality at the same time the use of actual places and events attempts to pull the series into the real world. This fusion of fiction and reality seems to be a result of attempting to make the series more relevant whilst at the same time trying to retain the idealistic fantasy seen throughout the first four seasons. The failure of season five may be interpreted in several ways: firstly, the ratings for the series fell from an average of 13.5 million for closing episodes of the fourth season to 11.8 million for the whole of the fifth season.⁷⁴ Secondly, the critical reaction to the fifth season was poor; for example one critic described the season as containing 'more soap than substance' while another suggested that the resolution to the kidnapping storyline did not match the drama of its instigation:

Remember when the president's daughter was kidnapped at the end of the season and Bartlett stepped down, leaving a Republican in charge of the Democratic White House? Who could forget? Remember how the whole thing resolved itself? Me neither.⁷⁵

Finally, the failure of the fifth season is indicated by the creative decisions by the production team concerning the sixth season. One potential explanation for the poor reaction to the fifth season may be its lack of an overarching plot. In season three and four, Bartlet's re-election campaign provided a new direction and focus for the series, season five however lacks this identity and as such appears to be without direction.

The season following the departure of Sorkin, therefore attempts to both access the idealistic past of the show and to introduce a new, more realistic relevance to the storylines of the series. The overall effect of the season, however, is that of a production crew trying to decide

which direction to take the series and, in the meantime, treading water. Furthermore, when examining the changes made during the sixth and seventh season, as I now intend to do, this stagnancy appears to have been acknowledged by Wells.

Seasons Six and Seven

Seasons six and seven of *The West Wing* are principally concerned with the search for, and the election of, Bartlet's successor. Unlike the Bartlet versus Ritchie election, however, the series presents the various campaigns as uncertain, open competitions. To this end two potential presidential characters are introduced: Democrat Congressman Matthew Santos, played by Jimmy Smits, and Republican Senator Arnold Vinick, played by Alan Alda. In addition to this, season six uses the Democratic primary campaign as its dramatic centre resulting in two more presidential possibilities: previous Vice President John Hoynes, played by Tim Matheson and current Vice President Bob Russell, played by Gary Cole. Unlike the role played by Ritchie in the third and fourth seasons, however, all these characters, particularly Santos and Vinick are not 'straw men' but believable presidential candidates and, more importantly, each a believable successor to Bartlet and viable presidential alternatives.⁷⁶ In addition to this, judging by the dramatic gravitas of their past roles, Alda and Smits are recruited initially as potential replacements for Martin Sheen as *The West Wing's* principal actor. In this section, I want to examine how the final two seasons of *The West Wing* adapt and refresh the format of the series and how these changes impact on the character of Bartlet.

Santos versus Vinick

The characters of Santos and Vinick are introduced in season six apparently with the intention of making the campaign storyline in season seven as realistic as possible. This seems to have been a conscious reaction to the criticism of *The West Wing's* previous depiction of a presidential election between Bartlet and Rob Ritchie. In this earlier campaign, the Republican was presented as a way of emphasising and elevating Bartlet's intelligence and, as I discussed in the last case study, a forum for Aaron Sorkin to criticise the modern, image and

spin dominated political campaign and to bolster the nuanced, intellectual presidentiality of Bartlet. The Santos and Vinick race is depicted in a different way, each candidate is given time to develop and be characterised. A change in the format and cast in seasons six and seven allows Sorkin's replacement, John Wells, to move the focus of the series away from the Bartlet White House and to place it on the campaign, primarily concentrating on Santos but also devoting time to present Vinick as a Republican who could win. Furthermore, before the series was cancelled in January 2006, there was a possibility of *The West Wing* progressing to an eighth season. The implication of this is that the winner of the presidential election would be the focus of the series beyond season seven. This means that both Santos and Vinick were required to be characters with the potential to continue as the stars if the series were to continue. At the time of playing Santos, Jimmy Smits's screen career had been one of playing 'introspective good guys'⁷⁷ in series such as *LA Law* (1986–1994) and *NYPD Blue*. Similarly, Alda's television career prior to being cast as Vinick had been dominated by his role as "Hawkeye" Pierce in *MASH* (1972–1983) but seems to have been perceived as a 'nice-guy actor' in the 1980s and 1990s primarily because of his public as opposed to screen persona.⁷⁸ In films such as *Murder at 1600* (1997) and his role immediately prior to Vinick, Senator Ralph Brewster in *The Aviator* (2004), Alda's characters have been manipulative and, in the case of the former film, murderous. It is testament to Alda's appeal in interviews and public appearances, however, that each time he plays a negative character it is seen as a surprise. In short, both Alda and Smits have a background in quality television series that makes their succeeding Martin Sheen a possibility enough to avoid compromising the suspense of the campaign. These backgrounds, their star status and their abilities to lead a series are both exposed and used in the seventh season episode 'The Debate'. This episode, the seventh of season seven, is remarkable for several reasons. Firstly it was performed live twice on the 6 November 2005, once for the east coast and once for the west. Secondly, it features no original members of the cast of *The West Wing*. Aside from a short introductory sequence showing Santos and Vinick preparing with staff for their entrances the episode concentrates on the two characters in front of an audience. To include a live episode is not unique in

American television: ‘Ambush’ (25 September 1997), an episode of *ER*, also produced by John Wells, was shot and transmitted live in a similar way. What does make ‘The Debate’ significant, however, is the way it replicates reality. Unlike the *ER* episode that has no intrinsic reason to be live other than to add another layer of tension to the drama, ‘The Debate’ recreates a real presidential debate, transmitted live, moderated by Forrest Sawyer, an ex-newscaster, furthermore, the episode is shot like a television event on video rather than film to emulate the look of a debate. The episode is clearly intended as an attempt to increase the media coverage of the series in and, in doing so, the ratings. Considering the media reactions to the proposed episode, it is clear that to a certain degree this intention was successful. In interviews conducted prior to the episode’s transmission, Alda, Smits and Wells all emphasise the risks and potential benefits of performing in and producing a live programme, particularly one as complex as *The West Wing*. The focus of these interviews appears to be on the degree to which the actors were expected to diverge from the written script and to improvise. For example in one interview with both Alda and Smits, the actors seem to be treating the debate as a genuine competition:

“It makes it fun. When an actor plays a character, you really want what that character wants. Otherwise it doesn’t look authentic. So I really want to defeat Jimmy – I mean Jimmy as the character,” Alda said. “No, he wants to win,” is the retort from Smits when told of Alda’s remark.⁷⁹

The blurring between whether this is a recreation of a debate between presidential candidates or debate between two actors is telling, firstly, emphasising the competition between the actors reinforces the tension of the event and introduces another layer of reality. This illusory layer of reality is equivalent to the use of monochrome or the allusions to photographs of Kennedy in *Life* or indeed to the detail of set design in earlier White House films. In all these cases, the overriding effect is the production of presidentiality through a visual cue that emotionally connects with the audience. Secondly, the live debate in *The West Wing* offers a satirical perspective of real presidential debates, as Wells says:

In many ways what they’ve done is created a world for real presidential debates in which the candidates have an opportunity, to a larger audience, not to engage each other, but to give another version of their stump speech...

...the whole idea about doing a [live 'West Wing'] debate was to try to do a debate in which the characters actually debated.⁸⁰

Just as Sorkin's presentation of political campaigning with Bartlet versus Ritchie may be read as a criticism of the shallowness and cynicism of real presidential campaigns, 'The Debate' may be read as an attempt to present a presidential debate that is paradoxically more real and less scripted than a real presidential debate. Finally, the competition between the actors in preparation for the episode is telling when considering the significance of the Santos/Vinick election. As Kevin Thompson suggests, 'while Vinick and Santos are battling for the commander-in-chief post, Alda and Smits, both of whom are signed for next season, are also engaged in a very real battle to determine who will become The Face of the revamped series next year.'⁸¹ In other words, the debate may be read as a combination of an attempt to recreate the feel of a presidential debate, a satirical comment on the validity of the real debates and also as part of an extended audition for the two actors to find a replacement for Sheen. 'The Debate' was transmitted during a time of crisis for *The West Wing*. The series had been moved to Sunday nights apparently to avoid having to compete with *Lost* (2004 – present) and *American Idol* (2002 – present) but had been continuing to lose viewers. While critics seem to have been positive in their anticipation of the live episode, they noted that it was unfortunate as:

The West Wing's Sunday night constituency has shrunk to the point where fewer people than ever are around to appreciate such fine points as the delicate balance between the views of a moderate Republican and a not particularly radical Democrat.⁸²

The complexity of the politically balanced race between Vinick and Santos is highlighted in an examination of *The West Wing's* main rival during the seventh season.

