EDICIONES
COMPLUTENSE

Behind Presidential Commitments: Exemplary Crises in the US-American TV Shows *Kennedy* and *The West Wing*

Willem Strank [1]

Abstract. The article deals with the depiction of national (socio)political crises fictional(ized) US-American presidents are faced with in exemplary TV series of the 1980s and 1990s. Based on the premise that the audiovisual depiction of crises serves an exemplary function for the systems of the narrative's diegesis, the article attempts to analyse the effects of personification and representation in the fictionalized and the fictional handling of (socio)political crises. As a sample it refers to the form of the presidential biopic as depicted in *Kennedy* (1983) and *The West Wing* (1999-2006; both NBC). The little-known and even lesser-analysed TV miniseries *Kennedy* is used as an example for fictionalized crises handled by fictionalized leaders John and Robert Kennedy whereas the much more widely-known prime-time series *The West Wing* will be used as an exemplary point of reference how these fictionalized ways of handling (socio)political crises find their way into larger-scale narratives and entirely fictional formats. Finally, the results of the analysis of the discourse will lead to a reflection about how good or bad leadership are (re)imagined in these particular works of fiction and how (much) they are tied to particular characters acting as good (or bad) examples for the system they represent. Following this set of ideas, the article's hypothesis is that popular discourse often metonymically ties the (un)successful handling of a crisis to the responsible person and the outcome serves to teach the spectator how the representative of a given norm system (i. e. the democracy of the United States of America) goes about protecting the norms he comes to represent to serve as an example for the way history and collective identity are shaped through crises.
Keywords. Political drama; Biopic; Quality TV; The West Wing; TV series; Politics in film

[es] Detrás de los compromisos presidenciales: crisis en los programas de TV *Kennedy* y *The West Wing*

Resumen. El artículo trata sobre la descripción de las crisis —sociopolíticas— nacionales a las que se enfrentan los presidentes norteamericanos ficticios —estadounidenses— en ejemplos de series televisivas de los años ochenta y noventa. Partiendo de la premisa de que la representación audiovisual de las crisis cumple una función de modelo para los sistemas de diégesis de la narración, el artículo intenta analizar los efectos de la personificación y la representación en el manejo ficcionalizado y ficticio de las crisis —sociopolíticas—. Se toma como objeto de análisis la biopic presidencial representada en *Kennedy* (1983) y *The West Wing* (1999-2006, ambas NBC). La miniserie de televisión *Kennedy*, poco conocida y menos analizada, se usa como ejemplo para las crisis ficcionalizadas manejadas por los líderes novelados John y Robert Kennedy, mientras que la mucho más conocida serie emitida en prime-time —*The West Wing*— se usará como un punto de referencia sobre cómo estas formas ficcionalizadas de manejo de crisis (sociopolíticas) encuentran su camino en narrativas de mayor escala y formatos

1   Kiel University (Alemania)
     E-mail: wstrank@ndl-medien.uni-kiel.de

completamente ficticios. Finalmente, los resultados del análisis del discurso llevarán a una reflexión sobre cómo se —re— imagina el liderazgo bueno o malo en estas obras de ficción particulares y cómo —en gran medida— están vinculados a personajes particulares que actúan como buenos —o malos— ejemplos para el sistema que representan. Siguiendo este conjunto de ideas, la hipótesis del artículo es que el discurso popular a menudo une metonímicamente el manejo exitoso—o no— de una crisis a la persona responsable y el resultado sirve para enseñar al espectador cómo el representante de un sistema normativo dado —es decir, el democracia de los Estados Unidos de América— trata de proteger las normas que representa para servir de ejemplo sobre cómo la historia y la identidad colectiva se configuran a través de las crisis..

Palabras clave: Drama político; biopic; TV de calidad; The West Wing; series de TV; política en el cine

Summary. 1. Introduction: (Political) Crisis in Film. 2. Short Foray: Kennedy and Robert Drew's Direct Cinema 3. Martin Sheen as *Kennedy* (1983) 4. Political Crisis as Television Theatre in Aaron Sorkin's *The West Wing* 5. Conclusion 6. Bibliography

1. Introduction: (Political) Crisis in Film

The audiovisual adaptation of political events has always been a particular form of ideological interpretation as any reduction of complex real–life circumstances to a simplified plot will necessarily leave out aspects more or less crucial to the understanding of the recounted situation. Any mass media have a tendency to relate and reassure ideological values through their continuous redistribution and especially the depiction of politics can yield telling results about the audiovisual texts' stances on democracy, good —and bad— leadership or world politics. The political crisis lends itself particularly well to this kind of fictional reimagining. Every crisis is a crossroads situation for the protagonist —in real life as well as in the subsequent mediatisation— and a politician's success is not seldomly measured by her/his handling of crises. While national crises —for the United States of America one of the most notable examples would be the assassination of the 35th president John F. Kennedy on November 22, 1963— often produce cultural narratives of great variety, their audiovisual adaptations sometimes take a stance in choosing one of these narratives ranging from recounting the mainstream version to vivid conspiracy theories. Oliver Stone's *JFK* (USA 1991) is a bona–fide example of a filmic text picking up the discourse and reimagining it in an ideological way. Kennedy's death was not his only crisis, though in his 1000 day presidency, foreign and national politics alike brought about critical situations that have produced cultural narratives up to this day. This article sets out to isolate one example and take a look at some particular audiovisual adaptations —and finally, one completely fictional variation of the topic— and evaluate to what extent the ideological conditions of the times may predetermine the different reimaginings of this particular crisis.

