



# John F. Kennedy on screen : the ambivalence of idealization

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# JOHN F. KENNEDY ON SCREEN: THE AMBIVALENCE OF IDEALIZATION



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## Introduction

“If John Kennedy had not existed, Hollywood might have been hard pressed to invent him.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, John F. Kennedy is often associated with youth, charisma, dynamism and progress. It is even said that the 35<sup>th</sup> president is a myth that America will not be able to find again with its future presidents. But this image of JFK has in fact been constructed by himself and the people around him, whether his family throughout his life, or his aides throughout his political career, and even after his death. Kennedy's exemplary portrait is such that it spread to cinema and is displayed in the numerous films and series about his life. These productions, in turn, reinforce the flawless portrait that he created in the public's imagination. Yet, although elevated to the rank of myth, it is possible to perceive an evolution in JFK's depiction in films, according to their period of production among other elements. As a consequence, this paper shall focus on the tension between the construction of JFK as a hero and more ambivalent representations in films displaying the man's life. By choosing to examine productions that deal with JFK before his death, and which therefore star actors playing the role of John F. Kennedy, this paper shall try to determine how JFK is displayed and made to act in films. The corpus selected for this analysis is composed of six productions, going chronologically as follows: *PT-109* (1963, directed by Leslie H. Martinson, starring Cliff Robertson as JFK), *Thirteen Days* (2000, directed by Roger Donaldson, starring Bruce Greenwood as JFK), *The Butler* (2013, directed by Lee Daniels, starring James Marsden as JFK), *Killing Kennedy* (2013, directed by Nelson McCormick, starring Rob Lowe as JFK), *LBJ* (2017, directed by Rob Reiner, starring Jeffrey Donovan as JFK), and episode eight from the second season of the series *The Crown* called “Dear Mrs Kennedy” (2017, directed by Stephen Daldry, starring Michael C. Hall as JFK). The gap between the 1960s, when Kennedy was still alive, and the 2000s could be explained by the revelations which have emerged since the 1980s and which produced a new interest for the Kennedys since the 2000s. On top of that, although they are not part of the corpus of this analysis, the films *JFK* (1991, directed by Oliver Stone) and *Jackie* (2016, directed by Pablo Larrain) shall be used as additional examples to further second some of the theories defended by this paper.

With these productions, this paper shall try to prove that there is an evolution in JFK's portrayal and that the ideal depiction can in fact be deconstructed, little by little. Indeed, the first film under study offers a biased, utterly positive image of Kennedy in *PT-109*, as it came out when Kennedy was still alive. An ambivalent depiction is to be found in later productions,

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1 Coyne, Michael. *Hollywood Goes to Washington: American Politics on Screen*. Reaktion Books, 2008: Chapter 3: Modern Presidential Parables: John Kennedy, Richard Nixon and Beyond – John F. Kennedy: America's Prince Charming, paragraph one.

thus including ideal elements but also more realistic and critical elements, according to the revelation of concealed documents since the 1980s. The evolution is progressive, as it starts by introducing forgivable elements such as Kennedy's poor health. Then, although they depict JFK using dangerous back channels, he is celebrated for his decisions and actions in films about the Cuban Missile Crisis. Adultery is also tackled by some of these productions. Eventually, the depiction of the president in the series *The Crown* is utterly negative, showing the ongoing evolution of his portrayal, coinciding with a general wish to deconstruct the image that Kennedy built himself.

Ambivalence is the coexistence of two contradictory feelings. The films under study are thus ambivalent as they produce a perfect and heroic portrait of Kennedy, stained simultaneously with degrading elements. Accordingly, they provoke and oppose two contradictory sentiments towards JFK: attraction and repulsion. Idealization can be said to be a consequence of ambivalence, or in other words, a way to cope with ambivalence. Indeed, idealization is a “defense mechanism” which distorts reality in order to cope with the distress produced by ambivalence, to paraphrase Kaplan and Sadock.<sup>2</sup> In practice, idealization is characterized by a perception or representation of someone or something as better than in reality, it turns someone into a hero, it romanticizes events and people.

Political films are a recurrent subject among scholars. Indeed, scholars such as Haas, Christensen and Haas<sup>3</sup> in *Projecting Politics: Political Messages in American Films*, and Coyne<sup>4</sup> in *Hollywood Goes to Washington: American Politics on Screen* have analyzed the genre's evolution since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the recurrent themes in political films. Their works have been of major importance for this analysis as they allowed to emphasize the need for a checklist when dealing with American presidents in films, checklist which, in turn, protects presidents. Haas, Christensen and Haas also warn about the difficulties that dealing with political films represent for scholars: they have to be analyzed carefully as they spread political messages and thus adopt a certain point of view. Yet, Scott in *American Politics in Hollywood Film*<sup>5</sup> and Valantin in *Hollywood, the Pentagon and Washington*<sup>6</sup> point out the importance of the genre to understand the relationships between Hollywood and the White House.

In addition, political films displaying real presidents such as George Washington,

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2 Sadock, B.J., and H.I. Kaplan. *Kaplan & Sadock's Synopsis of Psychiatry: Behavioral Sciences/Clinical Psychiatry*. 10th edition. Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 2007: 299

3 Haas, Elizabeth, Terry Christensen, and Peter J. Haas. *Projecting Politics: Political Messages in American Films*. Routledge, 2015.

4 Coyne, Michael. *Hollywood Goes to Washington: American Politics on Screen*. Reaktion Books, 2008

5 Scott, Ian. *American Politics in Hollywood Film*. Edinburgh University Press, 2011.

6 Valantin, Jean-Michel. *Hollywood, the Pentagon and Washington*. Anthem Press, 2005

Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Richard Nixon, Lyndon B. Johnson, and JFK are numerous, but it is also possible to find other productions about Woodrow Wilson, Andrew Johnson, or even George W. Bush, and one president was even an actor: Ronald Reagan. They offer great possibilities of analysis of the way presidents are presented as Morgan shows<sup>7</sup>, but they are also a testimony of the evolution of the links between the White House and Hollywood as Valantin explains.<sup>8</sup> Scholars such as Coyne<sup>9</sup> also used them to analyze the depictions of important events in American history.

Films depicting John F. Kennedy in particular are abundant, and although a certain number of analyses can be found, they mainly all deal with the same few films, such as *Thirteen Days* and *JFK* as the works of White in Morgan's *Presidents in the Movies*, Valantin's *Hollywood, the Pentagon and Washington* and Burgoyne's *Memory, history and digital imagery in contemporary film* illustrate.<sup>10</sup> Analyses<sup>11</sup> have shown that Kennedy's image is burnished in films and as White remarks, this burnishing is the result of directing decisions to nearly always present Kennedy as the hero. Indeed, Kennedy has been and still is a source of interest for scholars: his life and person transformed him into a cultural icon today as Yamniuk points out<sup>12</sup>, and his legacy is widely celebrated as Brinkley demonstrates.<sup>13</sup> Yet, other scholars<sup>14</sup> such as Hersh or Reeves in their revisionist works, but also Dallek in his biography, which was well received by the critics take a more negative turn. As far as press is concerned, Parry for the Daily Mail<sup>15</sup> also addressed Kennedy's more negative traits in order to nuance his portrait.

Just like Kennedy, other renowned people's achievements have been deconstructed by scholars and revisionists (see Zinn's deconstruction of Christopher Columbus<sup>16</sup>) and the public seems to follow this trend more and more. People thus started to draw links between JFK's

7 Morgan, Iwan W., ed. *Presidents in the Movies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011

8 Valantin, Jean-Michel. *Hollywood, the Pentagon and Washington*. Anthem Press, 2005

9 Coyne, Michael. *Hollywood Goes to Washington: American Politics on Screen*. Reaktion Books, 2008

10 White in Morgan, Iwan W., ed. *Presidents in the Movies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011; Valantin, Jean-Michel. *Hollywood, the Pentagon and Washington*. Anthem Press, 2005 ; Burgoyne, Robert. "Memory, History and Digital Imagery in Contemporary Film." In *Memory and Popular Film*, 220–36. Manchester University Press, 2018.

11 White in Morgan, Iwan W., ed. *Presidents in the Movies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011; White, Mark. "Apparent Perfection: The Image of John F. Kennedy: Apparent Perfection." *History* 98, no. 330 (April 2013): 226–46.

12 Yamniuk, Stephanie Melinda. "Image and Text, the Creation of JFK as a Cultural Icon," 2000; Potts, John. *A History of Charisma*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2009

13 Brinkley, Alan. "The Legacy of John F. Kennedy." *The Atlantic*, September 18, 2013

14 Dallek, Robert. *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917 - 1963*. Hachette UK, 2003; Hersh, Seymour M. *The Dark Side of Camelot*. HarperCollins, 1998; Reeves, Thomas C. *A Question of Character: A Life of John F. Kennedy*. Forum, 1997.

15 Parry, Hannah. "The Crown Depicts JFK as a Jealous Conniver and a Drug Addict." *Mail Online*, December 7, 2017, sec. News.

16 Zinn, Howard. "Columbus, the Indians, and Human Progress." In *A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present*, 1–22. Pearson Education, 2003.



darker behaviors and recent movements such as the #metoo movement as Kendall shows<sup>17</sup>, while others such as Greenberg<sup>18</sup> condemn the influence of the movement on History as they argue that it is dangerous to transpose social crises to different historical times as mores change. As a consequence, appreciation polls appear to be a useful tool in order to study JFK's legacy throughout time, as they allow to point out its endurance, even though it has been revised.