The West Wing and Commander in Chief

Commander in Chief starred Geena Davis as Mackenzie Allen, a politically independent Vice President who, following the death of the incumbent Republican, Teddy Bridges, becomes president. When the first episodes of the series were transmitted, it was an enormous success,

achieving double the ratings of *The West Wing*. These ratings were not sustained, however, and the series was cancelled after eighteen episodes. The parallels between *The West Wing* and *Commander in Chief* are striking: both were created by a single writer, in case of the latter Rob Lurie. Both were also influenced by an earlier film: Sorkin used elements of his film *The American President*, while in 2000 Lurie wrote and directed *The Contender*, a drama set in the White House starring Jeff Bridges and Joan Allen (two names that are repeated in *Commander in Chief*). Interestingly, while at times *The West Wing* can be seen as *The American President* with added political detail, the relationship between *Commander in Chief* and *The Contender* is the reverse. Lurie's film concerns a Democrat President who tries to recruit a female Vice President despite attempts by a Republican Senator to smear her. The influences of *The Contender* on *Commander in Chief* are clear: both feature women who gain a high political position, and both are concerned with the vulnerability of women in politics. In *Commander in Chief*, whilst Lurie represents the political vulnerability of his president, he is rather more preoccupied with the effect of her position on her personal life:

“I don't want to get bogged down with the minutiae of lawmaking” Lurie said. “*The West Wing* is rather arcane and deals with a lot of issues. We're going to deal a lot with how the president gets her kids to school and goes trick-or-treating.”⁸³

Commander in Chief reacts against the complexity of *The West Wing* by creating a presidency that is politically neutered. Instead it concentrates on the personal life of Allen in the East Wing and on the particular struggle a female president would encounter in the West Wing to gain respect. The series does depict political conflict, but it is not conflict between Democrats and Republicans. Instead the main antagonist of the series, Nathan Templeton, played by Donald Sutherland, opposes Allen from a paternally old-fashioned, misogynistic basis. As Diane Holloway suggests, ‘taking the politics out of “Commander” sets the show a world apart from “The West Wing,” which loves to deal with partisan issues and the inner workings of the government.’⁸⁴ What is interesting is that the seventh season of *The West Wing* is part of a process of moving away from Partisanship towards a more idealistic depiction of a presidential campaign. It is true that in its depiction of Rob Ritchie in season four, *The West*

Wing did produce a demonised Republican, but whilst Santos and Vinick are still Democrat and Republican, the way they are each depicted in the series, as can be seen in 'The Debate', makes it possible for either to win the election and become the lead character. One motive behind Lurie's creation of *Commander in Chief* seems to have been to create a realistic, female President and to expose how the job gets in the way of her personal life. The characterisation of Mackenzie Allen in the pilot episode is split between her relationships with staff, cabinet and military, and with her family. In this way, the episode creates a tension between the personal and political life of the president. For example, two consecutive scenes show Allen debating with others whether she should resign as Vice-President and leave the door open for the duplicitous Templeton. In the first, she questions her own staff, in the second she asks her children. When she has decided, her first action is to take control of the military and force the government of Nigeria to release a mother and child sentenced to death. The comparison between this action and her domestic life is a repeated motif throughout the series. Unlike Bartlet's initial moral uncertainty, Allen's relationship with the military is decisive and strong. At the same time, her husband, the new 'First Gentleman' is shown his new pink office by a staff member who repeatedly criticizes the political approach of Hillary Clinton to the role. In this way, the office of the president is presented in gendered terms. The significance of the first female president and Allen's success in releasing the captive Nigerian women is mitigated by the fact that she relies on a masculine threat of military action in order to do so. *Commander in Chief* appears to the surface to be a progressive fantasy, an idealised vision of the future in which a woman can become president. The focus of the series is on the struggle of the woman in the role as president and, later in the series, the struggle between Allen's desire to be objective and her desire to fight for the rights of women. The reality of *Commander in Chief* is that the gender and personal life of Allen becomes intertwined with the political life of the presidency. This is unlike *The West Wing*, a series that argues for the return of debate and rhetoric over personality to the presidency. It is interesting that just as *Commander in Chief* introduced the first female president, *The West Wing* introduces a new contender for the role, the Hispanic Matt Santos.

The New Style: Bartlet and Santos

Santos is introduced in the fourth episode of season six, 'Liftoff', but the major change to the series occurs in the eleventh episode, 'Opposition Research'. It is with this episode that the storyline of the campaign to become Bartlet's replacement begins but it is also the start of a new format for the whole series. From this episode onwards, *The West Wing* begins to alternate, more or less evenly, between episodes set in the White House concentrating on Bartlet and his staff and those set across America concentrating mostly on Santos but also on Vinick, Russell and Hoynes. 'Opposition Research', therefore sets a format for the season and a half that follows it. It is the episode that presents the start of the Democratic primary campaign that dominates the sixth season. It follows Josh Lyman and Matt Santos in New Hampshire as they attempt to recruit activists and assess the chances of Santos's bid for the presidency. The episode immediately begins to emphasise the contrasts with the more conventional episodes set in the White House. It opens, unusually, with the episode title in black on a white background, a polarised reversal of the norm. This is then replaced by an almost entirely white shot of the countryside of New Hampshire in snow. The Santos campaign starts with the candidate meeting unconvinced potential voters at a town dump, a site chosen by Lyman to show the apparent humility of the candidate. In terms of the story, the initial setting of a dump reiterates the fact that this episode is signalling a change and contrast with the glamorous Washington locations in the rest of the series. Usually in the series, episodes that feature scenes shot on location away from Washington, for example '20 Hours in America', are balanced with scenes in the White House. Throughout this episode, the White House is shown only twice, the first when Lyman telephones Toby Zeigler for advice, the second when Bartlet telephones Lyman with polling information. These brief moments of contact with the conventional settings of *The West Wing* serve to emphasise the unconventionality of the Lyman/Santos scenes. The viewer is also given insight into another candidate's campaign, that of the incumbent Vice President Bob Russell, as Lyman is invited to a meeting with his ex-White House colleagues, Will Bailey and Donna Moss. It becomes

clear during this meeting how further advanced and politically secure the Russell campaign is compared with that of Santos, and the contrast makes the Santos campaign appear quixotic and vulnerable. Considering these moments, the whole episode may be said to be concerned with contrasts, between the isolation and chaos of the Santos campaign and the stability and comfort of the White House and with the order and security of the Russell camp. As the Democratic primary plotlines are developed throughout the season, transforming into Presidential campaign storylines in the seventh season, it becomes clear how this episode sets a benchmark for future episodes. From the first scene set in a town dump, through scenes set in a ramshackle campaign headquarters, to scenes showing Santos campaigning in people's living rooms, the episode exposes the minutiae of details and provincialism of the initial stages of the race for the presidency. 'Opposition Research' is the first of a regular sequence of episodes set outside Washington in New Hampshire ('Freedonia'), Iowa ('King Corn') and New York ('La Palabra') that offer a localised, domestic comparison with the international crises that the remaining White House staff contends with. For example, the episode 'King Corn' follows three presidential candidates, Russell, Santos and Vinick as they campaign in rural Iowa, whilst the following episode, 'The Wake Up Call' returns to the White House and narrates a crisis involving Iran. The split between the different types of episode throughout the season, therefore, highlights the local origins of a presidential bid and the ultimate, international skills of a seasoned, experienced president. The effect of 'Opposition Research' is to show Santos learning how to be a presidential candidate and, importantly, how to appear presidential, a storyline that *The West Wing* has never been able to tackle other than in flashback as season one began with Bartlet already in office. The new format of the series also breaks up the established cast, an intentional ploy which, as John Wells suggests, both encourages new character dynamics and also offers a more realistic interpretation of staff of a White House administration:

One thing I noticed doing *ER* was that, unless you shake things up and change the way characters relate to each other, you wind up with the same character dynamics... ..also, we've been a little unrealistic. The average White House staffer leaves after about 18 months because the burnout rate is so high.⁸⁵

The breaking of the established core Bartlet administration team began at the beginning of season six when Leo McGarry first resigns as Chief of Staff and then suffers a heart attack. Lyman, Moss and Bailey then leave to run their respective candidates' campaigns leaving C. J. Cregg to take over as Bartlet's Chief of Staff. In addition to these changing roles, the departures of Lyman and Bailey were marked with conflict with other White House staff members, particularly Toby Zeigler. This conflict is developed during the Santos campaign as Lyman finds himself increasingly isolated from, and at odds with, the Bartlet administration and reaches a climax when Ziegler is fired by Bartlet after leaking confidential military information.

The effect this new format has on the character of Bartlet is marked. The introduction of Santos and the fracturing of his staff leaves Bartlet isolated and somewhat subordinated. In the previous seasons of *The West Wing*, notably in the pilot episode, the idolising of Bartlet by his staff members had been a key way of characterising the president. Without his staff and with Lyman concentrating on trying to protect Santos from stifling comparisons with the incumbent president, Bartlet loses this idolisation and thus loses an important foundation to his character. During his last two seasons, Bartlet becomes a sedentary figure, more frequently seen governing from the Oval Office. This lack of physical movement is enhanced both through comparisons between Bartlet and the youthful Santos and through Bartlet's increasing frailty owing to his MS. In the final episode of season six, '2162 Votes', the democratic candidates continue to campaign during the Democratic National Convention whilst Bartlet decides firstly not to show preference to a particular candidate, and ultimately which candidate to prefer. The scenes set at the convention are characterised by kinetic, handheld camera movement and harsh spotlights, contrasting with the traditional *West Wing* look of steadicam shots and patches of light and shade. Throughout the episode, Bartlet is shown in his office or in the domestic areas of the White House while the four candidates are shown in meetings, on the phone, jostling and arguing for position. In these final seasons,

Bartlet becomes isolated and the attention on him from the previous seasons is shared with other figures such as Lyman, Santos and Vinick. The way this shift in attention is conducted does not reduce or betray the character, however, but rather repositions the figure of Bartlet as the elderly statesman, the experienced president who solves problems with phone calls. The increasing political fallibility of Bartlet is seeded in the final two seasons as the character is consolidated, when the physical fallibility of the president is increased as the MS becomes more pronounced and the character is shown to age. The new format of the series, the reduction in attention on Bartlet and the oscillation between White House and campaign based episodes is a crucial part of this consolidation. Bartlet is shown to be at the same time, a moral and political figure for Santos to aspire to, but in terms of health and energy, a figure to be replaced. These two aspects of Bartlet are resolved in the final five episodes of season seven after Santos wins the election and becomes President-elect. In the episode 'Transition', a crisis between China and Russia apparently exposes the differences between Santos and Bartlet as the former appears unconvinced about the latter's decision to use the American military to create a buffer zone between the two countries in Kazakhstan. At the end of the episode it is revealed that the disagreement between Bartlet and Santos has been engineered by the President as a complex diplomatic plan, a form of 'good cop – bad cop'. 'Transition', whilst appearing to continue the fracturing of the *West Wing* family with the Bartlet/Santos disagreement, is actually the episode that begins to heal the rifts between Lyman and Santos and the Bartlet White House and therefore provides the reconciliation of the old style of the series with the new. The episode opens with Lyman visiting California in order to recruit Sam Seaborn, a character who left the White House during the fourth season. During the episode, Lyman also attempts to recruit further staff members including C. J. Cregg whilst escalating his romantic involvement with his ex-secretary Donna Moss. This episode is part of a movement at the end of season seven to close the whole series. The recruitment of past figures from the series such as Sam Seaborn to the new Santos administration would be unlikely if the series had been commissioned beyond the seventh season so the episodes following 'Transition' may be seen as an attempt to provide a conclusion to *The West Wing*

that is both optimistic and nostalgic. The cancellation of *The West Wing* was revealed halfway through the seventh season after which, the election of a replacement for Bartlet became the conclusion of the series.⁸⁶