The fictional crisis can be defined as an enduring state of conflict that threatens the values that are attributed to the fiction's diegetic 'normality'. Values that are usually threatened in audiovisual texts include peace, equality, security, the —fixed— distribution of riches, the permanence of a culture and the endurance of

its icons, to name a few. Crises can be personal as well, and whole genres are built around them: thrillers can be read as stories of individual crisis, recounting the escalation of an initially harmless situation and the subsequent loss of control —symbolically and physically— of the protagonist, resulting in a radical change of the way s/he regards the —fictional— world, making her/him experience a situation of powerlessness against an overwhelmingly powerful system of some kind. Like many of these introductory notes, this observation tends to be oversimplified and the thriller is far from the only genre dealing with crisis in its very core. In fact, crisis lends itself very well to narrative fiction because it delivers both the motivation and the context for a conflict. Conflicts, however, are inherently narrative in the Bordwellian 'fabula' they often mark the premise of a narration (Bordwell, 1985: 157) whereas the dynamics of charging and resolving a conflict in the course of its 'syuzhet' often lie at the heart of cinematic storytelling[2]. Poietical and poetological observations about the drama have discussed this at least since Aristoteles whereas more contemporary 'classics' dealing with the art of scriptwriting (i. e. Field, 2005) still acknowledge the fact that a conflict is necessary for narrative tension. A crisis is a paradigmatic example for narrative conflict as its outcome is often obscure, it rarely spares the protagonist from moral dilemma, and it puts the protagonist in a situation of responsibility, making her/him face the consequences of her/his actions after the resolution. Structurally, the recounting of a crisis lends itself well to stand in for a personal, political or social situation of conflict.

Ideological and narrative premises aside, the political crisis is as old as the history of the drama. More often than not it's the responsible individuals who witness a public crisis turn into a personal conflict, and while they personify the crisis, they also metonymically represent the apparatus they are making decisions for the state, the people, the family etc. The failure of responsible politicians and leaders is the essence of tragedy, implicitly expanding the consequences to those who were (badly or wrongly) represented by the individual. The presidential drama and the presidential biopic (Hesling, 2016: 193f.; Bingham, 2016) are thus contemporary manifestations of this very phenomenon, and many rules of the game remain unchanged. Christopher Bigsby (2013: 31) already noted that:

> [...] he presidency is already a construction. Not only does it exist apart from, and in some cases in contradistinction to, the man who holds it but it is mediated by those with a vested interest in maintaining that distinction. […]. Film, however, documentary and fictional, had long since established the president as actor in the national story.

There are indeed manyfold connections between the heritages of those forms: fictional— leaders are measured by their handling of critical situations— of conflict – if they fail, they are often replaced or condemned to die—. The biopic itself is a genre that is prone to use the rhetorics of 'leading by example', often setting the stage for larger-than-life protagonists that stand out from the 'normal' people making up the film's general population. Biopics draw upon the image that has manifested itself in popular discourse prior to the making of the film, often revisiting the most famous situations that made up the depicted celebrity's life, more often than not staging

---

2   For more on David Bordwell's neoformalistic concept of ‚fabula‘, ‚syuzhet‘ and ‚style‘ see Bordwell, 1985, pp. 49-53.

the protagonist's failure as the fault of her/his immature contemporaries, making the film readable as a cross–over between an overdue post-mortem celebration of their achievements and thus a —self— celebration of contemporary society that has finally overcome said immaturity. Presidents are archetypal protagonists for biopics as, especially in the United States of America, they metonymically represent their times — visible in labels like "the Reagan Decade" or the scope that the "Watergate" scandal— had for the question of trust in the highest of authority figures, personified by Richard Nixon. The latter is an interesting case from an audiovisual perspective, as the discourse often closed in on the person rather than his administration and staged his symbolical and historical isolation using a formal (*Secret Honor*, Robert Altman, 1984), analytical (*Frost/Nixon*, Ron Howard, 2008) and a hermeneutical (*Nixon*, Oliver Stone, 1995) approach, respectively[3]. Nixon came to personify the disappointment in "Washington" (another metonymy) in general and became a sort of anti-hero when compared to the figure that won the elections against him – John F. Kennedy whom we'll tackle shortly and in more detail.

The studies of crises and film —or TV— are mostly dedicated to three branches of investigation: the various crises of cinema —especially on the brink of the manyfold New Waves of the 1960s and 1970s but also in the 1930s with the event of the 'early talkies': Shindler, 1996; Hales/Petrescu/Weinstein, 2016; Dixon, 2016; Ariano, 2012—, crises of sexuality, identity and gender roles (Iles, 2008; Baker, 2006; Powrie, 1997 amo.) and films depicting crises, mostly dealing with the cinema of the 1960s and 1970s due to the affinity to countercultural movements and resulting discursive connections (Ryan/Kellner, 1990, especially ch. 2, pp. 49-75). Lawrence Webb identified urban crisis in the films of the 1970s as a reflection of the actual urban decay in everyday America during the same decade and proved conclusively that economical and structural (in this case: urban) crises are distinctly negotiated in audiovisual discourses of the 1960s and 1970s by focusing on the state of the 'modern city' as a potential living world for the contemporary subject at the verge of Keynesian capitalism (Webb, 2014, pp. 11ff., 17, 321). This article shall, however, follow a different approach in analysing how fictional(ized) role models —are meant to— handle fictional(ized) national crises. It therefore regards audiovisual media —such as TV series— as medial constructions of reality. Astrid Eril (2011:114) argues that "just like memory, media do not simply reflect reality, but instead offer constructions of the past. […] What they appear to encode —versions of past events and persons, cultural values and norms, concepts of collective identity— they are in fact first creating". Although Eril is more concerned with the —close— relationship of media and memory, the mediatisation of memory and the construction of memory via the reception of media, the outlook of this article will follow the idea that similar discourses of versions of past events and persons, cultural values and norms as well as concepts of collective identity are communicated largely through media. This entails political discourse, popular opinion on leadership as well as the very idea of 'reality'. As Donnalyn Pompper (2003:20) puts it, "[p]olitical narratives that rely on drama to bring together plot, character, scene, and purpose are quite useful for understanding culture". Following this preconception, the article will set out to analyse a sample of two interconnected TV series for their depiction of (socio)political crises to prove or disprove the initial hypothesis that (a) popular discourse often metonymically ties

---

3   For a more elaborate approach to "Nixon as film gangster" see Hesling, 2016

the (un)successful handling of a crisis to the responsible person and (b) the outcome serves to teach the spectator how the representative of a given norm system —i. e. the democracy of the United States of America— goes about protecting the norms he comes to represent to (c) serve as an example for the way history and collective identity are shaped through crises.