By taking into account all the angles of research cited earlier, this examination intends to demonstrate that JFK's image changed through time in films and series, but that even though it has been degraded, JFK's portrait did not change much in the common imagination and that, as a consequence, his legacy endures. In order to do so, the first part of this analysis shall present a theoretical and methodological framework to deal with politico-historical films, which contributed to the building and the protection of the Kennedy myth. As a consequence, an introduction to the origins of the myth, and the state of its legacy today shall also be determined in this first part. In its second part, this analysis shall concentrate on the origins of Kennedy's idealized depiction and the tools used by directors in the films under study in order to preserve this idealized portrait. In a third and last part, this paper shall deconstruct Kennedy's idealized image in films, and emphasize its ambivalence by commenting on JFK's negative traits. This paper will eventually conclude on the perpetual protection of Kennedy's legacy, no matter the revelations and the consequent evolution of his depiction in films and series.

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17 Kendall, Joshua C. "Op-Ed: JFK May Have Been a Worse Philanderer than Trump. Does It Matter?" *Los Angeles Times*, March 24, 2018, sec. Opinion

18 Greenberg, David. "Why We Shouldn't Let the #MeToo Movement Change History." *POLITICO Magazine*, December 16, 2017

## **Part 1: Theoretical Arguments**

This first part will not deal directly with film analysis. Instead, it shall try to give theoretical explanations in order to understand the relations between historical and political films and the Kennedy legacy. Historical and political films, by respecting a checklist of elements, have protected and continue to protect Kennedy. As a consequence, they contribute to the construction and burnishing of the President's image, which is still very much shining today. This first part shall expose how, by following the principles of the two genres cited above, and by receiving money from family and friends of Kennedy, the films from this corpus played a role in the protection of the Kennedy myth. As films contributed to the building of the Kennedy myth, this first part shall also thus expose the origins of the myth and its enduring legacy, in order to lay the foundations of this analysis.

### **I)Protection of JFK's Portrait in Films**

Historical films are a complex subject as they present one version of history, and political films have to be carefully studied as they might trigger political reactions. On top of that, it can be said that Hollywood often adopts an American point of view in historical and political films, which, most of the time, protects the United States and American Presidents, as this part shall first demonstrate. In addition, some facts must be cited concerning the parties which played a role in the release of two films from this corpus, *PT-109* and *Thirteen Days*.

#### **1)Representing History in Films: the Argument**

It can be argued that historical films are controversial and that they have to be dealt with carefully. Indeed, a historical film is always the reflection of a person's or a group's point of view and therefore, a meaning is adopted among others. As a consequence, no historical film can be said to be neutral, as there are several versions of history depending on who experiences it and who is telling it. Yet, as Burgoyne quotes from film director Bernardo Bertolucci: "Bernardo Bertolucci once said in an interview that the cinema 'is the language through which reality expresses itself . . . to create the language of the cinema, more than with any other form of expression, you have first to put your camera in front of reality, because cinema is made of reality.'"<sup>19</sup> This quote shows that a debate is ongoing. Indeed, some, like Bertolucci, argue that films have to represent reality, and thus in a way, history, the way it is, objectively. Yet, as explained earlier, there are multiple realities, and what Bertolucci says can

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<sup>19</sup> Burgoyne, Robert. "Memory, History and Digital Imagery in Contemporary Film." In *Memory and Popular Film*, 220–36. Manchester University Press, 2018: 220

be deconstructed. When Murphy asks “can popular film accurately depict/represent historical situations, events and characters?”<sup>20</sup> this paper shall answer and argue that films cannot accurately depict historical situations, precisely because a point of view is always chosen to represent history and thus many versions of it exist. In a way, historical films are necessarily biased.

In addition, another element seems to confirm the thesis defended by this paper, as Burgoyne puts it: “The representation of history in film is a notoriously vexed subject, typically involving controversies over authenticity and accuracy versus the interpretive requirements of narrative form.”<sup>21</sup> Indeed, films have to be romanticized for narrative and technical reasons, and as a consequence, accuracy or objectivity sometimes appear as secondary factors, once again proving that a film is not a reflection of reality, as there is no accurate reality: “A Hollywood film has to get its message across within the constraints of the conventional three-act format and the need for commercial success in a mass market. [...] Image, message, and myth are prioritized over historical accuracy and complexity.”<sup>22</sup> It can be argued that those factors allow historical films to be profitable as, by focusing more on an attractive narrative rather than on a perfect accuracy, which may not exist, the cinema industry “allows individuals to 'experience a bodily, mimetic encounter with a collective past they never actually led.'”<sup>23</sup> This, in a way, may explain the public's appeal for historical films.

In turn, it can be argued that the public plays a role in the notoriety that a historical film can get. Indeed, according to the effect that it has on its public, a film can push a people to influence history by confronting its government, and thus have real consequences, as Burgoyne puts it: “For films that take history as their subject undertake a dialogue with the real in a way that other films do not. Historical films have real-world reverberations: recent films such as *JFK*, *Braveheart*, *Glory*, *The Hurricane* and *Dances with Wolves* have served as a catalyst for the reevaluation of the historical past; they have provoked governments and led to the opening of secret files; they have inspired national consciousness.”<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, the writing of history can also be influenced by historical films as their romanticized vision sometimes replaces facts in people's minds. The public therefore once again plays a role, but, while historical films can be used as educational tools, “like a

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20 Murphy, Kieran L. “Representations of History in Popular Cinema : Schindler’s List and JFK as Postmodern History Texts,” 1999: 6

21 Burgoyne, Robert. “Memory, History and Digital Imagery in Contemporary Film.” In *Memory and Popular Film*, 220–36. Manchester University Press, 2018: 223

22 Morgan, Iwan W., ed. *Presidents in the Movies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011: 1-2

23 Burgoyne, Robert. “Memory, History and Digital Imagery in Contemporary Film.” In *Memory and Popular Film*, 220–36. Manchester University Press, 2018: 225

24 *Ibid.*: 221

traditional history text, cinema can be [a] tool of the historian in the teaching of history. Chambers and Culbert (1996) find that '... the value of historical films is that, through a skilful blending of images, words, and other sounds, it helps visualise the past and evoke a feeling for it...' ”<sup>25</sup> and from that moment, their use shifts to “prosthetic memory”. Prosthetic memory is “the way mass cultural technologies of memory, such as film, enable individuals to experience, as if they were memories, events through which they themselves did not live.”<sup>26</sup> By replacing their memories with prosthetic memories, people contribute to the spreading and reinforcing of one version of facts, and support the writing of one version of history. This is one of the most important reasons why historical films have to be taken carefully. Indeed, as Murphy argues: “Popular filmmakers [...] are not concerned with the arguments of authenticity in historical discourse, yet they produce historical texts which ask for the audience to engage their historical capital as 'fact', when often it is not.”<sup>27</sup> As a consequence, misrepresentations found in films spread and replace accuracy, and history becomes biased. If this growing tendency endures, the risk is to let fiction elevate itself to fact and this can appear dangerous: “As Thomas Elsaesser writes, 'Future generations, looking at the history of the 20th century, will never be able to tell fact from fiction, having the media as material evidence. But then, will this distinction still matter to them?' ”<sup>28</sup>

What this paper shall thus argue is that the same phenomenon is happening with John F. Kennedy's image. Indeed, the few elements that create ambivalence in the films from this corpus can be turned to Kennedy's advantage, and the missing elements allow to burnish his already idealized portrait as this analysis shall demonstrate. In addition to that, some inaccurate elements in films contribute to the spreading of one portrait of the man, and thus contribute to the building of the biased version of history, through narrative, technique, and the public. As White explains:

In its laudatory view of JFK, and in its depiction of him as a moralistic, progressive leader, *Thirteen Days* is emblematic of the general postassassination thrust in American popular culture to remember Kennedy by idealizing him. It is representative of the way in which film and television have sustained the myth of Kennedy's presidential brilliance—a myth in which the nuances and contradictions of his life and political career are obscured.<sup>29</sup>

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25Murphy, Kieran L. “Representations of History in Popular Cinema : Schindler’s List and JFK as Postmodern History Texts,” 1999: 7

26 Burgoyne, Robert. “Memory, History and Digital Imagery in Contemporary Film.” In *Memory and Popular Film*, 220–36. Manchester University Press, 2018: 223

27 Murphy, Kieran L. “Representations of History in Popular Cinema : Schindler’s List and JFK as Postmodern History Texts,” 1999: 7-8

28 Burgoyne, Robert. “Memory, History and Digital Imagery in Contemporary Film.” In *Memory and Popular Film*, 220–36. Manchester University Press, 2018: 233-234

29 White in Morgan, Iwan W., ed. *Presidents in the Movies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011: 147

## 2)Representing Politics in Films: the Message

Just like history in films, representing politics in films can be interpreted as another factor preserving presidents' portraits. Indeed, although political film is not the most appreciated genre, it nonetheless has been an important genre in the history of US cinema because of its main themes, as Coyne puts it:

American political films have featured as part of Hollywood's output since the early 1930s. The political film has never been a high-volume, mass market staple, but its qualitative contribution to movie history and twentieth-century US popular and political culture has been considerable. Despite the trite assertion that political film means the kiss of death at the box office, the genre has proved both protean and durable, reflecting and addressing major issues and tensions at the heart of American life. [...] The political film has kept pace with, chronicled and even helped configure the ever-changing American political landscape.<sup>30</sup>

The main aim of political films is to share ideological messages about the American presidency and political system. The genre has to show that the United States is politically superior to any other country, and that it thus is a model of democracy, freedom and diversity. Indeed, as quoted in Coyne: “Violence is an essential condiment of Hollywood, but the triumph of order over violence is arguably *the* archetypical American cinema narrative,”<sup>31</sup> and “Conflict between conformity and diversity in American political films is habitually resolved in favour of diversity, albeit within a consensual framework.”<sup>32</sup> What appears as the positive outcome of the proliferation of the genre, and thus of the spreading of its messages is the fact that it raises political awareness and pushes people to get involved in politics: “Films that are loaded with intentional political messages explicitly challenge the values of the audience and may even incite it to political action.”<sup>33</sup> Yet on the other hand, what appears as the negative outcome is that, as there is a check-list of themes to respect in political films, the message nearly always has to be positive: “Conventional wisdom presupposes that when the life of a presidential figure—real or imagined—is portrayed on screen, there is automatically an agenda being followed by the filmmaker in conceiving the central character in a certain way because it conveys traits and attributes sympathetic to his or her own ideology or vision.”<sup>34</sup> In a way, this can be interpreted as bias and political films thus contribute to protect the image of presidents.