The long running nature of *The West Wing* means that the writers of the series have been able to create an idealised version of the presidency that runs in parallel and adapts to the changes in the American political landscape. The series has also been able to provide a reaction to major global events such as the rise of fundamental terrorism and the attacks of 9/11. Where the series has been really successful is in its refusal to simplify or shortcut the details of the presidency. Unlike Mackenzie Allen in *Commander in Chief* whose presidency is defined not through her political but through her personal life, Bartlet is a complex, multifaceted character. In *Commander in Chief*, Allen is shown wrestling with her responsibilities as a parent and wife as they conflict with her responsibilities as president. *The West Wing* depicts the same tensions but they are shown from the perspective of the politics, preventing the series from becoming a domestic drama set in the White House. Instead, *The West Wing* presents a realistic, albeit romanticised, vision of American politics. The conclusion of the series takes this idealism to the extreme by presenting a truly bipartisan White House when Democrat President Santos appoints Republican Senator Vinick Secretary of State. This conclusion may be seen as an attempt to reconcile the polarised politics of the Clinton era and to prophesy a new style of presidency based on debate and communication as opposed to deception and obfuscation. The developing character of Bartlet and the introduction of other idealised presidential figures such as Santos appear to call for a presidential style that is more honest than the image-obsession of Clinton, and more engaged and cerebral than Bush. The character of Santos, like that of Palmer in *24*, also anticipates the election of a black candidate that would become an important shift in the nature of presidentiality and create, for a time, a colour-blind, post-racial presidency.

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Conclusion

The depiction of the presidency on film and television is clearly a complex and multilayered issue. As I have demonstrated throughout my case studies, aspects of television and filmmaking such as genre and casting have major implications on the construction and narration of presidential mythologies and fictional presidencies. In my introduction, I made a distinction between what I called the presidential myth and the quality of presidentiality. John Hellmann examined Kennedy's childhood as a source for later mythologising. In doing this, he discovered a 'carefully produced image' which:

had presented him as a liminal youth, a figure undergoing a series of passages, from his contemplation of the mistakes made by his English heroes as they confronted Hitler, to his life-threatening initiation in fundamental truths of human and extrahuman nature in the South Pacific, to his hospitalization and meditations upon ultimate purposes and the place of heroism in contemporary democratic society.¹

Hellmann suggests that in order to create his own mythology, Kennedy transformed his life into a series of chapters, each 'written' to highlight his courage and presidential potential. This utilisation of the fictional form to narrate factual events is common in the formation of presidential myths. What my thesis demonstrates is how this utilisation works in the context of film genres. Michael Coyne suggests that a notable feature of political films is their 'trans-generic' nature, the way in which each film draws on the visual and narrative conventions of other genres.² Throughout my thesis, I have demonstrated the extent of this trans-genericity and its impact on the formation and manipulation of different presidential mythologies.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s and into the new millennium, the Kennedy myth has been presented on screen in a fairly consistent way – always the courageous politician, always the charismatic hero and always the martyr. As I have demonstrated, however, this does not mean that all the depictions of Kennedy are straightforwardly elegiac or aggrandising. The screen depictions of Kennedy demonstrate a flexibility in the mythology; space within the Kennedy narrative that allows the film and television maker to adjust the mythology to suit the contemporary world.

The miniseries *Kennedy* rewrites the biography of Kennedy as a Reagan-era dynastic drama. The Kennedy myth that dominates the miniseries is one that focuses on the life of Kennedy, on his political and private worlds and on his family and his administration. All these aspects of Kennedy's life are adapted to suit the social preoccupations and anxieties of the 1980s, but the result is a myth of Kennedy that is drained of political signification. The alleged presidential sex scandals are noted, but masked by a corresponding mythology of Hoover, a dark and sinister figure whose presence dwarfs the affairs of Kennedy. As such, Kennedy's scandals become instead an object of Hoover's obsession over power and control, they become, in essence, Hoover's scandal. At the end of the miniseries, a second myth, that of the death of Kennedy, is briefly touched upon. Watching these final scenes, however, it is clear that the myth of the assassination has not been engaged with by the makers of the miniseries. Instead, they frame the death of Kennedy by showing the reactions of his family, in particular his wife and brother.

It is not until Stone's *JFK* that the myth of the Kennedy assassination is truly unpacked. Stone re-politicises the myth of Kennedy but uses the death rather than the life of the president to do so. To this end he meditates on the assassination of Kennedy gradually reducing the scope of his investigation down to a single frame of the Zapruder footage. In *JFK*, Jim Garrison displays a strong drive to understand and investigate Kennedy, but unlike Hoover in *Kennedy*, it is an apostolic rather than antagonistic obsession. Stone uses the quest of Garrison and the absence of Kennedy to transform the myth into a modern hagiography while the obsessive drive of Garrison acts as metaphor for the national desire to understand the assassination. Stone produces, in effect, a myth of Kennedy that has a national context and attempts to connect Kennedy's death to the major political and social traumas of the 1970s and 1980s.

The Cold War drama *Thirteen Days* casts Kennedy as an apotheosis of the 1990s new man, sincere, powerful, honest and charismatic. Through the casting of Costner, the Kennedy myth

as outlined in *Thirteen Days* can be read in the context of a raft of 1990s film that fetishise authenticity and realism and that attempt to construct a view of history using a methodology that prioritises sincerity over satire or irony. The position of Kennedy in this film, therefore, is much the same as in the 1983 miniseries, but instead of a myth that co-ordinates with the social policies of the incumbent president (as *Kennedy* did with Reagan), in *Thirteen Days*, we see Kennedy cast as an alternative to Clinton, a sincere, serious president without the crisis of authenticity that Clinton provoked.

These three interpretations of the Kennedy presidency are matched in my thesis by three interpretations of the life and career of Nixon. In *All the President's Men*, a myth of Nixon is constructed despite being absent from the film aside from an occasional fleeting appearance on a television set in the corner of the scene. The effect of this, unlike Kennedy's absence in *JFK*, is to turn Nixon into a sinister, marginalised figure. Like Garrison, Woodward and Bernstein are shown as obsessive in their drive to understand Nixon and to expose the truth, but in this case, the journalists are not presented as apostolic followers of the president, but rather as manipulative and ambitious as Nixon himself. The story of *All the President's Men* is that of the myth of Nixon being deconstructed in the context of a corresponding myth of Woodward and Bernstein.

Stone's return to the subject of the presidency with the film *Nixon* is in many ways a continuation of his preoccupations from *JFK*. Stone's film effectively turns the methodology of *All the President's Men* on its head by placing Nixon centre stage. In doing so, Stone presents a mythology of Nixon that operates on a psychological level. As in *JFK*, Stone expands on the wider consequences of a pivotal event, in this case the Watergate scandal, but in this case, using flashbacks, he uses the scandal to frame and shape the life of Nixon. Interestingly, in many ways *Nixon* is as much a myth of a presidential death as *JFK* and the recurring imagery of death throughout the film supports this. While the earlier film is concerned with the physical death of the presidency, *Nixon* examines the political and

psychological death of its subject. Stone's myth of Nixon, therefore, is very much an inversion of the *JFK* myth of Kennedy, each shaped by death, the former on a personal, psychological level, the latter on a political, national level.

In the same way, the mythology of Nixon constructed in *Dick* can be compared with the myth of Kennedy in *Thirteen Days*. The films were produced at approximately the same time but each approaches the presidency from the opposing perspectives of the new sincerity and the eclectic irony genres. *Dick* essentially defuses the Nixon myth, turning the sinister villain of *All the President's Men* and the psychotic antihero of *Nixon* into a comedic buffoon. Whereas *Thirteen Days* approaches its historical subject matter in a way that prioritises authenticity and accuracy, *Dick* rampages through cultural references from the 1970s and succeeds in satirising the turbulent relationship between youth culture and politics.

The trajectory of the Nixon myth across these three films should be seen in the context of the corresponding trajectory of the Kennedy myth. Regardless of genre, it is possible to find repeated themes and devices that cross all the films and television series, but often these themes have different effects on the construction of the presidential mythology. For example, a major factor in all the texts I analyse in this thesis is the absence or presence of the presidential character. In the case of Kennedy and Nixon, the absence of the president can produce a mythology that either protects and canonises the president or, in the case of Nixon, marginalises and demonises. In general, the Kennedy mythologies are shaped by his youth and his early death while the Nixon mythologies are shaped by his troubled relationship with the press and the Watergate Scandal. These contrasting historical attitudes towards the Kennedy and Nixon presidencies are something I follow and build upon when considering the varied depictions of Clinton in film, possessing, as they do, elements of both the Kennedy and the Nixon mythologies.

Primary Colors presents a mythologised version of Clinton that seems to encapsulate both the youth and vitality of Kennedy and the seedy corruption of Nixon. The film takes a very specific moment in Clinton's career, his first presidential campaign in 1992, and presents it as a morality tale. *Primary Colors* demonstrates that the excesses seen in campaign movie satires such as *The Candidate* and *Bulworth* are not all that excessive when seen in the context of the Clinton presidency. *Primary Colors* is a film that constructs a schizophrenic Clinton mythology that merges that president's sexual drives with his folksy popularity and that unpacks the differences between the private and public faces of Clinton. The distinctive aspect of the film is the fact that the character of Stanton is likeable and, politically at least, has demonstrated himself to be a true presidential candidate.