The sample is small due to it being only an article and the hypothesis would certainly warrant a much larger study, however, the fact that the two TV series — 1983's *Kennedy* (Jim Goddard) and 1999's *The West Wing* (Aaron Sorkin), both NBC series starring Martin Sheen as the president of the United States — are intertextually connected by casting and public image as well as the idea of storytelling through crises, will hopefully make this first step in connecting representation, collective identity and the fictional(ized) depiction of crises as three sides of one audiovisual discourse, somewhat valid. *Kennedy* has not been the subject of film studies[4], however, there are a couple of mentions of the miniseries in publications with a cultural history approach (White, 2013: ch. 5; Coyne, 2008: ch. 3). Michael Coyne (2008) also stresses the connection of Martin Sheen's roles in *Kennedy* and *The West Wing*, both Kennedy and Bartlet —the president of *The West Wing*— being catholic, liberal presidents with agendas dedicated to change. *The West Wing*, however, has been the subject of extensive scholarly analysis.

The publications range from descriptive series companions (Challen, 2001) to close-readings about the series' politics and their specifics (Fahy, 2005). There are whole monographies dedicated to *The West Wing*, such as Rollins/O'Connor (2003), encompassing articles about the authenticity, the political stance, the language, the scriptwriting process, perceptions of and critical responses to *The West Wing*, or McCabe (2013), a monography in the "TV milestones" series, focusing on the series' production contexts, Sorkin's status as the series' "auteur", a formal analysis, the representation of cultural memory in and through *The West Wing* as well a conclusion dealing with its legacy. Ruth Wodak (2009) deals with the staging of politics in television. Starting from the interpretation of politicians as 'stage actors', Wodak explores how fictional representations of politics influence and/or shape popular beliefs about politics, also referring to *The West Wing* in the process. Some authors deal with *The West Wing's* historical context and discuss it as a work of the so–called "Quality TV" paradigm (Hills, 2004; Feuer, 2007; Bianculli, 2016). The West Wing has also been the subject of post-9/11 studies (Holland, 2011; Scott, 2017) and there is a notable book about nationalism in the series (Parry-Giles/Parry-Giles, 2006), as well as several (expertly done) formally-oriented analyses (Bickerman, 2008, Herrmann, 2015). Among the discourse-oriented publications that are more relevant for the particular approach of this article, the chapter about *The West Wing* in Christopher Bigsby's 2013 book "Viewing America" stands out and will thus be referred to most extensively.

---

4   Although there is a very relevant and well-written article about filmic representations of John F. Kennedy (Connor, 2015) it fails to mention the NBC TV series altogether, possible due to the author's clear distinction between film and television.

2. Short Foray: Kennedy and Robert Drew´s Direct Cinema

The Direct Cinema movement originated around 1960 and was made possible by the technical innovation of synchronizing portable sound recorders with the equally portable 16mm camera (Noll Brinckmann, 2010, p. 198). As is so often the case, the technical innovation corresponded with new formal ideas that are often reduced to the simplified slogan "fly on the wall', outlining the filmmakers' attempt to minimize the protagonists' awareness of the filmic apparatus". Director Robert Drew's first collaboration with John F. Kennedy marked the manifestation of the movement, accompanying the soon–to–be youngest president elect so far during the primaries in the eponymous Primary. This was a good deal for both sides as it allowed the core members of the Direct Cinema group —Drew, Leacock, Maysles and Pennebaker — to test their theoretical premises with a relatively non–controversial subject and proved a valuable and befitting edition for Kennedy's extensive media campaign that eventually paved his way into the White House, marketing him as a president for new beginnings, an idea he gladly renewed later on in his inaugural speech by famously stating that "the torch has been passed to a new generation". The trust that was gained by Kennedy and his staff over the course of this pilot project also enabled Drew and his team to accompany the now–elected president Kennedy once again during the University of Alabama integration crisis in June 1963. The aptly named Crisis: *Behind A Presidential Commitment* was a political statement in itself, highlighting John and Robert Kennedy's —then Attorney General of the United States— problem–solving abilities and justifying the course they took to protect the two African–American students Vivian Malone and James Hood on their historical first day at the University of Alabama. Crisis tackled a much more controversial subject and became a very different film from Primary in the process, eventually sabotaging core ideals of the Direct Cinema movement by setting the crisis in question as the film's narrative framework[5]. It probably wouldn't work any other way, once again proving the point that crisis is a potent narrative propulsor.

3. Martin Sheen as *Kennedy* (1983)

One of the main strategies of the TV miniseries *Kennedy* (USA 1983; Jim Goddard, NBC) is to use the crises of John F. Kennedy's 1000–day presidency as script material, transforming them into narrative conflicts in the process. These micro–conflicts correspond with one of the seven episodes each, leaving room for an overarching, constantly brooding macro-conflict between the traditionally stylized antagonist J. Edgar Hoover (Vincent Gardenia) and the Kennedys. The series uses the increased instrumentalization of mass media during the Kennedy administration as a self-reflexive device from the beginning, showing reactions to the president's speeches, distributing important news and even letting the TV serve as a valuable source of information for the Kennedys. Just after John F. Kennedy's election a TV newsman lists a litany of "likely disasters" to be dealt with by the new administration —a catalogue of crises and narrative potentials, reflexively teasing the contents of

---

5   For a more detailed assessment of Crisis in connection to the filmic depictions of John F. Kennedy, see Connor (2015), especially pp. 145ff.

the series: "recession, the Negro problem, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia".