Indeed, in terms of narrative, because they are “symbols of the nation's spirit, values,

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30 Coyne, Michael. *Hollywood Goes to Washington: American Politics on Screen*. Reaktion Books, 2008: Introduction

31 *Idem*.

32 *Idem*.

33 Haas, Elizabeth, Terry Christensen, and Peter J. Haas. *Projecting Politics: Political Messages in American Films*. Routledge, 2015: 10

34 Scott in Morgan, Iwan W., ed. *Presidents in the Movies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011: 29

and historical destiny,”<sup>35</sup> directors thus have to show great, trustful, benevolent and wise presidents. As Coyne argues and as Morgan puts it: “For the most part, presidents are celebrated as idealistic, wise, and dependable guardians of the national interest, rather than ambitious, self-interested, and materialistic, thereby promoting the view that there is nothing wrong with American democracy so long as power is in the hands of intelligent and far-sighted visionaries.”<sup>36</sup>

In addition, quite often, as this demonstration shall prove with Kennedy, some elements are missing in presidential portraits, once again to protect their image. Morgan argues that this mostly concerns the race issue and that it is called the “American dilemma, namely, the inconsistency between the nation’s ideals and the reality of racial inequality.”<sup>37</sup> This American dilemma appears to be a recurrent pattern as Morgan signals that Lincoln is often portrayed “as the restorer of the union rather than the emancipator of the slaves,”<sup>38</sup> and that “*Tennessee Johnson* (1942), [...] treats Reconstruction solely as a political struggle for post–Civil War reunion rather than to ensure the civil rights of former slaves in the states of the ex-Confederacy.”<sup>39</sup> In addition:

Curiously, the most heroic movie representation of a president in regard to race and slavery does not feature someone conventionally lionized by historians or Hollywood. John Quincy Adams (1825– 1829), at best only an average president, is depicted as a moral titan in a postpresidential real life episode as the attorney defending African slave-ship mutineers before the Supreme Court in Steven Spielberg’s *Amistad* (1997). The film distorts the historical reality that the case revolved around the issue of the slave trade to make it a commentary on the domestic existence of slavery in the United States.<sup>40</sup>

Finally, most importantly, Morgan argues that, although biopics about Andrew Jackson and Andrew Johnson exist but do not mention the fact that they owned slaves, complete biopics about George Washington and Thomas Jefferson do not exist as it would be too difficult to portray them as heroes and fathers of the nation while at the same time showing that they were slave owners.<sup>41</sup> By choosing to represent only one version of history and of political figures, political films thus follow a pattern which nearly always protects presidents so as not to represent the wrongs of the nation on screen and confront people with their history. The contrary would produce ambivalence, trouble American viewers and unsettle

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35 Morgan in Morgan, Iwan W., ed. *Presidents in the Movies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011: Page 1 of the Introduction

36 *Ibid.*: Page 2 of the Introduction

37 *Ibid.*: Page 11 of the Introduction

38 Morgan in Morgan, Iwan W., ed. *Presidents in the Movies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011: Page 11 of the Introduction

39 *Idem.*

40 *Ibid.*: Page 12 of the Introduction

41 *Ibid.*: Page 11-12 of the Introduction, paraphrasing Morgan

American pride, and all these reactions would bring negative criticism to films.

In order to counter this type of reaction and attract the public, political films thus focus on presidents' personalities rather than on accuracy. As Scott explains:

Despite some admirable traits in the Wilson and FDR biopics, cinematic representations of real presidents work best when they are not rewrites of history or reassembled artifacts of a president's life and times. Instead, films that have tried to move away from the strictures of historical authenticity have found resonance in projecting presidents as the embodiment of national hope and mission and, in some instances, of divine guidance.<sup>42</sup>

This is why, as a consequence, "The focus tends to be on the president rather than the presidency as an institution, thereby putting the emphasis on individual character instead of organizational structures and the broader aspects of the American polity."<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, according to Morgan, one way to avoid the American dilemma is to focus on personal character.<sup>44</sup> This tendency to focus on personality in political films could also be an explanation for the lack of biopics dealing with less known, or even undistinguished, presidents.<sup>45</sup>

A direct consequence of this production of captivating narratives focusing on presidents' characters seems to be the response of the public. Indeed, all these elements appear to incite the public to appreciate and to understand politics better and thus political films push people to take political action. Indeed, as "political content usually helps to describe and explain how politics work,"<sup>46</sup> films thus represent "independent variable, cultural stimuli that potentially address and modify the political attitudes and behaviors of audiences and society."<sup>47</sup> One film seems to encompass this thesis and thus represents the perfect example for this analysis: *JFK*. Indeed, even though the film has been criticized for its historical inaccuracy and for the narrative liberties it took, the focus nonetheless is on one character, here not a president but a great defender of Kennedy, and the film was at the origin so many controversies that it created political awareness. In other words: "[*JFK*] undeniably generated great debate and interest in galvanizing so many people—hitherto little engaged with cinema, let alone politics—into some realization of their nation's political culture and the machinations of governmental agencies."<sup>48</sup>

Eventually, thanks to this analysis, it can be argued that political films were and still

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42 Scott in Morgan, Iwan W., ed. *Presidents in the Movies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011: 33

43 Morgan in Morgan, Iwan W., ed. *Presidents in the Movies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011: 2

44 *Ibid.*: Page 13 of the Introduction

45 *Ibid.*: Pages 8-11 of the Introduction

46 Haas, Elizabeth, Terry Christensen, and Peter J. Haas. *Projecting Politics: Political Messages in American Films*. Routledge, 2015: 10

47 *Ibid.*: 4

48 Scott in Morgan, Iwan W., ed. *Presidents in the Movies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011: 34



are a source of interest for the public contrary to what is commonly thought. Indeed, the elements cited earlier contribute to their appeal, and the interest demonstrated by the public generates an enduring production of political films and series. These productions, in turn, allow scholars to analyze the evolution of presidents' portraits in popular culture, as it is the case for Kennedy. In addition, the striking resemblance between Jimmy Santos and Barack Obama in *The West Wing*, which aired from 1999 to 2006 show that the ties between Washington and Hollywood are still strong: "The fact that one drew direct and acknowledged inspiration from the other, however, shows the reality of the Hollywood/entertainment/Washington nexus within American political culture in the early twenty-first century."<sup>49</sup> Scott goes even further by arguing that the connection between Santos and Obama is only the start of a new era for political films that will continue to flourish in the future :

With cinematic and televisual examination and reenactment a certainty, the presidency has become not only a political office but also reality TV. The Obama/Santos connection that struck such a chord in 2008 is not the natural conclusion of ninety years of respective posturing and mutual courting on the part of the White House and Hollywood. It is only the start of symbiotic storylines and fantastic fables that will continue to trace the movements of incumbents and their personalities from the Oval Office to TV series and films for the foreseeable future and beyond.<sup>50</sup>

The importance given to image during the Kennedy era is what generated the "fantastic fables" that Scott cites, and which are now to be found in films and series.

To conclude, even though political films can be criticized for their lack of accuracy, for their focus on personalities and for their message, whose aim is to glorify the United States, they nonetheless manage to engage people in politics and their future seems bright. Yet, the elements cited earlier and necessary to produce political films also contribute to the spreading of one version of history and thus to the defense of presidents, such as John F. Kennedy. On top of that, the funds received for certain historical and political films forbid their narratives to openly criticize presidents, as two films from this corpus shall demonstrate next.

### **3) Propaganda**

To a certain extent, the word propaganda could be used when talking about films dealing with John F. Kennedy. Indeed, the production of two films from this corpus are exemplary of the elements pushing directors to present John F. Kennedy as they do, that is to

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<sup>49</sup> Scott in Morgan, Iwan W., ed. *Presidents in the Movies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011: 27

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*: 42

say in an idealized way rather than a nuanced one. The first film is *PT-109*.