Wag the Dog, by contrast, depicts a president entirely in thrall to his spin doctors. The film focuses on sex scandals similar to the Clinton presidency and on the desperate attempt by a team of spin doctors to conceal them. As in *JFK* and *All the President's Men*, the presidential figure is absent, but in this case the intention seems to be purely to demonstrate how powerless the president is without marketing. In essence, the president in *Wag the Dog* is characterised solely through the comments and actions of the spin doctors and is shown to be wholly at their mercy. The film, therefore, depicts a Clinton figure that, like the Nixon in both *All the President's Men* and *Dick*, is struggling to retain his power and control over his own image. The success of the film is such that its title has become a signifier for a particular form of scandal and cover-up. Its portrayal of the spin doctors takes the satire to another level, however. In the film, just as the president is shown to be reliant on the spin doctors, the spin doctors are shown to be reliant on the actions of the press.

The American President depicts a president, Andrew Shepherd who shares a number of physical and ideological similarities with Clinton, but is a romantic, idealised figure. This film produces a Clinton myth that effectively defuses the excesses of the real world Clinton. By presenting a Clintonesque president in the context of a romantic comedy, by making him a

widower to inspire sympathy in the audience and by showing him actively defying his spin doctors, Shepherd is intended to be an inversion of the president in *Wag the Dog*. In this way, the Clinton presidency becomes a check list of scandals and anxieties, all of which are engaged with and, in a way, solved. As such, the affairs of Clinton, the youth of his staff and the political opinions of his wife are all presented in a way that makes them appear positive. In this film, Aaron Sorkin, the writer of *Wag the Dog* appears to be intent on exorcising the scandals of the post-war presidency just as Stone is intent on understanding and exposing them. Sorkin develops an excessively romantic and idealised presidential myth, based on Clinton, but one that purposefully selects the positive aspect of previous presidency, most obviously Kennedy. *The American President* is too small a canvas for such an exercise, however, and it takes on ongoing television series to fully develop the presidential mythology that Sorkin aims for.

The character of Bartlet in *The West Wing* is the culmination of Sorkin's desire to produce a perfect and idealised presidency. Interestingly, after the use of Kennedy and Nixon in the depiction of Clinton, *The West Wing* moves entirely away from the real world. The attempt is to produce a viable and realistic presidency myth that does not have obvious archetypes. The early years of *The West Wing* sees Sorkin attempt to reconstruct the presidency, producing a myth that initially can be viewed as an alternative to Clinton and then later to George W. Bush. It is when considering the depiction of spin doctors throughout the series we can really understand the reaction of Sorkin to the Clinton presidency. *The West Wing* is as critical of presidential marketing as *Wag the Dog*, but at the same time is less cynical and more idealistic. This means that when Bartlet's presidency is threatened during his first campaign for re-election, the competition is not between Bartlet and the clearly inferior, Bush-like Ritchie, but between the two approaches to presidential campaigning. *The West Wing* finds an alternative to the spin and image control of the modern presidency in rhetoric and debate, in words and text rather than images and sound-bites. Because of the long running format of the series, Sorkin has the time and narrative space to develop Bartlet beyond a simple cipher of

presidentiality into a rounded and believable presidential candidate. The later seasons of the series test Bartlet's presidential quality by introducing different models of presidentiality and different types of presidential mythologies. Ultimately, Bartlet reaches the end of his second term triumphant, but is replaced by the equally popular Matt Santos. Santos is one of a string of characters during the last few seasons of the series who display different presidential personalities to Bartlet. He has the youth and military background of Kennedy and lacks the professorial relationship with his staff that Bartlet possesses. The legacy of *The West Wing* is not just the development of a single viable presidential mythology in Bartlet, but is in fact the creation of a range of various presidential mythologies, each as idealistic and realistic as the last.

My thesis demonstrates how film and television genres align with the narratives of presidential mythologies to contemporise the subject matter and to create a set of productions that use the genre characteristics to critique or valorise different presidents. In the case of Kennedy, the texts demonstrate different modes of flawless leadership presenting the president as the heroic figure in the biopic genre, the conspiracy thriller and the Cold War drama. In the case of Nixon, the texts present the president as the flawed leader in a paranoid thriller, another biopic and in a teen comedy. The varying national opinion towards the presidency of Clinton inspires a mixture of approaches towards his depiction on screen, a combination of romanticised heroism and flawed corruption across a range of genres such as political satire, campaign movie and romantic comedy. Finally, the construction of the character of Bartlet in *The West Wing* demonstrates a new direction for the screen depiction of the presidency, occurring as it does over the course of seven seasons. Bartlet, unlike the other real presidents examined in my case studies, is allowed to develop and change in character. The long period of time allowed by the ongoing series encourages a Bartlet mythology that both adapts to the changing political and social world, but also creates a textual alternative to the presidencies of both Clinton and George W. Bush.

The presidential mythologies in these films and television series are developed using a variety of methods that make them viable and realistic. The constructions of presidentiality in these texts are aspects of the production that affect the recreation and manipulation of the presidential mythology. In each screen depiction I examine, the presidency is fashioned in a way that accesses an emotional response from the audience. While the manipulations of the presidential myth operate on a formal level, I would suggest that the constructions of presidentiality operate on an aesthetic level, a combination of imagery, music and casting that manipulates the viewer's concept of what the presidency should look and sound like. The quality of presidentiality accesses an emotional reaction in the viewer to what the presidency should look and sound like. In most of the films and television series I examine, this is done by attempting to produce a hybrid of cultural memory and experience with the historical subject matter. In the films and television series I analyse, the director has chosen to use cultural references that remind the viewer of the presidency. In *Kennedy*, *Thirteen Days* and even in the title sequence of *The West Wing*, imagery from *Life* magazine is recreated with the actor or actors in similar positions to photographs of Kennedy. Conversely, in his two films, *JFK* and *Nixon*, Stone chooses to reference the death rather than life of the presidency. In *JFK* this involves the use of both the Zapruder footage and the Kennedy autopsy photographs. In all these films, monochrome is used, partially to create a sense of 'pastness' but also to recall these moments from the 1960s when Kennedy appeared on television or news-reel. In several of the films I examine, the lack of presidentiality is as important as the presence. In *Dick*, for example, the use of 1970s pop culture references acts to expose the stuffiness of the unfashionable Nixon. In *All the President's Men* the *Washington Post* newsroom is recreated with an obsessive attention to detail while the Oval Office, normally the central set behind any attempt to create presidentiality, remains behind closed doors. The effect of both of these is to marginalise the presidential figure, in both cases Nixon, and to demonstrate how out of touch with reality he is compared with either Woodward and Bernstein or Arlene and Betsy.

The construction of presidentiality in *The West Wing* encompasses all these elements, but also operates on a more complex level. In many ways, Sorkin's depiction of Bartlet is helped by the seven year span of the series. The episodic nature of the programme means that the audience is able to both fully engage with the characters' lives, but also that the setting of the series, the elaborate sets including the central Oval Office, become familiar and almost homely. *The West Wing*, like many of the texts I examine, spends a lot of time meticulously recreating the Oval Office set so as to inspire a sense of familiarity in the audience. The Oval Office is a location that the viewer will have seen in photographs and on the television so is a clear way of promoting presidentiality. In *The West Wing*, this historical familiarity is combined with a feeling of domesticity as the family-like White House staff gather on a weekly basis for meetings. The effect of this, unlike any of the other films or the miniseries, is to combine politics with the familial. The closest any of the films comes to this aspect of the myth of Bartlet is in *The American President* when Shepherd is shown in the White House residence on a date, but in that film, the politics and romance are kept separate, indeed it is the conflicts between the two that creates the dramatic friction in the narrative. In *The West Wing*, Sorkin uses the familiarity of the White House sets not only to imbue Bartlet with presidentiality, but to merge the personal with the political and to transform Bartlet into the ultimate father figure – to his family, to his staff and to the nation. The ideal presidential model of Bartlet is tested as the series progresses, however, with the introduction of other viable presidential figures. Also, as Walken, Vinick and Santos are introduced, the style of the series changes. The change in cast and the move towards interspersing the White House set episodes with location shot episodes focusing on the campaign mean a move away from the domesticity that is so important in the construction of the Bartlet presidential myth. The series begins to play out a range of different types of presidentiality by moving towards a documentary visual style similar to that seen in campaign genre films such as *The Candidate* while the location filming helps ground the presidential candidates in a reality outside the setting of the White House. In addition to this, the range of actors playing the candidates is another test for the Bartlet model of presidentiality.

A major aspect in the hybridisation of cultural memory and history in the creation of presidentiality is the choice of actor to portray the president. It is not a coincidence that particular actors recur throughout the films and television series that depict the presidency. Martin Sheen in particular has appeared in at least six productions that focus on the American presidency from playing Robert Kennedy in *The Missiles of October* to Josiah Bartlet in *The West Wing*. Actors like Sheen bring an authenticity to the role of the president that, particularly in the case of Sheen, uses the audience expectation based on the actor's previous roles combined with the actor's personality and political activity off screen. The other candidates for the casting of Bartlet, Alan Alda and Sidney Poitier indicate Aaron Sorkin's intentions in the construction of the presidential character; Sheen, Alda and Poitier are all politically liberal and each have the authority of being an 'elder statesman' in Hollywood.³ Sheen's casting resulted in the strange situation of calls for him to enter political office. Indeed, looking at interviews with Sheen during and after *The West Wing's* run, the similarities between Bartlet and the actor playing him become clear. Both combine a cosy avuncular nature with a hardened authority, both are committed to political causes, in the case of Sheen liberally radical, in the case of Bartlet more pragmatic and conservative. It is also interesting that after finishing playing Bartlet, Sheen decided to continue his education by attending a university in Ireland. Thus Sheen and Bartlet's characters become merged and inseparable; Sheen emulates Bartlet's appetite for education and knowledge while Bartlet feeds on the public regard towards Sheen. Another recurring actor throughout my thesis is Kevin Costner. In both *JFK* and *Thirteen Days*, Costner plays not the president, but a subordinate role to the president. Costner's roles as presidential acolyte in the two films has a similar effect to that of Sheen, but instead of bringing authority and presidentiality directly to the central role, he substitutes the presidential figure, in doing so bringing an extra element of distanced almost religious respect. In this sense, Costner's characters reflect the audience and the intended national perception of the notion of presidentiality. A final effect of presidential casting can be seen when considering what Michael Douglas brings to the part of Andrew