The first episode begins with Kennedy's assassination and the last episode ends with it, framing the series of crises in the middle with an even more serious national crisis triggering a state of emergency. I will focus on two of the intermittent conflicts that serve to typify two kinds of crises the Kennedys have to face —the bay of pigs invasion crisis as an example for a foreign politics conflict John (Martin Sheen) is faced with in episode 3, and the freedom riders crisis as an example for a domestic crisis that Robert (John Shea) is faced with in episode 4. The focus on "Jack" and "Bobby" respectively shows the aforementioned strategy of personifying the conflict resolver to simplify matters for the narration. Although the series often acknowledges the participation of a plethora of interest groups in political action, the rise of tension always results in the isolation of one key figure dealing with the conflict more or less alone.

The bay of pigs invasion is prepared early in the second episode when the president is advised to continue a project from the Eisenhower administration, namely the secret revolution in Cuba from within, instigated by double agents. As this is one of the first decisions Kennedy makes after his being elected the event is recounted as a beginner's mistake. It effectively thwarts the promise of his inaugural speech to stand in for a new kind of politics and to represent a new generation —the torch has been passed, indeed, but only to a younger generation that ostensibly repeats the mistakes of the former administration. By adapting Eisenhower's politics, Kennedy is no longer the innovator he has set out to be, and the logic of the miniseries dictates him to be sanctioned for it. The mistake of inheriting the bad politics of the 'old generation' leads to his first veritable crisis as president; the situation escalates and becomes a conflict that his opponent Hoover regards as a potential stumbling block. The main topic here is responsibility, introduced in the first conversation on the bay of pigs invasion and picked up by the president himself after things have gone wrong.

The fateful conversation starts around twenty minutes into the episode —about 64 minutes into the DVD version which combines the first three episodes into one— and uses a rather conventional set of shots and reverse shots to underline the dialogue as well as the situation. Kennedy is alone against the two CIA men who repeatedly cite former authorities as initiators but also as patrons of their initiative —first Eisenhower, then Nixon who is thus made out as the real culprit behind this. Bringing Nixon into the discussion at this point falls back on the later president's public image; it thickens the plot around him as another antagonist belonging to the old administration, linking him to the series "true opponent: conservatism as represented by Hoover. The CIA men promise Kennedy something that nobody could ever deliver – "complete control" – and the young president falls for it. "With you both being personally in charge?", Kennedy reassures himself, overlooking the fact that, being the president, he will ultimately be in charge anyway. The fact that the shot–reverse–shot structure often isolates the president in opposite frames from the CIA men corresponds with another scene that is cross–cut to this one. The parallel scene shows Kennedy's brothers and advisors working on his inauguration speech while he actively contradicts it through his actions. The three writers are working together and are being framed together, their looks corresponding in a triangle, further emphasizing their teamwork. The formal opposition could hardly be clearer: John F. Kennedy is working on his own, without his staff, without his

family, and thus making a mistake that contradicts the team's statement as laid down in the inaugural speech by harking back to a generation he has set out to replace. He stresses repeatedly that he "don't care to think of the consequences if anything goes wrong" although the consequences should probably inform his decision. The situation is initially handled poorly by the young president, his hybris and his vanity —acting alone and believing that $13 million will be enough to finish a plan his predecessor couldn't see through— trigger his first crisis in foreign politics.

On the eve of the potential invasion the tone changes significantly —the idea is strictly illegal and the secrecy of the CIA has prevented other organisations from stepping in. The president subsequently steps up to assemble his team and listens to every advice he can get: in the situation room, in the Oval Office, in back chambers of the White House. When his brother Robert stresses that the invasion would be illegal by any reading of the law, the president replaces the initial opposition of legal vs. illegal by a more complex moral conundrum: "On the one hand, you are in the spirit of freedom and righteousness, but in the eyes of the law, you're in the wrong". This is a remarkable statement on many levels —regarding the law as a hindrance for trigger–happy foreign politics does not place Kennedy far from more right–wing positions, and of course next to no time passes until the name Nixon is mentioned once more: "Maybe Nixon is right", Kennedy muses, "he advised me to find a proper legal cover and move in". The crisis continues lacking a clear course by the president —he publicly declines any US involvement in the situation in Cuba while clandestinely sticking to the CIA plan of a secret invasion. When Castro calls his bluff by complaining about an invasion to the UN, Kennedy finally has to abandon the few invaders when they are discovered. He refuses to send military backup to stay true to his public word and the whole operation becomes a fatal failure. Interestingly, the crisis moves from the situation rooms and offices of the White House to more private surroundings; it finally culminates in the president's bedroom. All the while the miniseries omits the Soviet reaction to the suggested invasion almost completely —there is mention of the Sino–Russian bloc in a short TV newsflash but the global dimension of the crisis is only hinted at. *Kennedy* instead focuses on the personal moral dilemma of the president, on the lesson he has learned from his failure to act as a president for a new generation of liberal voters. His reactionary and confrontational approach has gone wrong; most of the latter scenes have shown him bumbling about, insecure about how he should proceed. The miniseries ends the conflict by 'hitting home': as mentioned before, the climax is reached as the president receives a nightly telephone call in his bed, informing him of the failure. "It was all a mistake", he sums it up, "people are dying down there right now, and I'm directly responsible". This underlines that the first crisis didn't end well but it was a lesson learned, a lesson of personal growth and improvement of leadership: Now Kennedy knows that he should not have delegated the responsibility —"being in charge"— to others when he is responsible for what happens anyway, being the president. The system and its representative are interlinked as it has been customary in almost every narrative tragedy —his failure results in consequences for the whole apparatus he stands to represent.