Indeed, the film follows Kennedy's epic in the Pacific, yet before the film, Kennedy's experience in the Pacific became well known to the public thanks to an article by published by journalist John Hersey as Yamniuk puts it: "This media creation of Kennedy began in 1944 when writer John Hersey wrote an account of his PT 109 experience in the South Pacific that was published in *The New Yorker* as 'Survival,' and shortly after appeared in a condensed version in *The Reader's Digest*."<sup>51</sup> What seems important to note is that, from the beginning, the story was used as a publicity for Kennedy as "On hearing Kennedy's account of his adventure in the Solomon Islands in the South Pacific, Hersey saw it as a magazine feature."<sup>52</sup> Yet, in order to sell an even more heroic image of himself, the whole story had to take another turn:

In the account of the PT-109 that JFK gave to *New Yorker* writer John Hersey, he repeatedly tried to establish the fact that he was on the attack when his boat was sunk, a point that is repeated on the jacket cover of *Profiles*. Later, when his father arranged for *The Reader's digest* to print a piece from the *New Yorker* article, JFK took special care that the phrase "turn for an attack" was retained while other sections were cut (Wills 132). Although interviews with others on the boat make it clear that there was no attempted attack, for JFK it was important that he be seen on the defense, rather than on the offense, to justify his actions. [...] In 1944, when John Hersey tried to find out how a destroyer could run down a PT boat, he was blocked by the military and was not able to obtain the information he needed to confirm the feat.<sup>53</sup>

In fact, witnesses have said that "Lieutenant Kennedy begged and scrounged for his adored Oh Henry! candy bars, real eggs, powdered ice cream, and bread and cheese for his favorite cheese sandwiches. He promised lobster dinners in Boston in exchange for a case of fresh New Zealand mutton."<sup>54</sup> Once the story was published, Kennedy benefited from the publicity he had wished for and he once remarked: " 'My story about the collision is getting better all the time. Now I've got a Jew and a n\*\*\*\*\*r in the story and with me being a Catholic, that's great.' "<sup>55</sup>

Yet, as the story was published in 1944, JFK's father knew he could get more use out of it and so, just as his son ran for office in Congress in 1946, "Joe Kennedy, Sr. ordered 100,000 offprints of the story for distribution in his congressional district."<sup>56</sup> In addition, in order to have his son become president one day: "In pursuit of his 18-year quest to have a son

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51 Yamniuk, Stephanie Melinda. "Image and Text, the Creation of JFK as a Cultural Icon," 2000: 49-50

52 Howe, Caroline. "How Father of JFK Hyped PT 109 Incident to Get Son Elected." *Daily Mail Online*, October 6, 2015, sec. News

53 Yamniuk, Stephanie Melinda. "Image and Text, the Creation of JFK as a Cultural Icon," 2000: 16

54 Howe, Caroline. "How Father of JFK Hyped PT 109 Incident to Get Son Elected." *Daily Mail Online*, October 6, 2015, sec. News

55 *Idem*.

56 Yamniuk, Stephanie Melinda. "Image and Text, the Creation of JFK as a Cultural Icon," 2000: 50

in the White House that began in '42 by getting John into PT boat service, Joseph P. doggedly went after buying his son that big chair in the oval office. [...] Joseph P. pulled strings, wrote the checks and gave advice.”<sup>57</sup> As a consequence, he managed to sell more copies of the story by having it published in *The Reader's Digest*:

Joe Kennedy, clearly dissatisfied with the limited publication that appealed to the American socially elite, wanted to find an outlet that would speak 'to the voting masses capable of propelling a Kennedy into political office, as the elder Kennedy foresaw. 'Then Joe Kennedy had an idea that proved to be a masterstroke' – an unprecedented condensation of the piece in the mass audience monthly, *Reader's Digest*. 'After a sustained pressure-and-charm offensive by Joe Kennedy...a deal was struck in June 1944 that would make John Kennedy a national hero', writes author William Doyle. [...] Joe Kennedy printed up thousands of copies and flooded key election neighborhoods with the account that overshadowed his son's lack of political experience.<sup>58</sup>

This shows how Joe Kennedy sold his son to the White House, and this is why, as a consequence, the story can be perceived as a tool of propaganda. The last element to confirm this thesis and which is the object of this analysis is *PT-109*, the film. *PT-109* can be said to be quite loyal to the “Survival” story as it idealizes Kennedy as the first chapter of this analysis shall demonstrate. However, once again, Joe Kennedy played a role in Kennedy's depiction, this time, through the film, as he was one of the negotiators and investors in the production, as Howe mentions: “Joe Kennedy personally negotiated that book option contract with Warner Brothers and stayed involved in the movie's development until a stroke incapacitated him in 1961.”<sup>59</sup>

The second film from this corpus which can be perceived as a tool of propaganda is *Thirteen Days*. Indeed, there is an ongoing debate about O'Donnell's role in the Kennedy administration, and thus in the film: “The film perplexed historians by elevating O'Donnell, hitherto seen as no more than a backroom White House fixer, to the status of key player- 'it's like making Rosencrantz or Guildenstern the lead in Hamlet', one joked.”<sup>60</sup> Yet, Gibbons suggests that the only ones who could potentially tell if this depiction of O'Donnell as this close to Kennedy is accurate or not are McNamara and Sorensen, but as the “chief keepers of the Camelot flame”<sup>61</sup> to quote Gibbons, they that said they were satisfied with the film and its inaccuracies.

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57 Howe, Caroline. “How Father of JFK Hyped PT 109 Incident to Get Son Elected.” *Daily Mail Online*, October 6, 2015, sec. News

58 *Idem*.

59 *Idem*.

60 Gibbons, Fiachra. “From Ordinary Joe to hero of Cuban crisis.” *The Guardian*, March 3, 2001, sec. World news.

61 *Idem*.

Even though, Roger Donaldson, the director denies that O'Donnell's son played a role in the making of the movie: “ 'Kenny's son is a friend of our producer Armyan Bernstein, but he only got involved in Beacon long after work on the film had begun and he did not call the shots.' ”<sup>62</sup>, the contrary could be argued. Indeed, the propaganda factor which could explain the place given to O'Donnell in the narrative is actually the fact that O'Donnell's son himself invested in the production of the film, as both Gibbons and White point out: “The furore has also raised awkward questions about the role O'Donnell's family played behind the scenes. His son Kevin, an internet tycoon, helped bankroll a buyout of Beacon Entertainment, which made the movie, and appears to have been the partial inspiration for promoting his father - played by Kevin Costner - to the role of the "ordinary Joe" hero audiences identify with.”<sup>63</sup>

The thesis thus defended by this paper is that, by receiving funds from O'Donnell's son and thus by placing O'Donnell as a close and idolatrous aide of Kennedy, but also by choosing Kevin Costner to star as O'Donnell, when he had already played a fervent Kennedy supporter in *JFK*,<sup>64</sup> the film in turn reinforces Kennedy's idealization. Gibbons even argues that “Costner, who co-produced the film and fought for several years through six directors to have it made, makes no bones about his admiration for Camelot and is convinced the film will claw back a little of the dirt the Kennedys have been caked in,”<sup>65</sup> and “Thirteen Days does not present JFK as a two-dimensional, comic book hero. To be sure, the film veers toward idolatry in places. At one point O'Donnell tells his wife things will turn out well because of the intelligence of the Kennedy brothers. 'You're smart too,' she responds. 'Not like them,' O'Donnell states reverentially.”<sup>66</sup> The “idolatry” mentioned by White in the second quote is also a phenomenon that is seen in the public, as this paper shall point out next through a study of the Kennedy myth and its enduring legacy.

## II)Enduring Legacy

In part because it is protected by films, Kennedy's legacy did not cease to shine, even after revisions started to correct his portrait following the revelations and gradual availability of his personal papers since the 1980s. As a consequence, in order to understand how JFK's legacy is able to resist the passing of time and criticism, the different trends studied by

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62 Gibbons, Fiachra. “From Ordinary Joe to hero of Cuban crisis.” *The Guardian*, March 3, 2001, sec. World news.

63 *Idem*.

64 White in Morgan, Iwan W., ed. *Presidents in the Movies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011: 137

65 Gibbons, Fiachra. “From Ordinary Joe to hero of Cuban crisis.” *The Guardian*, March 3, 2001, sec. World news.

66 White in Morgan, Iwan W., ed. *Presidents in the Movies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011: 138

scholars, but also circulated among the public, these past decades, must be addressed.

## 1) Camelot

According to the positive portrait of JFK built by himself and those surrounding him, and thus presented to the public in films, it seems that in the end, Kennedy remains an ideal man in people's minds, no matter the criticism that has emerged through the years and the attempts to stain his portrait both in life and on films. As this part shall prove, the Camelot legend lives on.

In fact, in the same way that Zinn<sup>67</sup> deconstructed the worshipping of Columbus by pointing out his attitude towards natives when he arrived in America, the revisionist movement that revolves around Kennedy, and which counts scholars, journalists and witnesses, deconstructed the perfect image that JFK had built and allowed to nuance his portrait in life and in productions. Indeed, scholars like Hersh, Reeves and Dallek<sup>68</sup> addressed several subjects such as Kennedy's health, Vietnam, Cuba, the Civil Rights movement, or even the mafia among Kennedy's wrong doings in whole books or biographies which pushed the public to reevaluate the man. Among these subjects, women have recently become the object of a larger attention because of the #MeToo movement.

The #MeToo movement emerged in 2017 when several women used the MeToo hashtag on Twitter first to testify and share that they had been the victims of sexual harassment and assault from film producer Harvey Weinstein. It soon became viral and global as it became the symbol of sexual harassment and assault in general, and as the movement is still growing. With its emergence, some people linked Kennedy to the movement as JFK's treatment of women can be seen as sexual harassment as the last chapter of this analysis shall demonstrate. Following the #MeToo and the idea to speak up, break the silence and share, Patricia Lawford Stewart, who was married to former Kennedy in-law Peter Lawford (who was Patricia Kennedy – JFK's younger sister – 's husband from 1954 to 1966) decided to express her feelings towards the Kennedys in an article entitled “My (twisted) life with the Kennedys”: “Stewart, too, found herself like many a Kennedy wife — alone at home, husband off partying, expected to accept heavy boozing and rampant infidelity as the trade-off for becoming a member of America’s royal family. [...] 'They’re bullies,' she says. 'Just plain bullies. They treat their women like crap. [...] 'They were open about the philandering,' [...]

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67 Zinn, Howard. “Columbus, the Indians, and Human Progress.” In *A People’s History of the United States: 1492-Present*, 1–22.

68 Dallek, Robert. *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917 - 1963*. Hachette UK, 2003; Hersh, Seymour M. *The Dark Side of Camelot*. HarperCollins, 1998; Reeves, Thomas C. *A Question of Character: A Life of John F. Kennedy*. Forum, 1997.