Shepherd, and what the role of Andrew Shepherd brings to Michael Douglas in *The American President*. Unlike Sheen or Costner, Douglas's previous roles were not presidential, indeed in films such as *Basic Instinct*, *Wall Street* and *Fatal Attraction*, his characters are edgy, corrupt and flawed and distinctly *un*-presidential. The role of Shepherd therefore can be seen as an act of contrition for Douglas. The part of the president, particularly in a romantic comedy, becomes a moment of rebirth for Douglas, a regeneration of his screen persona. This in turn creates a different brand of presidentiality, one that highlights the power of the presidency to absolve and morally cleanse. It is clear then that just as the choice of actor can enhance the quality of presidentiality to the role he is playing, the role can also have a reciprocal, beneficial effect on the actors' screen persona. The later seasons of *The West Wing* display possibly the greatest range of actors playing presidential characters, each bringing a subtle, and at times not so subtle, variation to the model of presidentiality that is created by the casting of Sheen. Alan Alda and John Goodman both play Republican politicians who earn the respect, or at least the grudging admiration of Bartlet, and who are depicted in the series in a positive and presidential light. Equally, Tim Matheson who plays Vice President John Hoynes and Gary Cole, who plays Hoynes' replacement Vice President Bob Russell, each portray conceivable presidential characters but each is flawed in turn by a sex scandal and by the inability to match Bartlet's rhetorical skills. It is Jimmy Smits playing Matt Santos, however, who is ultimately crowned as Bartlet's successor. Smits' presence brings a degree of presidentiality to the role of Santos, but it is that character's Hispanic origins that really distance him from Bartlet. In *The West Wing*, the racial origin of the president is presented as an issue that the viewer is invited to ignore. Throughout his fictional campaign Santos repeatedly refuses to play the 'race card' and thus seeks to be elected on the merits of his rhetorical skills and strength of character. Like Palmer in *24*, Santos's race brings a modern, almost futuristic presidential tone to the series. The writers of *The West Wing*, *24* and, indeed, *Commander in Chief* are, by depicting the characters of Santos, Palmer and Allen, suggesting a future presidency. Bartlet is presented as the traditional, even old-fashioned presidential figure, to be compared with Franklin Roosevelt rather than any post-war president. Santos is

presented as the next step in presidentiality, as if the writers of *The West Wing* are suggesting that in order to maintain the idealised presidency it is necessary to go back to basics before advancing. The combination of the fictional election of Matt Santos, and the success of Jimmy Smits in gaining the lead role of the series should it have progressed to an eighth season, is indicative of a further narrowing of the gap between the film star and the telegenic appeal of the presidency. Smits and Santos effectively shared the election in the series, and after the conclusion of *The West Wing*, the importance of this conflation of star and president became increasingly evident through the growing criticism of the inarticulate George W. Bush, and the ascendancy of Barack Obama from Illinois Senator to Commander in Chief.

I began my thesis by examining the significance of the Kennedy/Nixon debate in the light of the development of television news coverage and the corresponding need for the presidency to become a marketable and telegenic institution. I followed this trend, observing the effect of this developing style of presidency on two aspects of the depiction of presidency on screen. The intellectual appeal of presidential myth based in and manipulated by narrative conventions and the emotional imagery and aesthetics of presidentiality, are the key repeated themes that thread through all of the films and television series I examine. *The West Wing* gives possibly the best commentary on these themes beyond the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations and into the future. An important aspect of *The West Wing*'s characterisation of the character of Bartlet is his ideological and moral conflict between his intelligence and his folksy appeal, described in the series as the tension between Bartlet the Nobel laureate and Bartlet the 'Uncle Fluffy'. These tensions are reflected in a similar tension between the image led presidency and what Patrick Finn describes as the 'textual presidency'.⁴ The emphasis on the importance of the rhetoric and textuality over the physicality or imagery of the presidency is a sign of a changing priority in the real world of American politics from the presidency of George W. Bush to that of Barack Obama. In *The West Wing*, this conflict between the two sides of Bartlet is resolved dramatically in the episode called 'Game On' in which Bartlet is shown in debate with his Republican presidential rival Robert Richie, a clear parody of

George W. Bush. Bartlet is shown to struggle with the dilemma of how to use his intelligence without appearing condescending and without losing his folksy charm. In the episode, he is shown to resolve this conflict by choosing to embrace his intellectual superiority over Ritchie and fight him using language and political rhetoric as opposed to emotional, nostalgic ideology. This theme is extended into the final season of the series which featured two new candidates for the presidency. This contest proved to be uncannily accurate in its prophesising of the future of the presidency.

In early November 2008 two events took place that have a major impact on the themes and debates outlined in my thesis. On 4 November, Barack Obama defeated John McCain to become the first black American to be elected as president of the United States, while on 7 November, Oliver Stone released his third film to focus on a particular president, *W.* (2008) starring Josh Brolin as George W. Bush. Each event demonstrates a shift in the relationship between the Presidency and Hollywood. *W.* was released whilst its eponymous character was still in office, and, unlike *JFK* or *Nixon*, Stone chooses to take a comedic, lampooning approach to his depiction of the presidency. While not as decisively partisan as one would expect from Stone, *W.* depicts Bush as an accident-prone president, foregrounding his verbal slips and physical gaffes. *W.* can be seen as the conclusion to a steady diminution of respect towards, and popularity of, the presidency during the last term of the Bush administration, Stone's film is a combination of the polemics of Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) and the irreverence of Trey Parker and Matt Stone's short-lived sitcom *That's My Bush!* (2001). It signposts the closure of a period of particular set of screen depictions of presidency which, at one extreme, the documentaries of Moore, question the legality of the Bush presidency, and at the other, in the case of *The West Wing*, play out fantasies of an idealised successor for Bush in the form of Matt Santos.

Stone's film focuses on the early life of Bush using the preparation for the Iraq War in 2003 as a framing narrative. The film received mixed reviews after its release, with many critics

suggesting that Stone was too soft on the Bush presidency, whilst others suggesting that he had lost his edge after the more serious *JFK* and *Nixon*.⁵ This criticism is not without justification: unlike Stone's earlier presidential films, *W.* is packed with humour ranging from the ironic juxtaposition of scenes showing Bush as a college frat-boy with Bush in conference with his White House staff to Stone's focus on the physical and verbal pratfalls of Bush. The comedy in *W.* is a combination of political satire and slapstick humour and is evident in the flashback and framing narrative devices of the biopic, in the physical appearance and filming of Bush, and even in Stone's choice of music for his soundtrack: for example, a scene in which Bush leads his war planning team in a walk at his Texan ranch is performed to the theme from the British 1950s television series *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1955-60).

Criticism of *W.* has been made of the uncomfortable tensions between the seriousness of the subject matter, the Iraq War, and the levity of the presentation. I would suggest, however, that Stone's film neatly illustrates the effect of eight years of the Bush administration on the public opinion of the American presidency. In particular, by emphasising the verbal and physical inadequacies of Bush, Stone demonstrates the final demise of the image-conscious presidency, but also the ultimate failure of presidentiality. Stone, in effect, depicts a president who he believes is incapable of being presidential and incapable of tapping into the iconography and authority of the presidency. To this end, Stone's representation of Bush focuses on the comedic failures of the character's body, from the drunkenness of his college days to his choking on a pretzel. Stone focuses on the body and face of Bush, as critic Mark Maurer notes, 'the camera is often jammed in Josh Brolin's face with a mixture of externally high-angle and low-angle shots.'⁶ In addition, Bush is shown in a variety of intimate and embarrassing situations, isolated in a baseball stadium during a dream sequence, or on the toilet. In contrast with Stone's cynical, personal representation of the Bush presidency is the return of national and international respect towards the office of the president during the campaign and election of Barack Obama. I would argue that this election also demonstrates a redirected focus from the presidential body to the policy and rhetoric of the presidency.

Obama's election is frequently described as a reflection of the idealism and optimism seen in the final two seasons of *The West Wing*, the parallels between Obama and *The West Wing*'s Matt Santos being widely reported in the media during the campaign.⁷ On the website film.com, Charlie Toft states that:

The more you look at *The West Wing* and Obama, the more similarities you see. Obama suffered a serious personal loss on the eve of the election with the death of his grandmother, while Santos's victory was marred by the death of his vice presidential candidate Leo McGarry (actor John Spencer had died unexpectedly halfway through the final season). And Smits brought matters full circle by appearing at Obama campaign rallies down the stretch, including the Florida rally featured in the Obama "infomercial" of October 29. In its early years *The West Wing* was often cited, by both fans and detractors, as a fantasy version of the Clinton administration, which was winding down when the series debuted. How strange that its final episodes ended up forecasting so much about the next Democratic presidency.⁸

In addition to these similarities, I would suggest that the prophetic links between the Obama election and *The West Wing* also suggest a movement towards a different style of presidential campaigning to that initiated by the 1960 Kennedy/Nixon debate; a presidential campaign in which debate and rhetoric are of equal, if not greater importance than image or physical appearance.