The first domestic crisis is handled very differently by the series. An opening montage of the fourth episode depicts the status quo of racism in the fictionalized United States of America: an African–American mother of two is beat up in public for no reason by some white men in front of her children while beer-drinking

bystanders are watching in amusement. Another scene shows the Kennedys in the White House swimming-pool discussing the freedom riders movement, a group of non–violent demonstrators that tries to peacefully enforce the new desegregation laws in Alabama. Robert reminds John that it's a "moral and fundamental legal issue", making it clear from the beginning that concerning *this* crisis law and morality are on the same side. A few minutes of runtime later, the narration turns its attention to Alabama again, showing the police explicitly allowing a violent mob to attack and injure the freedom riders, setting their Greyhound bus on fire. This structural principle of cross–cuts remains constitutive for the remainder of the episode: something happens 'out there'– riots, cases of violence, later the reaction of the state and strategies are discussed 'inside', in Washington D.C. Martin Luther King (Charles Brown) is introduced as the advocate for the freedom riders and as an extension to the moral conscience of the White House, constantly reminding the representatives of their failures in supporting the civil rights movement. Robert Kennedy's strategy is twofold: he instructs a Southern marshal to try to convince the protesters as well as Governor Patterson that the White House position is lawful and decent 'from Southerner to Southerner', thus trying to influence the outcome of the conflict from within. Secondly, he increases the pressure on the Governor by effectively threatening to step in with federal troops: "If the force of law has to be applied, it will be applied", he tells him over the phone, and informs him that he takes the responsibility for it. This angers the governor but ultimately resolves the conflict: Robert's application of the force of the state is successful, proving the position of his (democratic) party that a big government is a strong government right. The attempt at altering the situation from within, however, is doomed to fail once again: the marshal convinces the freedom fighters to go home but has no standing with the protesters and intermediately gets under attack himself. The Attorney General sends in 400 US marshals as a symbol of state power, while the president is not involved at all, attending an international event meanwhile —this crisis is Robert's to resolve and filling a position he reluctantly accepted, he immediately takes responsibility for his (successful) actions, metonymically representing the judiciary branch of the Kennedy administration. He understands the interdependent dynamics of decisions —as made in Washington— and events —as happening elsewhere— as a cause–and–effect network that has to be dealt with actively and transparently, thus being a more efficient problem solver than his older brother.

Martin Sheen seems to have a knack for political roles (see also Coyne, 2008, ch. 3) as he not only played John F. Kennedy in *Kennedy*, but also his brother Robert ten years previously in the TV film *The Missiles Of October* (Anthony Page, 1973). The latter film also deals with the Cuban missile crisis extensively but frames it much more as a conventional Cold War standoff story with a happy ending. In 1983, the same year as *Kennedy*, he also played the demagogic antagonist Greg Stillson who would blow up the world as president in David Cronenberg's *The Dead Zone*, an early Stephen King adaptation, further complicating his already multi-faceted image as a typecast world leader.

4. Political Crisis as Television Theatre in Aaron Sorkin's *The West Wing*

Aaron Sorkin's *The West Wing* (1999-2006, 7 Seasons, NBC) may be the most famous example of a political TV series prior to *House Of Cards* (2013-, 5+ Seasons, Netflix). It has generated a lot of academic attention over the years —see above— and designed the concept of a White House that thrived on collaboration, a meticulously orchestrated staff and a commander–in–chief that was often only informed on a need–to–know basis. This commander-in-chief's name was Josiah "Jed" Bartlet and he was played by Martin Sheen who re-used much of his trademark acting he had established in *Kennedy* sixteen years prior. Embodying an optimistic nationalism with a positive outlook on the United States as a problem–solver nation, *The West Wing* told its story mainly through political conflicts that occasionally devolved into serious crises. The imagination of an active, responsible president is resemblant of the one in *Kennedy*, although naturally *The West Wing* had seven seasons of character development as opposed to the seven episodes of the miniseries. Apart from Kennedy, the other role model appears to be contemporary real-life president Bill Clinton, as Myron A. Levine (2003: 55) also notes: "Developed during the Clinton years, the series reflects the ambience and style of the Clinton White House (1993-2001), not the more structured, hierarchical, and businesslike manner of the Nixon, Reagan, and Bush presidencies". I tend to agree with Christopher Bigsby (2013:32), though, who emphasizes the fact that Sorkin's vision was not consistent with any one real president but rather "a set of convictions which coloured his portrait of a fictional president whose principles sometimes seemed rather closer to presumed American values than those of any actual president of recent times, depending on what those values were assumed to be". This makes any liberal president a reasonable point of comparison —or rather none of them at all, and much the same could be said about *Kennedy* which is far from an authentic historical representation but rather a condensation of the president's best–remembered selling points.

It is impossible to take the whole series into account in the space of one single article but it seems feasible to compare the aforementioned crises of *Kennedy* with similar situations President Bartlet finds himself in. The first focuses on a US guerilla conflict not unlike the beginning of the Bay of Pigs invasion, albeit situated in Colombia instead of Cuba (*The War At Home*, 02x14, NBC, 2001). The second gives an update on interracial relations (and tensions) by establishing the threats posed to African-American White House worker Charlie (Dulé Hill) when he is dating the President's daughter Zoey Bartlet (Elisabeth Moss) (*The White House Pro-Am*, 01x17, NBC, 2000)[6].

The West Wing is notable by structuring its entire narrative around the art of crisis management —the whole staff of the White House is usually involved in resolving small– and large–scale crises at any given moment, giving way to a character–driven narrative that softens the aforementioned metonymical relationship of the president and the state significantly[7]. The whole White House staff is presented as a complex working system made up by humans who frequently and inevitably make mistakes,

---

6   Interestingly, most of the literature about *The West Wing* tends to focus on a set number of the same episodes
      —most notably the first season's second episode— and these two are usually not among them.