'They thought they had a regular pass to do it.' ”<sup>69</sup> Lawford's testimony encompasses the pressure the Kennedys exerted on women and their treatment of women and it can be said that episode 8 of the second season of *The Crown* tackled this issue as well, as Michael C. Hall, who stars as Kennedy in the episode, explains: “it was interesting to examine JFK's relationship with women in the wake of the recent Harvey Weinstein scandal and #MeToo campaign. His relationship with women was certainly a well-kept secret back then but at this particular moment is an interesting thing to examine and reveal.”<sup>70</sup>

Nonetheless, it seems that Kennedy defenders always manage to counterbalance the idea that he used women as objects and thus always forgive his attitude and his extra-marital affairs, as Kendall demonstrated in his article entitled “Op-Ed: JFK may have been a worse philanderer than Trump. Does it matter?” Indeed, by comparing the public's reaction after the testimonies of two performers: the testimony of Stormy Daniels, a porn star, saying that she had an affair with President Donald Trump, and the testimony of Tempest Storm, a burlesque actress and stripper of the 1960s, saying she had an affair with President Kennedy, Kendall noticed differences. Each time a woman claimed that she had an affair with Kennedy, she was muted: “when Campbell wrote her well-documented 1977 memoir about the multi-year affair, Kennedy loyalists did their best to discredit and degrade her. Tempest Storm’s 1987 memoir got similar dismissive treatment. The mainstream press ignored it as undignified gossip. The tide turned only when several academic Kennedy biographers acknowledged that her story meshed with their research.”<sup>71</sup> On the contrary, when Stormy Daniels' affair was revealed in 2018, it made headlines and the story became known around the world. Kendall argues that this difference in reactions is because the public feels a nostalgia for the 1960s:

Sometimes a porn star is just a porn star. But for JFK, as for Trump, his inability to resist her allure indicates a much deeper character issue. And yet a romanticized image of Kennedy still survives intact. Even as Americans debate what to make of Trump’s reported lover with the weather-themed name, our nostalgia endures for the “Mad Men” era, when lecherous behavior was viewed not as a potential violation of the civil rights of women, but as the right of powerful men.<sup>72</sup>

And the nostalgia felt for the “Mad Men era” is what pushes the Kennedy supporters to excuse him and to minimize Kennedy's behavior: “Kennedy’s track record as a playboy and philanderer may well have been even worse than Trump’s is. Remarkably, this information

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69 Callahan, Maureen. “My (Twisted) Life with the Kennedys.” *New York Post*, May 27, 2012

70 Parry, Hannah. “The Crown Depicts JFK as a Jealous Conniver and a Drug Addict.” *Mail Online*, December 7, 2017, sec. News.

71 Kendall, Joshua C. “Op-Ed: JFK May Have Been a Worse Philanderer than Trump. Does It Matter?” *Los Angeles Times*, March 24, 2018, sec. Opinion.

72 *Idem*.

still remains largely buried by the work of countless apologists over the decades — including journalists and biographers who continue to minimize Kennedy's extramarital sexual adventures."<sup>73</sup>

Another scholar, Greenberg, on the contrary, argues against this comparison between Kennedy and Trump, or, in the case of his article, Clinton:

If we're not attentive to the history implicit in the 'Me Too Moment' phrase—the reality that people and the press viewed aberrant sexual behavior differently in other eras—we risk misinterpreting the past. If we expect historical actors to have abided by codes of behavior we set out in 2017, we betray the historical project of understanding why people acted as they did. [...] History requires reconstructing the thought processes of historical actors, which are invariably different from our own. The way people acted in the past was shaped by assumptions, conditions and norms, some deeply embedded in their culture. Those norms shift over time, and it can be surprising to see how differently people in other ages thought about any number of problems, including the intersection of sex and politics.<sup>74</sup>

Greenberg explains that popular opinion on sex scandals changed in the 1980s and that the subject became a source of interest for journalists as the taboo faded. As a consequence, Kennedy's acts were not considered condemnable at the time as they were off limits to the press and thus none of the journalists' business: "People today sometimes say that the press 'covered up' for Kennedy, or these other politicians, but that wording misconstrues how norms work. Kennedy's womanizing wasn't reported because it wasn't news, according to what people thought at the time. Tales of behavior by these men that today might be called harassment, or at least lecherous, emerged only after their deaths."<sup>75</sup> On the other hand however, other subjects such as divorce or position on civil rights could hurt a politician's image as Greenberg explains. Greenberg's point appears to be quite relevant, however, his thesis also defends Kennedy and other presidents in a way. Indeed, once again, an excuse is found in order not to let presidents be accountable for their acts. The fault is on the evolving mores and the changing role of the press through the decades, but not on presidents.

It thus appears that neither criticism nor links drawn between Kennedy and recent movements such as the #MeToo movement have any impact: the thesis that this paper shall defend is that Kennedy's image remains untouched in people's minds. Indeed, "While the academic view of Kennedy shifted decisively [in the 1980s and 1990s], the popular perception of him remained one of admiration."<sup>76</sup> This adoration can be explained by his death

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73 Kendall, Joshua C. "Op-Ed: JFK May Have Been a Worse Philanderer than Trump. Does It Matter?" *Los Angeles Times*, March 24, 2018, sec. Opinion.

74 Greenberg, David. "Why We Shouldn't Let the #MeToo Movement Change History." *POLITICO Magazine*, December 16, 2017.

75 *Idem*.

76 White in Morgan, Iwan W., ed. *Presidents in the Movies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011: 135

according to White as “the tragedy of his assassination that left many Americans with the desire to remember him well. The image of him as a man of principle rather than a politician of expediency met this need.”<sup>77</sup> Yet, although it acknowledges that JFK's assassination played a role in his ongoing shining legacy, this paper shall prove that this is not the sole reason for it. So many years after his death, support, worshipping and love for Kennedy are still strong. People were and still are attracted to Kennedy:

With each new [negative] allegation [...] the vast legion of Kennedy fans are rocked backward. But only for a moment. [...] John Kennedy was the kind of guy who could get his PT boat rammed in half by a Japanese destroyer, losing two of his men, and end up not with a court-martial but with a medal. He was a winner, and we like winners. He'll get out of every scrape history can serve up. [...] And the dream will never die.<sup>78</sup>

This quote points out how people will always be unconsciously drawn to Kennedy. His charisma “won” people's hearts and established a whole army of supporters behind him, which survives the passing of time. Even though the revisionist movement and the more recent films featuring Kennedy have started to nuance his portrait and thus created ambivalence, this ambivalence seems to align with the definitions given in the introduction of this analysis: when confronted with the distress provoked by the revelations and display of unsettling elements about JFK, people tend to idealize the man in order to cope with ambivalence. The feeling that so many Kennedy supporters still hold can be summarized by Flanagan's words:

I recently came across a Kennedy photograph I'd never seen before. The family is entering the White House for the first time, John-John wrapped in a blanket in his mother's arms. JFK's hands are in the pockets of his overcoat, his eyes glued to the precious head of his new baby boy—and I was gone. Let him have the girls, I thought; he could handle the girls and still put in an ace performance as Father of the Century.<sup>79</sup>

Although this quote proves that the controlled image argument defended by this analysis played an important role in the shaping of the “Kennedy mystique”, it also proves that there is indeed an unconscious feeling of support that still lives on, and that endured questionings, revelations and scandals. This tendency seems to be constant in life but also in films with no real explanation to it, as “films and television productions continued to shape JFK's image after his death,”<sup>80</sup> and Camelot endures, elevating Kennedy to the rank of God year after year: “Photographs of JFK were hung in homes around the world, next to the Virgin Mary and

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<sup>77</sup> White in Morgan, Iwan W., ed. *Presidents in the Movies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011: 133

<sup>78</sup> Flanagan, Caitlin. “Jackie and the Girls.” *The Atlantic*, June 13, 2012, sec. Politics.

<sup>79</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>80</sup> White in Morgan, Iwan W., ed. *Presidents in the Movies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011: 136



Jesus Christ.”<sup>81</sup> As a consequence, this unconditional support from the public is also felt in polls.

## 2) Polls

The last tool that this paper shall use to support the statement arguing that Kennedy's legacy lives on, no matter the backlashes that emerged through the years, is polls. Polls give a genuine idea of Kennedy's popularity among scholars, but also among the population. This paper shall first deal with the polling of historians and scholars, which has been a tradition since 1948, with the first poll of scholars on US presidents organized by Arthur Schlesinger, as Morgan explains: “Rating the performance of the holders of this protean office has become a significant scholarly enterprise since the first survey was conducted by Harvard historian Arthur Schlesinger Sr. in 1948. While there is no universal standard for assessing them, presidents are broadly judged on the basis of: the scale of problems they faced and their success in dealing with them; their vision for the nation; their moral authority and character; and the long-term effects of their actions.”<sup>82</sup> Since then, many more polls ranking presidents have been held in the United States. Below is a table of Kennedy's ranking in a selection of these polls.

Rank	
12	1970 : Maranell Accomplishment Poll
+ than 10th	1977 : US Historical Society Poll
14	1982 : Chicago Tribune Poll
13	1982 : Murray Poll
8	1982 : Siena College Research Institute
10	1990 : Siena College Research Institute
10	1994 : Siena College Research Institute
12	1996 : Schlesinger Jr.'s Ppoll
8	2000 : Cable Satellite Public Affairs Network
14	2002 : Siena College Research Institute
15	2005 : The Federalist Society & The Wall Street Journal
6	2009 : Cable Satellite Public Affairs Network
10	2010 : Siena College Research Institute
14	2014 : The New York Times
14	2015 : The Brookling Institution
8	2017 : Cable Satellite Public Affairs Network
16	2018 : The New York Times
10	2018 : Siena College Research Institute

Figure 1: table showing Kenedy's rank in 18 scholar polls from 1970 to 2018, Laury Vandenterghem. Due to technical issues, the references for these polls will be cited only in the bibliography.