During the 2008 presidential campaign, a great deal was written in the media about Obama's status as a 'post-racial' candidate, in short a black candidate who does not use his race as the focus in his campaign. The term 'post-racial' is a contentious one. Writers such as Krissah Williams Thompson objected to the idea that the popularity of Obama with the white as well as black voter was a sign that America was becoming a post-racial nation. In his words, 'the term post-racial itself has become disconcerting. It means moving beyond something – and I don't want to move beyond everything it suggests.'⁹ When considered in a national context, the term 'post-racial' is laden with sensitive political signification. Sociologist Michael Eric Dyson writes:

Contrary to many critics, [Obama's] election does not, nor should it, herald a post-racial future. But it may help usher in a post-racist future. A post-racial outlook seeks to delete crucial strands of our identity; a post-racist outlook seeks to delete oppression that rests on hate and fear, that exploits cultural and political vulnerability. Obama need not cease being a black man to effectively govern, but America must overcome its brutal racist past to permit his gifts, and those of other blacks, to shine.¹⁰

When considered in the context of the presidential campaign, however, Obama's ability to transcend race is an important one. In this respect Obama reflects the fictional campaign of *The West Wing's* Matt Santos who repeatedly claimed he did not wish to simply be 'the brown candidate'. This also contrasts with the primary campaign of Reverend Jesse Jackson in 1988 whose liberal platform was to a degree an extension of his involvement in the civil rights activism of the 1960s. In essence, Obama's campaign transcended the body allowing a greater focus to be directed on his policies and his differences from Bush than would be directed on his appearance and race. In contrast to this, his opponent John McCain's campaign repeatedly focused on the body of its candidate. McCain, a war veteran who was tortured and imprisoned in Vietnam during the late 1960s and early 1970s, was the second oldest person to run for the presidency after Ronald Reagan. As such, a great deal of his campaign focused on proving his vitality and on recalling his stoicism during the war. The choice of the Governor of Alaska, Sarah Palin, as his running mate compounded this focus on physicality by encouraging interest in Palin's children, in her ability to govern effectively whilst carrying out her maternal duties, in her appearance and her choices of clothing.

Throughout my thesis, I have described the development of a style of presidency that began in the 1960s with John F. Kennedy, that challenged and, ultimately defeated, Richard Nixon, and which reached a peak in the Kennedy-Nixon hybrid presidency of Bill Clinton. Through examining particular screen depictions of each president, I have demonstrated how this developing style can be adapted to create presidential mythologies that contain both historical, biographical facts together with a contemporary political motivation. I suggest that by using a variety of different film genres, the media images and mythologies of the three different presidents are given a contemporary relevance that bends with the changing political world.

The West Wing, I suggest, presents fictional, idealised visions of the presidency that prophesy a new style of politics. At present at least, the victory of Obama and his running mate Senator Joseph Biden is being interpreted as a victory over the shallow, image-preoccupied style of campaigning. Finn talks about a style of presidency that requires a Commander in Chief who:

can actually speak, who reads and knows Latin. A little bourgeois perhaps, but this audience seems to prefer a politician who can do a *West Wing* walk-and-talk to one caught in the all too human realities of *real politick*, where the meticulous eye of the media searches for and exploits any sign of weakness in a politician's life.¹¹

Whether it is sustained remains to be seen, but for now the election of the articulate and, when compared to Bush, the more cerebral Obama appears to have given America a new 'textual presidency'.

¹ John Hellmann, *The Kennedy Obsession* (New York: Columbia UP, 1997) 88.

² Michael Coyne, *Hollywood Goes to Washington* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008) 9.

³ Aaron Sorkin, *The West Wing Script Book* (London: Channel 4 Books, 2003) 6.

⁴ Patrick Finn, "The West Wing's Textual President," *The West Wing: The American Presidency as Television Drama*, eds. Peter Rollins and John E. O'Connor. 101-24.

⁵ Jason Silverstien, "W. story is timely," review of *W.* in *Buffalo News* 22 October 2008; Rewey, Alex. "W. a fair, yet incomplete picture of Bush." *University Wire* 20 October 2008. 2.

⁶ Mark Maurer, "W. Dramatic but lacks bite," review of *W.* in *University Wire* 24 October 2008.

⁷ Jonathan Freedland, "The Great Showdown," *The Guardian* 30 October 2008. 4.

⁸ Charlie Toft, "The West Wing Connection: Obama and Rahm Emanuel," film.com.

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⁹ Krissah Williams Thompson, "I'm Not Post-Racial," *Washington Post* 30 November 2008. 2.

¹⁰ Michael Eric Dyson, "Race, post race; Barack Obama's historic victory represents a quantum leap in the racial progress of the United States," *Los Angeles Times* 5 November 2008. 1.

¹¹ Finn 123.

Screenshots

Figure 1: The Kennedys and Hoover celebrate Christmas in *Kennedy*



Christmas at the Kennedys in contrast with...



...Christmas at J. Edgar Hoover's

Figure 2: The assassination scene from *Kennedy*



The assassination scene begins by showing the motorcade then cuts to...

...Jackie Kennedy filmed from inside the car then cuts to...

...John F. Kennedy from Jackie Kennedy's point of view, then back to...

...Jackie Kennedy hearing the first gunshot, then back to...



...JFK again from Jackie Kennedy's POV
and then finally back to...

...Jackie Kennedy for the final gunshot. For
the rest of the episode, the camera focuses on
Jackie Kennedy.

Figure 3: The opening montage sequence from *JFK*



A succession of short scenes edited together at a fast pace using: archive film,



still photography,



home-movie footage,



fictional scenes,



recreated footage,



and the Zapruder footage.

Figure 4: The courtroom scene from *JFK*



Jim Garrison
addresses the
court...

...then the jury...

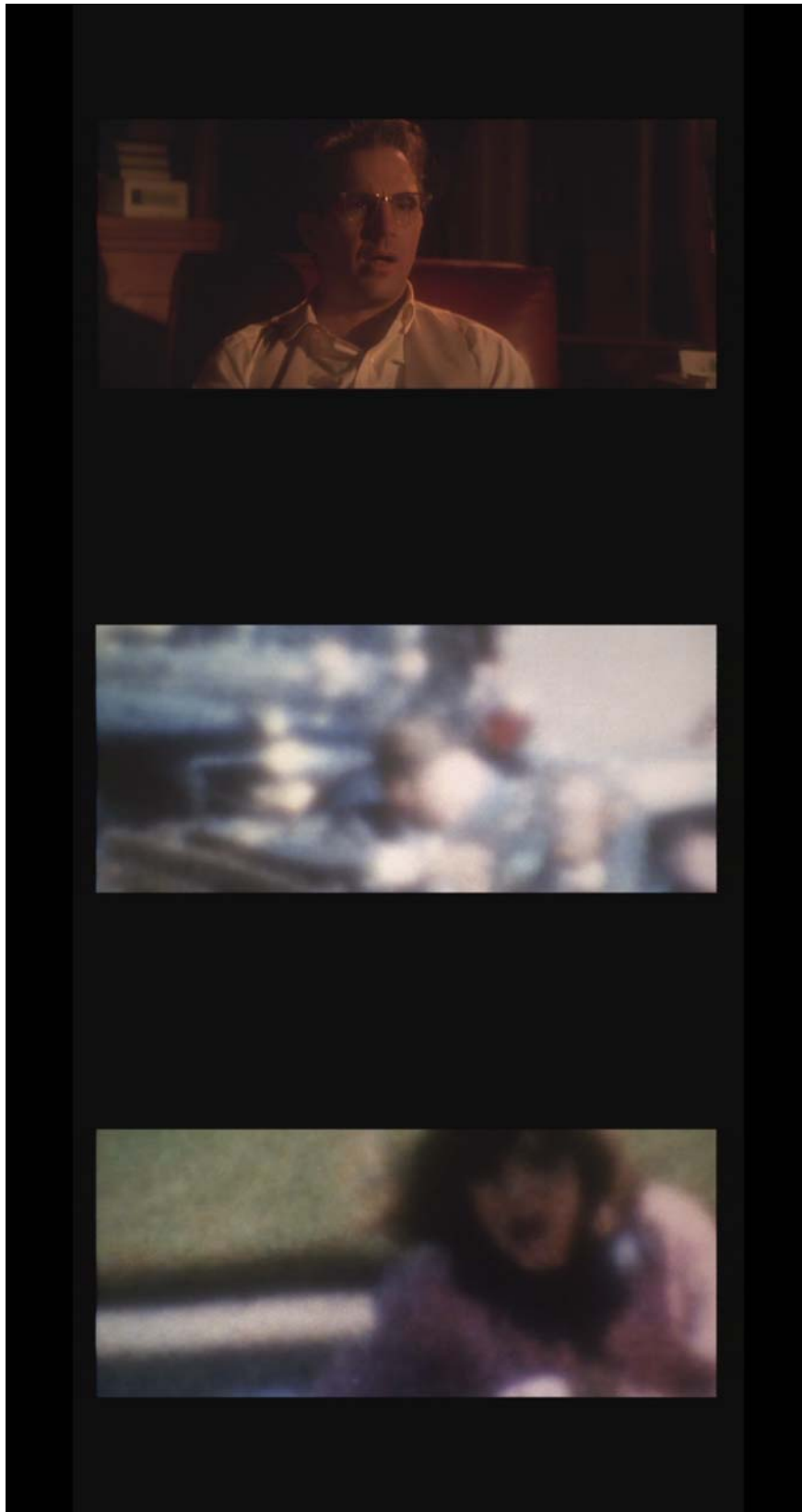




...then, staring
down the
camera, the
viewer saying:

“Nothing as
long as you live
will ever be
more important
– it’s up to you”

Figure 5: Garrison's nightmare from *JFK*



Garrison reads the Warren Report

He has a nightmare that includes the ghost-like face of Kennedy from the Zapruder Footage

The noise of the screaming crowd is played over a similarly ghost-like shot of Jackie Kennedy. It reaches a crescendo and...

...Garrison suddenly
wakes up.



Figure 6: The autopsy flashback from *JFK*



The autopsy footage reconstructed by Oliver Stone.

Kennedy's back is wiped by the pathologist...

...who then inserts a finger into a bullet wound

Figure 7: Kenny O'Donnell's journey to work from *Thirteen Days*



Over breakfast, O'Donnell quizzes his children on the identity of key members of the Kennedy administration, so we know he is involved in politics.



O'Donnell travels to work at a location revealed to be the White House.



O'Donnell is then shown in his office, revealed to be adjacent to the Oval Office.



He then walks to the private residences where he meets and argues with Jackie Kennedy.



His identity is revealed through a subtitle



He then joins John F. Kennedy for breakfast.

