

SHOOTING THE PRESIDENT:

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

Submitted by Matthew David Barber, to the University of Exeter as a thesis for a degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English, September 2009.

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I certify that all material in this thesis which is not my own work has been identified and that no material has previously been submitted and approved for the award of a degree by this or any other University.

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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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