Out of the 18 polls available for this analysis, and thus presented in the table above, Kennedy appears between ranks 6 and 16. The fact that he is not granted higher ranks does not seem very surprising owing to the fact that historians and scholars are more critical as their role is

81 Yamniuk, Stephanie Melinda. “Image and Text, the Creation of JFK as a Cultural Icon,” 2000: 30

82 Morgan in Morgan, Iwan W., ed. *Presidents in the Movies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011: Page 4 of the Introduction

to research and thus are constantly confronted to facts that may not be well known by the public. However, a score situated between 6 and 16, among 44 other presidents for the last 2 polls, can be said to be rather positive.

Concerning the polling of the public, the Gallup Institution polls will be used for this analysis. The Gallup company, created by George Gallup in the 1930s, first concentrated on polls revolving around elections, but now provides consultancy for companies in various fields.<sup>83</sup> What is interesting to note with the polls focusing on public opinion is that people do not seem to be influenced by the tarnishing and nuancing of Kennedy's image and thus, the ranks that the public attributes to JFK in polls are much higher than the ones attributed by historians and scholars. Indeed, the average percentage of JFK's job approval rating by the public during his presidency is of 70.1%.<sup>84</sup> It is the highest rate of presidents who were in office between Harry S. Truman and Barack Obama. As Brinkley points out, "By the middle of 1963, 59 percent of Americans surveyed claimed that they had voted for him in 1960, although only 49.7 percent of voters had actually done so. After his death, his landslide grew to 65 percent."<sup>85</sup> What this quotation highlights is that people wanted to be associated with him. It can be argued however that this high ranking is due to the fact that Kennedy controled his image during his presidency, as this analysis shall prove. In order to further defend the point demonstrated here, this paper also gathered more recent information.

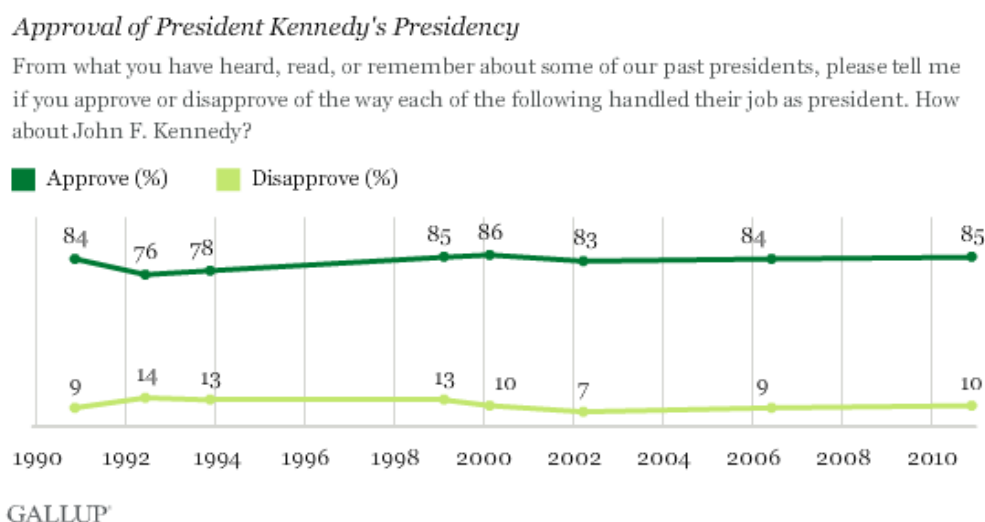


Figure 2: Graphic from the Gallup Company showing Kennedy's job approval by the public in percentage from the 1990s to the 2010s.<sup>86</sup>

In addition, in the 2010 and 2018 Gallup company Poll, Kennedy was also ranked the highest

<sup>83</sup> Information provided by the Gallup Company's official website Gallup.com

<sup>84</sup> Gallup Inc. Presidential Approval Ratings -- Gallup Historical Statistics and Trends." Gallup.com, March 12, 2008.

<sup>85</sup> Brinkley, Alan. "The Legacy of John F. Kennedy." *The Atlantic*, September 18, 2013.

<sup>86</sup> Gallup Inc. "Americans Rate JFK as Top Modern President." Gallup.com, August 1, 2016.

each time.<sup>87</sup> These data show that public support for Kennedy's decisions in office has surprisingly (surprising due to the fact that he sometimes struggled to face some of the crises he was confronted with, and due to the fact that he did not even finish a term as President) been ongoing for decades. Eventually, a sample of public opinion polls on popularity from 2011 to 2013 shows that the trend is recurrent. Indeed, according to the Public Policy Polling of 2011 “There is no question who the most beloved president of the last half century is: John F. Kennedy. 70% of American voters have a favorable opinion of Kennedy, and only 15% an unfavorable one.”<sup>88</sup> The same year, the Angus Reid Public Opinion and Vision Critical poll showed that “John F. Kennedy garnered the biggest proportion of mentions as a 'Good President' with 80 per cent.”<sup>89</sup> Finally, when polled in 2013, 74% of Americans polled considered Kennedy the most “Outstanding/Above average” president, only 19% of them considered him “Average”, and the “Below average/Poor” category only received 3% of the answers.<sup>90</sup> As the author of the article accompanying this poll notes,

Kennedy was killed on Nov. 22, 1963, and the 50-year anniversary of his assassination is being marked by a bevy of new books that re-examine this fateful event. The high esteem in which Americans hold Kennedy is not just a product of the current commemorative atmosphere, however. The results of this Nov. 7-10 Gallup poll are in line with previous findings; in 2004, 78% of adults said Kennedy would be seen as an outstanding or above-average president, also higher than any of his predecessors or successors whom Gallup measured. Moreover, previous Gallup research demonstrates how remarkably well-regarded Kennedy has been over the past 50 years. As recently as 2010, 85% said they approved of the way Kennedy handled his job as president, the highest retrospective job approval rating of any president measured, and his posthumous approval rating fell no lower than 76% in Gallup polls from 1990 to 2010.<sup>91</sup>

Kennedy's popularity does not seem to be impaired by the revelations of the 1980s and 1990s and from the revisionist movement that have been nuancing the ideal portrait he constructed. It can be argued that an irrational element, be it Kennedy's death, his short time in office, his family or his charisma, pushes the public to be drawn to the man and support him forever, believing in “what ifs” that shall never be answered, but which provide hope and thus defend his ideal image in life but also in films. Although in his Life Magazine Epilogue, Theodore H. White concludes with the following sentence: “For one brief shining moment there was

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87 Gallup Inc. “Kennedy Still Highest-Rated Modern President, Nixon Lowest.” Gallup.com, December 6, 2010 and “Obama’s First Retrospective Job Approval Rating Is 63%.” Gallup.com, February 15, 2018.

88 Jensen, Tom. “JFK, Reagan, Clinton Most Popular Recent Ex-Presidents.” *Public Policy Polling*, September 15, 2011, 17.

89 Angus Reid Public Opinion. “Kennedy and Reagan Lead List of Good Presidents for Americans | Angus Reid Public Opinion,” August 22, 2012.

90 Gallup Inc. “Americans Rate JFK as Top Modern President.” Gallup.com, August 1, 2016.

91 *Idem*.

Camelot,” what this thesis argues on the contrary is that the legacy lives on, now also through films, and that there *is* Camelot still, and the public will continue to unconditionally celebrate the memory of John F. Kennedy. Taking all the elements cited earlier in this first chapter into account, this analysis shall next try to prove that Kennedy is nearly always idealized in productions.

## **Part 2: Creating a hero**

Before the second part of this paper starts using active film analysis in order to point out how Kennedy is mostly portrayed as an ideal man and a hero in films, it shall explain how Kennedy was formatted to become a hero. Indeed, throughout his life, whether by his father or by his administration, Kennedy's image seems to have always been controlled so that he would appear flawless in any situation in the eyes of the public. It can be argued that, after his assassination, he was elevated to the rank of legend by the population as a consequence. Active film analysis shall then reveal the narrative and cinematic strategies used by directors to portray and display Kennedy as the hero in productions. Finally, this second part shall examine how the public reacted to these depictions, through the means of reviews.

### **I) Kennedy's control of his own image**

Kennedy's father played an important role in the crafting of his son's image as this part shall demonstrate. Indeed, being a Kennedy meant no flaw, and this is a principle which Kennedy kept throughout his presidency and life. He created a character which took over the man in the eyes of the public, but also in films, and which is now anchored in the Camelot legend.

#### **1) The Kennedy Doctrine**

The name Kennedy probably only evokes images of glory, youth, charisma, idealism, and reminiscences of a bright period in the history of America in most people's minds. To understand how the 35<sup>th</sup> president benefited from such a positive image, it seems important to examine John F. Kennedy's life, and especially the people and elements around him which contributed to forge such a remarkable portrait, which has remained nearly untouched, even a hundred years after his birth.