Figure 8: Woodward and Bernstein search for clues in the Library of Congress

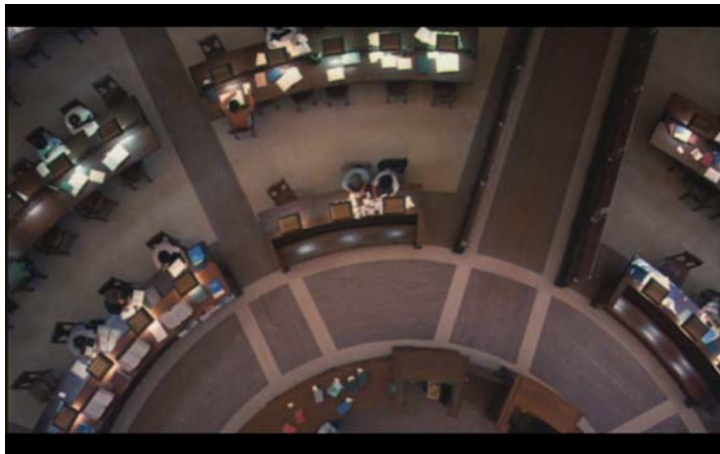


Figure 9: Nixon is re-elected as Woodward and Bernstein continue to work



Figure 10: Nixon's symbolic death



Figure 11: Nixon at the 1968 Republican Convention

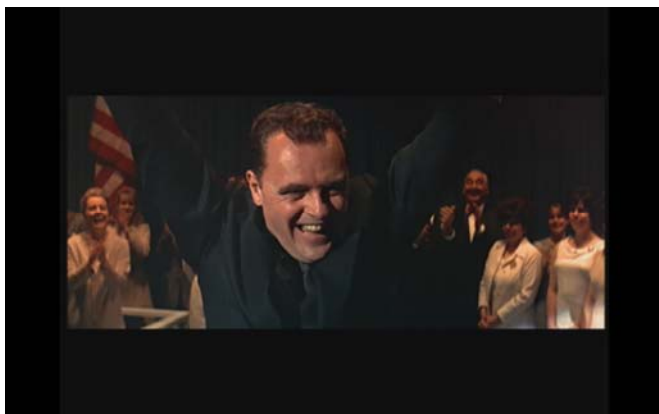
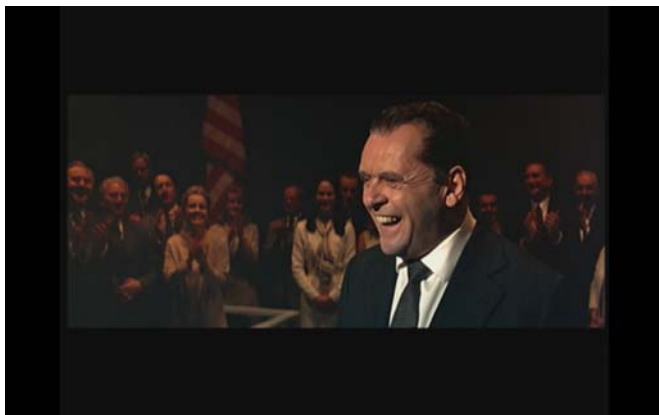
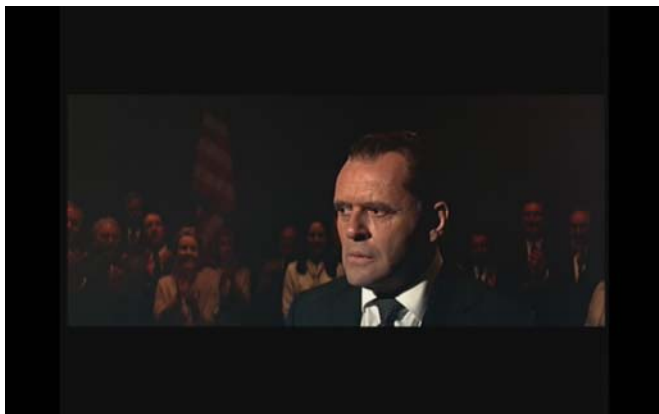


Figure 12: Betsy's Brother



Figure 13: Jack Stanton's handshakes



Figure 14: Burton meets Stanton in a Krispy Kreme Donut bar



Figure 15: The pervasiveness of screens in *Wag the Dog*





Figure 16: Rumson's party compared with Shepherd's meatloaf night



Figure 17: Leo McGarry's journey to work in the pilot episode of *The West Wing*



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Brubaker (1980) Dir. Stuart Rosenberg. Prod. 20th Century Fox. Perf. Robert Redford. USA

Bulworth (1998) Dir. Warren Beatty. Prod. 20th Century Fox. Perf. Warren Beatty. USA

Captains and the Kings (1976) Dir. Douglas Heyes and Allen Reisner. Prod. Public Art Films. Perf. Henry Fonda et al. USA (TV series)

Capricorn One (1978) Dir. Peter Hyams. Prod. Associated General Films. Perf. Elliot Gould and James Brolin. USA

Casablanca (1942) Dir. Michael Curtiz. Prod. Warner Bros. Pictures. Perf. Humphrey Bogart. USA

The China Syndrome (1979) Dir. James Bridges. Prod. IPC Films. Perf. Jane Fonda. USA

Clueless (1995) Dir. Amy Heckerling. Prod. Paramount Pictures. Perf. Alicia Silverstone. USA

Commander in Chief (2005) Prod. Battleplan Productions. Perf. Geena Davis. USA (TV series)

The Contender (2000) Dir. Rod Lurie. Prod. Dreamworks Pictures. Perf. Jeff Bridges. USA

The Conversation (1974) Dir. Francis Ford Coppola. Prod. American Zoetrope. Perf. Gene Hackman. USA

Dallas (1978-1991) Prod. Lorimar Television. Perf. Larry Hagman et al. USA (TV series)

Dances with Wolves (1990) Dir. Kevin Costner. Prod. Tig Productions. Perf. Kevin Costner. USA

Dark Angel (2000-2002) Prod. 20th Century Fox. Perf. Jessica Alba. USA (TV series)

Dark City (1998) Dir. Alex Proyas. Prod. Mystery Clock Cinema. Perf. Rufus Sewell. USA

Dave (1993) Dir. Ivan Reitman. Prod. Donner/Shuler-Donner Productions. Perf. Kevin Kline. USA

The Day Reagan was Shot (2001) Dir. Cyrus Nowrasteh. Prod. Halsted Pictures. Perf. Richard Dreyfuss. USA

The Dead Zone (1983) Dir. David Cronenberg. Prod. Dino De Laurentiis Company. Perf. Christopher Walken. USA

Deep Impact (1998) Dir. Mimi Leder. Prod. Paramount Pictures. Perf. Robert Duvall, Morgan Freeman et al. USA

Dick (1999) Dir. Andrew Fleming. Prod. Canal+. Perf. Kirsten Dunst and Michelle Williams. USA

Disclosure (1994) Dir. Barry Levinson. Prod. Warner Bros. Pictures. Perf. Michael Douglas and Demi Moore. USA

Dr Strangelove (1964) Dir. Stanley Kubrick. Prod. Columbia Pictures Corporation. Perf. Peter Sellers. USA

Dynasty (1981-1989) Prod. Aaron Spelling Productions. Perf. John Forsythe et al. USA (TV series)

Ed Tv (1999) Dir. Ron Howard. Prod. Imagine Entertainment. Perf. Matthew McConaughey. USA

ER (1994 – 2009) Prod. Constant c Productions. Perf. Noah Wyle et al. USA (TV series)

Face/Off (1997) Dir. John Woo. Prod. Touchstone Pictures. Perf. John Travolta and Nicolas Cage. USA

Fahrenheit 9/11 (2004) Dir. Michael Moore. Prod. Fellowship Adventure Group. USA (Documentary)

Fail-Safe (1964) Dir. Sidney Lumet. Prod. Columbia Pictures Corporation. Perf. Henry Fonda. USA

Falling Down (1993) Dir. Joel Schumacher. Prod. Alcor Films. Perf. Michael Douglas. USA

Family Ties (1982-9) Prod. Paramount Television. Perf. Michael J. Fox et al. USA (TV series)

Fatal Attraction (1987) Dir. Adrian Lyne. Prod. Paramount Pictures. Perf. Michael Douglas and Glenn Close. USA

A Few Good Men (1992) Dir. Rob Reiner. Prod. Castle Rock Entertainment. Perf. Tom Cruise. USA

Field of Dreams (1989) Dir. Phil Alden Robinson. Prod. Gordon Company. Perf. Kevin Costner. USA

The Fifth Element (1997) Dir. Luc Besson. Prod. Gaumont. Perf. Bruce Willis. France.