7   For a rundown of the public's reactions to the „traditionally obscure seams of White House crisis management
      sessions involving national security issues" see Pompper, 2003, p. 28f.

thus producing a significant amount of additional work themselves. *The War At Home* is an interesting episode because it's a showcase for the typical West Wing narrative (see Feuer, 2007: 149) while encompassing crises and/or conflicts on various levels of representation, stressing the interferences between public and private conflicts as well as offering positive outcomes for some and negative outcomes for others. While *Kennedy* already showed that the crises of the John F. Kennedy presidency were handled at least by two Kennedys —John and Robert— and that the President rarely acted alone but rather made an informed decision based on the research work and advice of his staff, *The West Wing* broadens this aspect by distinguishing between different levels of problems that are solved by different members of the staff.

The War At Home is set just after President Bartlet's third State of the Union address. His speech gets substantial media coverage but is also the source for at least one subsequent problem. Abbey —Stockard Channing— the president's wife, is able to read between the lines of the speech and deduces that it must mean that her husband is going to run for a second term. By running for a second term he is breaking a deal between the spouses which angers Abbey. The deal revolves around Bartlet secretly having multiple sclerosis which makes every other year of his presidency a gamble — as a doctor and as his wife, Abbey— is convinced that running again may be a substantial mistake, leading to a marital conflict. This conflict is dealt with in an interesting way: due to the subject, it takes place only in moments of complete privacy that rarely exist in the presidential couple's lives. The Bartlets have to treat their dates like scheduled meetings, argue in between work commitments, yet their conflict is only private in occasion, yet public in scope. This difference informs most of the conflicts in *The West Wing*, showing that in certain positions public work and private life have to converge. Abbey stresses this by not wanting to argue about it prior to Jed resolving a foreign crisis. The complex network of conflicts shows that they are on one hand interlinked with one another, on the other hand the protagonists must keep them separate at all times. Once again, this makes it very clear that the main task of those working in Aaron Sorkin's White House is crisis or conflict management.

Two other conflicts of the episode revolve around a private and a public problem respectively, Josh Lyman's —Bradley Whitford— secretary Donna —Janel Moloney— is obviously infatuated with her boss but nevertheless attempts to fix him up with polling expert Joey Lucas —Marlee Matlin—, baffling Josh who had taken Donna's infatuation for granted. This is an exclusively private matter as no professional problems arise out of this triangular constellation. Press secretary C.J. Cregg —Allison Janney— has to deal with the aftermath of the president's state of the union speech. Bartlet had singled out a policeman named Jack Sloan —Richard Riehle— as a positive example but the PR section of the White House staff had failed in vetting him thoroughly for the occasion. It was subsequently revealed that the officer in question had been on trial for a potentially racially–motivated shooting but C.J. defends him on the grounds that he was acquitted after the trial. The failure to vet him properly is an internal fact, thus the conflict and its resolution are purely public —the officer gives an exclusive interview on the television and relieves himself in the White House's stead. Only insiders see the publicity measure for what it is —like the senator of North Dakota who confronts White House Communications Director Toby Ziegler —Richard Schiff— with it over lunch.

The main crisis is another, though: Five DEA agents have been taken hostage by Colombian guerilla commandos acting for the drug cartel. They try to blackmail the American president into releasing a Colombian drug kingpin from jail but Bartlet greenlights an undercover rescue commando. Not unlike the bay of pigs crisis in Kennedy, the rescue mission plays out solely in the White House – the effects of Bartlet's orders are only reported but not visualized. In other regards, it is also staged similarly: Bartlet discusses the situation in the actual control room as well as in an isolated space with his most loyal advisor Leo McGarry —John Spencer— as well as in different meetings all over the White House. After the failure of the actual mission — the coordinates were planted by the guerilla and led the American soldiers into an ambush— the president briefly considers escalating the crisis into a full–blown war on the cartel. The initial parallels to Kennedy's bay of pigs crisis are now replaced by parallels to the Vietnam war as the chances of success are apparently comparable. Bartlet also complains about having inherited the war on drugs from the fourth president before him —which would be Richard M. Nixon in the real world who actually coined the term. The inheritance of a bad war also echoes Kennedy's continuation of Nixon's Cuba initiative —even linked to the same man, a popcultural villain, as mentioned above. And it also leads to Bartlet questioning himself as a leader, playing chess in the cold while waiting for the results. The crisis is thus coded with a variety of intertextual materials: prior depictions of crises with the same actor portraying a (liberal) president as well as historical narratives of past American crises: the bay of pigs invasion, the Vietnam war, the war on drugs. The episode even quotes the mediatization of these historical crises by having the president remember pictures of the Vietnam war as selected by the television: caskets coming off the plane. In the last scene, he consequentially travels to Dover to witness the new caskets coming off the plane, caskets enclosing casualties he is responsible for. We also see C.J. handle —and possibly spin— the news about the Colombian crisis and it is resolved not by the White House's own power but because the Colombian president offers to give in to the guerilla's demands, effectively leading Bartlet's position to never negotiate with terrorists under any circumstances into absurdity. The public crisis leads Bartlet into isolation, affects him personally — he is outside playing chess with himself, only visited by his most trusted advisor and in the end he is framed alone, witnessing the arrival of the caskets. His personal state equals the state of the union, after all, he has to handle the most urgent crisis of the four, making decisions that are potentially —and eventually— fatal for those involved. The initial argument between Abbey and Jed thus becomes readable in a metonymical way, too: A sick president may equal a sick country, and that would be the major catastrophe. *The War At Home* prototypically shows the workings behind the scenes of the White House but all the parts of the machine serve to uphold the fiction as well as the reality of there being one decision-maker —the president— who metonymically represents the whole country, its values, its progress, stagnation or decline and its standing in times of crisis.