First and foremost, the first actor in the creation of the Kennedy image was JFK's father. Joseph Kennedy was a Catholic Bostonian of Irish origin, born in 1888, who gradually self made and became one of the richest men in the United States in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In addition, he became politically involved throughout his life, notably under Franklin Delano Roosevelt's presidency, and wished for his family to stay involved in politics. Because Joseph Kennedy managed to impose himself despite common prejudices concerning his religion and his origins, he knew the cost and “the power of image and incorporated this value into his family's values.”<sup>92</sup> When his first son, Joseph Patrick Kennedy Jr., on which all his political hopes for the future rested, died at war in 1944, Joseph Kennedy then turned to JFK, his

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92 Yamniuk, Stephanie Melinda. “Image and Text, the Creation of JFK as a Cultural Icon,” 2000: 8

second and now eldest son, as mentioned in *Killing Kennedy* by John himself: “This was supposed to be Joe. He was the oldest. Father always thought it would be Joe. He was shot down and we were all... stunned. Cut in the way things were supposed to go. Never supposed to be me, but it is.” [00:04:27] But the influence of the Kennedy patriarch on John's behavior could be felt for a considerable amount of time before politics played a role in his life. Joseph Kennedy shaped the Kennedy image and brought up his children with specific values in mind: victory, and the pride of being a Kennedy, and being a Kennedy meant no failure and no weakness. This mindset can be illustrated by the way Rosemary Kennedy, the eldest Kennedy daughter who suffered from mental disabilities was concealed from the world, as Yamniuk explains: “She did not fit into the 'Kennedy Image' that Joe had worked so hard to create. When her father decided that she should have a lobotomy, the press was told that she was being sent to a convent. Nothing was going to blemish the Kennedy name, not even another Kennedy.”<sup>93</sup>

Accordingly, throughout his youth, John's image was protected by his father: despite average grades at school and numerous diseases, which kept him in poor health and thus unable to attend school for long periods of time, Joe kept sending his son to the best institutions such as Choate or Harvard. John's education is referred to in *PT-109* and even mocked, as a privileged background is not the priority in times of war: “Seems like all he ever did was go to school, he's had no sea duty. Says here he wrote a book.' 'Sounds like he ought to be in charge of the library.'” [00:18:38] This quotation, as it is extracted from a dialogue between members of JFK's own crew who have not met him yet, suggests that his privileged status of “being a Kennedy” surpasses him, and that he will have to prove his worth. In addition, he is said to be able to leave the Pacific whenever he wants to thanks to his father in *PT-109*: “Tell the old man to drop the word into somebody's ear.” [00:03:04] Later on, when politics came into John's life, Joe once again took control of his son's career and life, as Yamniuk states: “just before the 1960 campaign, the Kennedy family sequestered JFK's medical records, believing that if the press found out about his back troubles and frequent sickness, it would give the impression that he was not sufficiently physically fit for the presidency.”<sup>94</sup> During the 1960 presidential campaign, Joe actively protected John's image again and advertised for his son. As he had spent five years working in the cinema industry in the 1920s, he knew what tools could charm people and thus, when the time came, he “virtually scripted the presentation of his son in the first congressional and senatorial

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93 Yamniuk, Stephanie Melinda. “Image and Text, the Creation of JFK as a Cultural Icon,” 2000: 10

94 *Idem*.

campaigns.”<sup>95</sup> Later on during the campaign, Joe compared his son to a movie star, and particularly to two important movie stars of the period: Jimmy Stewart and Cary Grant. Indeed, he stated:

Jack is the greatest attraction in the country today. I'll tell you how to sell more copies of a book. Put his picture on the cover. You advertise the fact that he will be at a dinner and you will break all records for attendance. He can draw more people to a fundraising dinner than Gary Grant or Jimmy Stewart. Why is that? He has more universal appeal.<sup>96</sup>

Once Kennedy was elected President, his father kept an influential part in his presidency: JFK often asked him for advice, until he suffered from a stroke in 1961, which was followed by aphasia. Joe's importance in Kennedy's decisions can be illustrated with a specific quote from *LBJ* in a dialogue between JFK and RFK on selecting Johnson as Vice-President: “You're out of your mind, Jack! You couldn't have made a worse choice if you tried.' 'I spoke with Dad. He agreed.' 'Spoke with Dad?' 'If we wanna win, we need Johnson.’” [00:18:33] This example suggests that Joe's approbation was important for JFK, no matter whether he was the president or not.

Nevertheless, even though Kennedy liked to ask for his father's opinion when he made decisions for most of his career, it is important to note that he was unwilling to let his father make decisions for him. JFK had his own ideas and did not want to have the same political career and destiny as his father. Indeed, as Dean Acheson, Truman's secretary of state, mentions in *Thirteen Days*, “the Kennedys' father was one of the architects of Munich.” [00:23:26] By saying this, Acheson acknowledges that he thinks JFK will react like his father reacted in times of crisis when he was ambassador of the United States in Great Britain. The title of “architect of Munich” thus refers to the advice Joseph Kennedy gave president Roosevelt just before the war: he told Roosevelt to accommodate with Hitler and sign the Munich Agreement in 1938. This agreement, by giving out a region of Czechoslovakia to Hitler in order to appease his threats of war can be seen as an act of collaboration with Nazi Germany. As a consequence, Joe Kennedy was considered a traitor for this advice and his statements while ambassador, and was later ousted from Roosevelt's administration. After these events, his political decisions became less influential. Joe's sympathy for the Nazi regime is mentioned in *Thirteen Days* in a subtle statement from Kenny O'Donnell, special assistant to the president, in which he refers to Joe's past. While John and Robert decide to leak to journalist Lippmann that the government would agree on a deal in Turkey in order to

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95 Hellmann, John. “JFK: The Author and the Text.” *American Literary History* 2, no. 4 (1990) : 743–55 : 744

96 Yamniuk, Stephanie Melinda. “Image and Text, the Creation of JFK as a Cultural Icon,” 2000 : 67-68, quoting Hellman, 1997



put an end to the Cuban Crisis, Kenny states: “That's something your father would have done right there.” [01:25:43] Kenny thinks this leak can only have negative consequences, and links this deal with Joe Kennedy's record. However, as history and the film show, this deal allowed to end the Cuban Crisis, and made it possible to differentiate Joe's traitor status and John's will to make peace.

Finally, Joe's connections to major journalists and newspaper editors also played a role in building his son's image during the 1960 campaign, and then throughout John's presidency. Indeed, these connections allowed JFK to enjoy a positive depiction from newspapers during the campaign, but most importantly, as he became close to journalists and writers, he provided them only with selected elements later on to share in articles, which allowed him to enjoy a total control of his image during his presidency. In the end, Kennedy was not compared to a movie star anymore, he became a star, an icon in people's minds. In other words, he had a “family-man image [that] coexisted alongside that of the handsome politico with a film star's sex appeal. More than any U.S. president before or since, Kennedy had an eroticized image that received consistent public affirmation.”<sup>97</sup> The positive relationship he developed with journalists, but also the rise of TV, enabled John F. Kennedy to spread his ideal portrait during his presidency, as this paper shall next demonstrate.

## 2)The Presidency

Kennedy's lasting positive depiction was only made possible thanks to the shaping of his image by his father throughout his youth, and then by himself and his campaign team during the presidential campaign and especially his cabinet once elected. First, JFK appealed to the public during the 1960 Democratic Convention in Los Angeles, as illustrated in *LBJ* in the form of archive footage that shows Kennedy supporters, and in which he is referred to by a commentator as “the man to beat”: “Partisans of Senator Kennedy radiate the cheer and confidence of the powerful front-runner, who is clearly the man to beat.” [00:14:12] Then he participated in the first ever live debate on TV against Republican candidate Richard Nixon on the 26<sup>th</sup> of September 1960, during the presidential campaign. This series of debates played an important role in the reception of Kennedy's image on TV. Indeed, as TV was well developed in the 1960s, more and more households could afford a TV set, and thus see the debates, as White points out: “Ten years earlier (in 1950) of America's then 40,000,000 families only 11 per cent (or 4,400,000 enjoyed the pleasures of a television set. By 1960 the number of American families had grown to 44,000,000, and of these *no less than 88 per cent*,

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97 White in Morgan, Iwan W., ed. *Presidents in the Movies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011: 133

or 40,000,000, possessed a television set.”<sup>98</sup> As a consequence, when figures from the different television networks are assembled together, it is possible to say that more people watched the debates than the 1959 World Series, which brought around 90,000,000 spectators, according to White.<sup>99</sup> This shows the interest people had in politics, but also the advantages of TV in terms of visibility for the candidates. In addition, the first debate was a positive experience for Kennedy as his image was flawless and contrasted with Nixon's image. As White explains, Nixon looked sick, tense, thin, unenergetic and sweaty, he had a “lazy shave”, and the setting disadvantaged him and made him look “transparent”. Kennedy on the contrary controlled his stress and his suit contrasted with the background.<sup>100</sup> As a consequence, as mentioned by White:

Those who heard the debates on radio, according to sample surveys, believed that the two candidates came off almost equal. Yet, every survey of those who watched the debates on television indicated that the Vice-President had come off poorly and, in the opinion of many, very poorly. It was the picture image that had done it—and in 1960 television had won the nation away from sound to images, and that was that.<sup>101</sup>

And in addition: “When they began, Nixon was generally viewed as being the probable winner of the election contest and Kennedy as fighting an uphill battle; when they were over, the position of the two contestants were reversed.”<sup>102</sup> Later on, Kennedy also became the first president to have his inaugural address broadcast on TV on the 20<sup>th</sup> of January 1961, and finally he was the first president to hold live TV news conferences, starting on the 25<sup>th</sup> of January 1961. As these examples suggest, TV played an important role in the election as it turned Kennedy into an idol and brought supporters: “His crowds had been growing for a full seven days before the debates, but now, overnight, they seethed with enthusiasm and multiplied in numbers, as if the sight of him, in their homes on the video box, had given him a 'starquality' reserved only for television and movie idols.”<sup>103</sup> Indeed, Kennedy received the same treatment that Hollywood stars received as, to a certain extent, he had become the star of his own film. As a consequence, the films made about Kennedy later on, like the ones under study in this corpus, preserved and spread the image of Kennedy as a politician, but also and more importantly, as a star, loved by the public.