For the Love of the Game (1999) Dir Sam Raimi. Prod. Universal Pictures. Perf. Kevin Costner. USA

Forrest Gump (1994) Dir. Robert Zemeckis. Prod. Paramount Pictures. Perf. Tom Hanks. USA

The Forsyte Saga (1967) Prod. BBC. Perf. Eric Porter et al. UK (TV miniseries)

Friends (1994-2004) Prod. Warner Bros. Television. Perf. Jennifer Aniston, Courteney Cox, Lisa Kudrow, Matt LeBlanc, Matthew Perry and David Schwimmer. USA (TV series)

The Game (1997) Dir. David Fincher. Prod. Polygram Filmed Entertainment. Perf. Michael Douglas. USA

George Washington (1984) Dir. Buzz Kulik. Prod. David Gerber Productions. Perf. Barry Bostwick. USA (TV series)

The Graduate (1967) Dir. Mike Nichols. Prod. Embassy Pictures Corporation. Perf. Dustin Hoffman and Anne Bancroft. USA

Grease (1978) Dir. Randal Kleiser. Prod. Paramount Pictures. Perf. John Travolta. USA

The Greek Tycoon (1978) Dir. J. Lee Thomspon. Prod. ABKCO. Perf. Anthony Quinn. USA

Head of State (2003) Dir. Chris Rock. Prod. Dreamworks SKG. Perf. Chris Rock. USA

Hill Street Blues (1981 – 1987) Prod. MTM Enterprises. Perf. Daniel J. Travanti et al. USA

Hook (1991) Dir. Steven Spielberg. Prod. Amblin Entertainment. Perf. Robin Williams and Dustin Hoffman. USA

Independence Day (1996) Dir. Ronald Emmerich. Prod. Centropolis Entertainment. Perf. Will Smith. USA

Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy (1981) Dir. Steve Gethers. Prod. ABC Circle Films. Perf. Jaclyn Smith. USA (TV series)

JFK (1991) Dir. Oliver Stone. Prod. Warner Bros. Pictures. Perf. Kevin Costner. USA

Kennedy (1983) Dir. Jim Goddard. Prod. Central Independent Television. Perf. Martin Sheen. UK/USA. (TV miniseries)

King (1978) Dir. Abby Mann. Prod. Filmways Television. Perf. Paul Winfield. USA (TV miniseries)

Klute (1971) Dir. Alan J. Pakula. Prod. Gus Productions. Perf. Jane Fonda and Donald Sutherland. USA

Knots Landing (1979-1993) Prod. CBS. Perf. Michele Lee et al. USA (TV series)

LA Law (1986 – 1994) Prod. 20th Century Fox Television. Perf. Corbin Bernsen et al. USA (TV series)

LA Story (1991) Dir. Mick Jackson. Prod. Carolco Pictures. Perf. Steve Martin. USA

Look Who's Talking (1989) Dir. Amy Heckerling. Prod. MCEG Virgin Home Entertainment. Perf. John Travolta. USA

Lost (2004 – present) Prod. ABC Studios. Perf. Matthew Fox et al. USA (TV series)

Lou Grant (1977-1982) Prod. MTM Enterprises. Perf. Edward Asner et al. USA (TV series)

Malice (1993) Dir. Harold Becker. Prod. Castle Rock Entertainment. Perf. Alec Baldwin. USA

Malcolm X (1993) Dir. Spike Lee. Prod. 40 Acres and Mule Filmworks. Perf. Denzel Washington. USA

The Manchurian Candidate (1962) Dir. John Frankenheimer. Prod. M. C. Productions. Perf. Frank Sinatra. USA

The Manchurian Candidate (2004) Dir. Jonathan Demme. Prod. Paramount Pictures. Perf. Liev Schreiber. USA

The Mary Tyler Moore Show (1970-1977) Prod. MTM Enterprises. Perf. Mary Tyler Moore et al. USA (TV series)

*M*A*S*H* (1972 – 1983) Prod. 20th Century Fox Television. Perf. Alan Alda et al. USA (TV series)

The Matrix (1999) Dir. Andy and Larry Wachowski. Prod. Groucho II Film Partnership. Perf. Keanu Reeves. USA

The Missiles of October (1974) Dir. Anthony Page. Prod. Viacom Productions. Perf. William Devane. USA (TV miniseries)

Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (1939) Dir. Frank Capra. Prod. Columbia Pictures Corporation. Perf. James Stewart. USA

Murder at 1600 (1997) Dir. Dwight H. Little. Prod. Warner Bros. Pictures. Perf. Wesley Snipes. USA

My Fellow Americans (1996) Dir. Peter Segal. Prod. Peters Entertainment. Perf. Jack Lemmon and James Garner. USA

Network (1976) Dir. Sidney Lumet. Prod. MGM. Perf. Faye Dunaway and William Holden. USA

Nixon (1995) Dir. Oliver Stone. Prod. Cinergi Pictures Entertainment. Perf. Anthony Hopkins. USA

North and South (1985) Prod. David L. Wolper Productions. Perf. Kirstie Alley et al. USA (TV miniseries)

NYPD Blue (1993-2005) Prod. 20th Century Fox Television. Perf. Dennis Franz et al. USA (TV series)

The Parallax View (1974) Dir. Alan J. Pakula. Prod. Doubleday Productions. Perf. Warren Beatty. USA

Platoon (1986) Dir. Oliver Stone. Prod. Hemdale Film. Perf. Charlie Sheen. USA

Play Misty for Me (1971) Dir. Clint Eastwood. Prod. Universal Pictures. Perf. Clint Eastwood. USA

The Postman (1997) Dir. Kevin Costner. Prod. Tig Productions. Perf. Kevin Costner. USA

Primary (1960) Dir. Robert Drew. Prod. Drew Associates. USA (Documentary)

Primary Colors (1998) Dir. Mike Nichols. Prod. Award Entertainment. Perf. John Travolta. USA

Pulp Fiction (1994) Dir. Quentin Tarantino. Prod. A Band Apart. Perf. John Travolta et al. USA

Rambo: First Blood Part II (1985) Dir. George P. Cosmatos. Prod. Anabasis NV. Perf. Sylvester Stallone. USA

The Reagans (2003) Dir. Robert Allan Ackerman. Prod. Sony Pictures Television. Perf. James Brolin. USA (TV miniseries)

Remains of the Day (1993) Dir. James Ivory. Prod. Merchant Ivory Productions. Perf. Anthony Hopkins. UK/USA

Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves (1991) Dir. Kevin Reynolds. Prod. Warner Bros. Pictures. Perf. Kevin Costner. USA

Robocop (1987) Dir. Paul Verhoeven. Prod. Orion Pictures Corporation. Perf. Peter Weller. USA

Roots (1977) Prod. David L. Wolper Productions. Perf. LeVar Burton et al. USA (TV miniseries)

Salvador (1986) Dir. Oliver Stone. Prod. Hemdale Film. Perf. James Woods. USA

Saturday Night Fever (1977) Dir. John Badham. Prod. RSO. Perf. John Travolta. USA

Saturday Night Live (1975-ongoing) Prod. NBC Studios. USA (TV Series)

Saving Private Ryan (1998) Dir. Steven Spielberg. Prod. Amblin Entertainment. Perf. Tom Hanks. USA

Schindler's List (1993) Dir. Steven Spielberg. Prod. Universal Pictures. Perf. Liam Neeson. USA

Secret Honor (1984) Dir. Robert Altman. Prod. Sandcastle 5 Productions. Perf. Philip Baker Hall. USA

Seven Days in May (1964) Dir. John Frankenheimer. Prod. Seven Arts Productions. Perf. Burt Lancaster and Kurt Douglas. USA

Shadow Conspiracy (1997) Dir. George P. Cosmatos. Prod. Cinergi Pictures Entertainment. Perf. Charlie Sheen. USA

Sleepless in Seattle (1993) Dir. Nora Ephron. Prod. TriStar Pictures. Perf. Tom Hanks. USA

Sphere (1998) Dir. Barry Levinson. Prod. Baltimore Pictures. Perf. Dustin Hoffman. USA

Sports Night (1998 – 2000) Prod. Touchstone Television. Perf. Joshua Malina et al. USA (TV series)

Stand by Me (1986) Dir. Rob Reiner. Prod. Act III. Perf. Wil Wheaton et al. USA

State of the Union (1948) Dir. Frank Capra. Prod. Liberty Films. Perf. Spencer Tracy. USA

Staying Alive (1983) Dir. Sylvester Stallone. Prod. Paramount Pictures. Perf. John Travolta. USA

St Elsewhere (1982 – 1988) Prod. MTM Productions. Perf. Ed Begley Jr. et al. USA (TV series)

Survivor (2000 – ongoing) Prod. Mark Burnett Productions. USA (TV series)

Teen Wolf (1985) Dir. Rod Daniel. Prod. Wolfkill. Perf. Michael J. Fox. USA

Third Watch (1999-2005) Prod. John Wells Productions. Perf. Jason Wiles et al. USA (TV series)

Thirteen Days (2000) Dir. Roger Donaldson. Prod. New Line Cinema. Perf. Kevin Costner. USA

That's My Bush! (2001) Prod. Comedy Central. Perf. Timothy Bottoms. USA (TV series)

Three Days of the Condor (1975) Dir. Sydney Pollack. Prod. Dino De Laurentiis Company. Perf. Robert Redford. USA

Tin Cup (1996) Dir. Ron Shelton. Prod. Regency Enterprises. Perf. Kevin Costner. USA

The Truman Show (1998) Dir. Peter Weir. Prod. Paramount Pictures. Perf. Jim Carrey. USA

The Untouchables (1987) Dir. Brian de Palma. Prod. Paramount Pictures. Perf. Kevin Costner. USA

W. (2008) Dir. Oliver Stone. Prod. Emperor Motion Pictures. Perf. Josh Brolin. USA

Wag the Dog (1997) Dir. Barry Levinson. Prod. Baltimore Pictures. Perf. Dustin Hoffman and Robert De Niro. USA

Wall Street (1987) Dir. Oliver Stone. Prod. 20th Century Fox. Perf. Charlie Sheen and Michael Douglas. USA

War and Remembrance (1988) Prod. ABC Circle films. Perf. Robert Mitchum et al. USA (TV miniseries)

The War Room (1993) Dir. Chris Hegedus and D. A. Pennebaker. Prod. Cyclone Films. USA (Documentary)

Waterworld (1995) Dir. Kevin Reynolds. Prod. Universal Pictures. Perf. Kevin Costner. USA

The Winds of War (1983) Prod. Jadran Film. Perf. Robert Mitchum et al. USA (TV miniseries)

The West Wing (1999-2006) Prod. John Wells Productions. Perf. Martin Sheen et al. USA (TV series)

When Harry Met Sally (1989) Dir. Rob Reiner. Prod. Castle Rock Entertainment. Perf. Billy Crystal and Meg Ryan. USA

Wilson (1944) Dir. Henry King. Prod. 20th Century Fox. Perf. Alexander Knox. USA

The X-Files (1993-2002) Prod. 20th Century Fox Television. Perf. David Duchovny and Gillian Anderson. USA (TV series)

Young Mr Lincoln (1939) Dir. John Ford. Prod. Cosmopolitan Producitons. Perf. Henry Fonda. USA

You've Got Mail (1998) Dir. Nora Ephron. Prod. Warner Bros. Pictures. Perf. Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan. USA