The analysis of *The White House Pro–Am* can only add a footnote to these observations. The episode is separated into different plots and the one regarding the threats is actually very short. It encompasses mainly a conversation between Zoey and her father in the Oval Office and between Charlie and Zoey over lunch. The first conversation involves President Bartlet telling Zoey about the letters by white supremacists. Since her relationship with Charlie has become a news item Zoey is

not safe to bring Charlie to a club opening anymore and Bartlet orders her to cancel it. The scenes is broken up into several shots and reverse–shots in which Bartlet is clearly the dominant figure–sitting higher up, taking up significant portions of the frame in over–the–shoulder shots signifying his point of view. His paternal position is intermingled with his profession as he advises Zoey as her father but also as her president. The personal tackling of the conflict before it can evolve into a crisis involves a concession that is hard to accept: not taking Charlie to the club opening means yielding to white supremacists. Accompanying music emphasizes this as the resolution is not scored with a positive mood music but rather a dramatic underscoring. Zoey gives in immediately, without discussion, evading the sociopolitical conflict that would arise following an attempt on her life. Later, Zoey tells Charlie about the solution to their problem over lunch but he doesn't accept it as easily. The potential public conflict and the threat by extremists is averted by extremely moderate and concessive behavior but it opens up a conflict in Charlie's and Zoey's relationship that has to be resolved subsequently. This highlights an argumentation that is often picked up by the series when the Bartlets' private life moves into focus: the office is more important than the person holding it and those attached to this person by being part of his family.

5. Conclusion

The sample analysis of presidential crises in the US-American TV series *Kennedy* and *The West Wing* showed a tendency to combine private and public dimensions of conflicts, possibly to heighten the comprehensibility of the protagonists' actions and thus to justify their stances. A president unaffected by the possibility of fatalities as a result of his orders would be disagreeable but furthermore represent the values entrusted in him by the electorate in an inaccurate fashion. If the head of state metonymically represents the state with all possible consequences, he has to be diplomatically and politically as well as socially and morally competent to be likable. Secondly, there seems to be an aesthetic preference to emphasize the teamwork involved in the planning stages —and in distributing success— and to isolate the responsible protagonist in times of failure, equating a bad outcome with a personal tragedy. The emphasis is on the decisions, underlined by the fact that the results of the decisions made in the White House are usually not shown, the exception being the domestic conflict managed by Attorney General Robert Kennedy in Kennedy. Christopher Bigsby (2013: 44) also stresses this connection between the representation of general American values through the Bartlet White House and the necessity of having one central figure to carry the burden of the dramatic conflict:

> The fact is that the series was not going to be about a single man, or even the team he leads, but about a vision of America lost somewhere in the journey from Concord, cultural no less than democratic centre of a society born with a declaration of rights, towards a society in which character has transmuted into personality and performance replaced being. The irony is that this theme would be developed through the performance of a fictive character, one of whose central commitments would be to closing the gap between present America and the values it professes. […] Against his original intention, Sorkin turned Bartlet into the axle around which the wheel of the drama turns.

Furthermore, the analysed presidents regard themselves as liberals, reacting to their predecessors' politics by trying to be noticeably different – inherited conflicts are thus especially problematic and in both cases result in failure. This is consequent following the logic of the series because the continuation of a conflict by a disregarded president makes the "new" president part of the same old system he had promised to overcome. In *Kennedy* this is staged more or less as a beginner's mistake that serves as a timely warning to set the young president straight but in *The West Wing* the topic arises more often and is handled in a more complex fashion. It's part of the conflict network and often a necessity as the inherited conflicts are often a matter of the general situation of foreign politics rather than a specific agenda that should have been abolished earlier. The analysed example is thus a bit of an anomaly —even reviving Nixon— albeit implicitly, as the stand–in villain and tying Bartlet's hands in a war of which he is unable to make sense himself. The idea of 'crisis inheritance'is particularly interesting regarding the opening hypothesis: the crises are literally handed over from one responsible individual to another and each leader's handling of the situation contributes to the shaping of concepts of collective identity. This device is especially potent when the leader faces a moral dilemma as her/his actions largely renegotiate the norms s/he represents, leading to an altercation of the judgment of her/his compatibility to the system s/he presides at.

A third symbolic border separates legal and illegal actions —both presidents are momentarily seduced by easy, illegal solutions but ultimately decide against them in the light of their responsibility. Under the law, the president is equal to his people— he has to work as a leader but also as a responsible role model. The perks of being a superpower often fall short due to this category as commented on by president Bartlet in *The War At Home*: both series take a rather critical stance when it comes to America's role as a "world police" apparatus–domestic force to keep the peace at home, however, is highly efficient and successful in both examples.

All in all, sovereign and visible action is preferred to attempts at coups d'état, invasions or guerilla missions – the Vietnam war looms large over both series as an example for a catastrophic outcome –although it is only proleptically hinted at in Kennedy in order not to break the historical immersion– and the honest and open way is always the more successful one. This is interesting as both series present fictional backstage views of the mechanics at work in the White House, educated guesses how politics really work at the highest level. Still, transparency is a major value in either format, potentially highlighting the series' believability by heightening their perceived authenticity. It is also regarded as an important value which is not surprising as every democratic president has to account for his actions come the next election day, leaving it up to the voters —and regarding television, the viewers— to decide how well the major crises of the term have been handled.

6. Bibliography

Ariano, Andrea. (2012). *Crisis of Action. Violence and Affect in New Hollywood Cinema*. La Trobe University (Ph.D thesis).

Baker, Brian. (2006). *Masculinity in Fiction and Film: Representing Men in Popular Genres, 1945-2000*. London/New York: Continuum.

Bianculli, David. (2016). *The Platinum Age of Television: From I Love Lucy to The Walking*

Dead, How TV Became Terrific. New York: Anchor Books.

Bickermann, Daniel. (2008). "'Bartlet for America': Innovation und Konvention, Technik und Stil, Utopie und Politik in The West Wing", in Sascha Seiler (ed.), *Was bisher geschah: Serielles Erzählen im zeitgenössischen amerikanischen.* Fernsehen. Köln: Schmitt, pp. 80-96.

Bingham, Dennis. (2016). "The Lives and Times of the Biopic", in Robert A. Rosenstone and Constantin Parvulescu (eds.), *A Companion to the Historical Film.* [First published in 2013.] Chichester: Wiley & Sons, pp. 233-255.

Bigsby, Christopher. (2013). *Viewing America*. Twenty-First-Century Television Drama. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [Chapter 1: The West Wing (NBC 1999-2006), pp. 23-64.]

Bordwell, David. (1985). *Narration in the Fiction Film*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Challen, Paul. (2001). *Inside the West Wing. An Unauthorized Look at Television's Smartest Show*. Chicago/Toronto: ECW Press.

Connor. J.D. (2015). "Clean Cuts. Kennedy Modernism on Screen", in Jeff Menne and Christian B. Long (eds.), *Film and the American Presidency*. New York: Routledge, pp. 135-154.

Coyne, Michael. (2008). *Hollywood Goes To Washington: American Politics on Screen*. London: Reaktion.

Dixon, Wheeler Winston. (2016). *Hollywood in Crisis or: The Collapse of the Real*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Eril, Astrid. (2011). *Memory in Culture*. London/New York: Palgrave Macmillan. [translated by Sara B. Young]

Fahy, Thomas (ed.). (2005). *Considering Aaron Sorkin: Essays on the Politics, Poetics and Sleight of Hand in the Films and Television Series.* Jefferson / London: McFarland.

Feuer, Jane. (2007). „HBO and the Concept of Quality TV", in Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (eds.), *Quality TV. Contemporary American Television and Beyond*. London/New York: I. B. Tauris, pp. 145-157.

Field, Syd. (2005). *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting.* [Revised Edition; 1st edition 1979]. New York: Random House.

Hales, Barbara / Petrescu, Mihaela / Weinstein, Valerie (eds.). (2016). *Continuity and Crisis in German Cinema, 1928-1936*. Rochester: Camden House.

Herrmann, Sebastian M. (2015). "How Is It Possible That This Was Kept a Secret?" Representation, Realism, and 'Epistemic Panic' in The West Wing", in Christoph Ernst and Heike Paul (eds.), *Amerikanische Fernsehserien der Gegenwart. Perspektiven der American Studies und der Media Studies*. Bielefeld: transcript, pp. 225-248.

Hesling, Willem. (2016). "Oliver Stone's Nixon: The Rise and Fall of a Political Gangster", in Robert A. Rosenstone and Constantin Parvulescu (eds.), *A Companion to the Historical Film*. [First published in 2013.] Chichester: Wiley & Sons, pp. 199-218.

Holland, Jack. (2011). "'When You Think of the Taliban, Think of the Nazis': Teaching Americans '9/11' in NBC's *The West Wing"*. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, vol. 40, pp. 85-107.

Iles, Timothy. (2008). *The Crisis of Identity in Contemporary Japanese Film: Personal, Cultural, National.* Leiden/Boston: Brill.

Levine, Myron A. (2003). "The West Wing (NBC) and The West Wing (D.C.): Myth and Reality in Television's Portrayal of the White House", in Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor (eds.), *The West Wing: The American Presidency as television drama.* Syracuse:

Syracuse University Press, pp. 42-62.

McCabe, Janet. (2013). *The West Wing*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

Noll Brinckmann, Christine. (2010). ʺProgrammatik und Verfahren des Direct Cinema (mit besonderem Augenmerk auf Don Alan Pennebaker)ʺ. *Kieler Beiträge zur Filmmusikforschung*, vol. 5.2, S. 198-202.

OʻConnor, Jacqueline. (2015).ʺAnna Deavere Smith and Her West Wing Residenciesʺ, in Jeff Menne and Christian B. Long (eds.), *Film and the American Presidency*. New York: Routledge, pp. 235-250.

Parry-Giles, Trevor / Parry-Giles, Shawn J. (2006). *The prime-time presidency. The West Wing and U.S. nationalism*. Urbana / Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Pompper, Donnalyn. (2003). ʺThe West Wing: White House Narratives That Journalism Cannot Tellʺ, in Peter C. Rollins and John E. Oʻconnor (eds.), *The West Wing: The American Presidency as television drama*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, pp. 17-31.

Powrie, Phil. (1997). *French Cinema in the 1980s. Nostalgia and the Crisis of Masculinity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Richardson, Kay. (2006). „The dark arts of good people: How popular culture negotiates ‚spin' in NBCʻs The West Wing". Journal of Sociolinguistics, vol. 10, pp. 52-69.

Rollins, Peter C. / Oʻconnor, John E. (eds.). (2003). *The West Wing: The American Presidency as television drama*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

Ryan, Michael / Kellner, Douglas. (1990). *Camera Politica. The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. [1st edition 1988].

Scott, Ian. (2017). ʺ'The last hurrah': *The West Wing* and the future of American politics after 9/11", in Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally (eds.), *Politics and Politicians in Contemporary US Television: Washington as Fiction*. New York: Routledge, pp. 34-46.

Shindler, Colin. (1996). *Hollywood in Crisis: Cinema and American Society 1929-1939*. London: Routledge.

Webb, Lawrence. (2014). *The Cinema of Urban Crisis. Seventies Film and the Reinvention of the City*. Amsterdam: AUP.

White, Mark. (2013). *Kennedy: A Cultural History of an American Icon*. London/New York: Bloomsbury.

Wodak, Ruth. (2009). ʺStaging Politics in Television. Fiction and/or Reality?ʺ, in: Stephan Habscheid and Clemens Knobloch (eds.), *Einigkeitsdiskurse. Zur Inszenierung von Konsens in organisationaler und öffentlicher Kommunikation*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS, pp. 33-58.