The influence of television is even reinforced in films during speech scenes. Two

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98 White, Theodore H. *The Making of the President - 1960 (Reprint Edition)*. Harper Perennial Political Classics., 2009: 279

99 *Ibid.*: 283

100 *Ibid.*: 288-290

101 *Ibid.*: 290

102 *Ibid.*: 290-291

103 *Ibid.*: 291

speeches are to be noted: the Television Address to the Nation of the 22<sup>nd</sup> of October 1962 is reenacted both in *Killing Kennedy* [00:30:00] and in *Thirteen Days* [00:49:57], and the Address on Civil Rights of the 11<sup>th</sup> of June 1963 is to be found in *The Butler* [01:01:10] and *LBJ* [00:47:46]. Although the images of the speeches from *Killing Kennedy* and *LBJ* are quite similar to the original ones, it is interesting to point out the changes that appear in *Thirteen Days* and *The Butler*. Indeed, instead of medium close-ups, as in the original speeches, both films emphasize Kennedy's image by zooming in on his face, a process that heightens the importance of his words, and of the situation in both cases. By using the cinematic tools of extreme close-ups, of his face in *Thirteen Days*, and of his eyes in *The Butler*, the public feels close to Kennedy and can even grasp him through the screen. Finally, it is important to note that in *The Butler*, the extreme close-up of Kennedy's eyes and the speech are accompanied by an emotional music, followed by the sound of bullets, suggesting his death. This dramatic sequence of shots and sounds together can be interpreted as follows: it may convey a feeling of trust towards JFK, his large eyes displayed and emphasized on the black and white shots create a proximity between his eyes and the public's, as they are the only feature of his face that can be seen. [*The Butler*, 01:02:00] Although the lack of colors is made to resemble the real images of the 1963 speech, it may also suggest that there is no distraction, no other possibility than asking Congress to end violence as Kennedy suggests. In other words, the public's attention can only focus on JFK's concerned eyes, and the shot suggests that he will not dupe the African American community, nor the public.

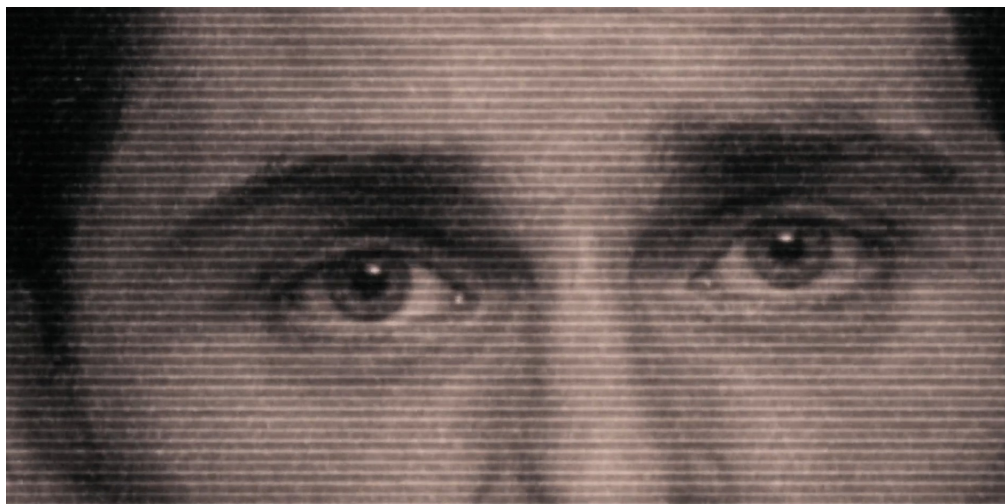


Figure 3: extreme close-up on Kennedy's eyes during his speech in *The Butler*. Daniels, Lee. *The Butler*. 2013.

As far as the public is concerned, TV also appears as a way for people to be informed about the presidential family, as exemplified in *Killing Kennedy*. Indeed, a real news bulletin from August 1963 is shown, but cut in order for the public not to see the real JFK's face: the “Universal International News – Kennedy Baby President Stands Vigil After Early Birth.”

[00:48:39] The date of this news bulletin is important as it coincides with Patrick Bouvier Kennedy's birth, Kennedy's third child. He is said to be "the object of worldwide attention during his dramatic fight for life" and indeed, he only lived for two days, from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 9<sup>th</sup> of August 1963. News bulletins like this one allow to reinforce the influence of TV during Kennedy's administration, as it creates a bond between the Kennedys and the population. After Patrick Bouvier Kennedy's death, the whole nation mourned him. This melodramatic scene has its own importance in the film as one of the missions of the film is to create sadness and empathy for Kennedy. This passage, like Kennedy's death, which is featured in nearly every film about JFK, ignites strong emotions from the public, which feels close to JFK: people have the feeling that they know what he went through and felt.

In similar fashion, press agents of the JFK administration, and especially White House Press Secretary Pierre Salinger represent another actor in the building of the Kennedy image. Together, the press secretary, the president, and JFK's official photographers Jacques Lowe, Stanley Tretick and Cecil Stoughton, created a universal appeal with a "narrative, with a protagonist, a setting, and a story presented within a discourse."<sup>104</sup> They published photographs of the Kennedy family's everyday life featuring the president, accompanied by his wife and children, in magazines and newspapers, as White explains.<sup>105</sup> Even though some of the pictures taken by the White House photographers were natural, some were the result of a process of displaying Kennedy and his children. This can be illustrated notably in *Killing Kennedy* as a whole scene stages a photographer, taking pictures of JFK and JFK Jr playing together in the Oval Office. [00:33:53] It can be said to be staged as they have John Jr. sit on the chair and answer the phone while the photographer takes pictures. This scene is made to resemble archive footage as the shots are blurry, grainy and shaky. It is not a particularly important scene in terms of understanding of the story, but it has an important emotional, nearly nostalgic role, because of its vintage colors. Once again, it reinforces the drama that Kennedy's death provoked. He is pictured as a caring, loving and amusing father while the music can be called mournful, notably because of the instruments playing and the piano notes. The archive looking shots are followed by normal shots, and then by the photographs taken during the scene, in black and white. As figure four below emphasizes, the pictures are very similar to Stoughton's photographs from October 1962.

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104 Hellmann, John. "JFK: The Author and the Text." *American Literary History* 2, no. 4 (1990): 743–55: 744

105 White in Morgan, Iwan W., ed. *Presidents in the Movies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011: 133



Figure 4: Top: Cecil Stoughton, White House photographs, October 10, 1962. JFK Library and Museum, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/JFKWHP/1962/Month%2010/Day%2010/JFKWHP-1962-10-10-G>.

Bottom: pictures taken in *Killing Kennedy*. McCormick, Nelson. *Killing Kennedy*. 2013

This technique of seizing joyful family moments and publishing them in newspapers and magazines contributed to reinforce the perfect image of the presidential family, and thus increased support from the public: people identified with the Kennedys and found similarities between their family and the Kennedy family.

As far as Press Secretary Pierre Salinger is concerned, one film from this corpus in particular illustrates his role of link between the press and the government, and shows notably how information was coordinated and shared in order to create a certain image of the president. Indeed, *Thirteen Days* suggests that Salinger was not told about the military exercises that took place at the beginning of the Cuban crisis, so as not to create panic [00:32:37] and in similar fashion, journalist James Reston's remark about Operation ORTSAC is silenced by Kenny O'Donnell. [00:33:17] Furthermore, in order for the president to appear in control during the Cuban Missile Crisis, O'Donnell asks Salinger to tell the press that the president is sick during a trip to Chicago, so that he can come back to the White House and handle the situation, when cancelling the trip would have been suspicious. [00:36:54] Later on, Salinger is seen informing the press that the president will be coming back to Washington D.C. to see his doctor and rest. As a consequence, the press can be seen as careless, and ready to hide things from the public, in order to protect the president. In similar fashion, two other examples can be used to illustrate the type of relationship the government and the press maintained, the first one being the leaking of the missile trade to journalist Walter Lippman, as

mentioned in *Thirteen Days*: “We get a hold of Walter Lippmann, and we leak the idea of pulling our Jupiter missiles out of Turkey, and the Soviets pull their missiles out of Cuba.” [01:22:32] But in fact, what this example really suggest is that Kennedy and his press secretary were able to manipulate the press in order to make people believe they were the real saviors. In similar fashion, the concealment of JFK's extramarital relationship with Judith Campbells as suggested by Robert Kennedy in *Killing Kennedys* has been kept secret by journalists, even though they knew about it: “The press has been very good about looking the other way when it comes to...” [00:22:13] What is interesting to note thanks to these scenes is that lying to the press allows to protect the president from a negative image, yet, it is even more important to note that lies do not appear as the only way to deal with the press and that threats occurred too. Indeed, O'Donnell can be seen threatening journalist Reston by pushing him on a wall and cornering him as Reston mentions a possibility to invade Cuba in public: “If you print something like that, all you're going to do is inflame the situation. Nobody talks to assholes who inflame situations. Assholes like that can find themselves cut out of the loop.' [...] 'All right. I won't print anything until I have another source, but I promise you, I'll get one.” [Thirteen Days, 00:37:54] As a consequence and as the films suggest, in times of crisis, agents controlled the image of the president in the press and on TV during press conferences or speeches, and displayed “a president who was calm, thoughtful, assertive, and in control. It was necessary to 'create' the image of a president that would give the world confidence of his success”<sup>106</sup> according to Yamniuk. As a result, JFK's image remained one of a rational and wise commander in chief who controlled the situation during important times of crisis. All in all, JFK's relationship with journalists can be summarized in one scene from *Killing Kennedy*, in which he seems at ease with them and makes them laugh while telling a joke. [00:03:53] On the one hand, this scene suggests a trustful relationship between Kennedy and the press, but it also suggests Kennedy's charisma and magnetism as he attracts important journalists in his circle, as this paper shall later develop. On the other hand, to a certain extent, it can be seen as a negative control of the press by Kennedy, who thus has a power over the press and who blinds journalists with a joke. As they have the impression that they are friends with the president, they might not want to disappoint him nor risk their careers doing so.

As noted also by Hellmann<sup>107</sup>, many events of Kennedy's life also contributed to make his metamorphosis from an average man to a well-known politician possible : his experience at war, his role in the House of Representatives and later on in the Senate, his position, or lack of position concerning Joseph McCarthy's politics against communism, his “Bachelor” status,

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106 Yamniuk, Stephanie Melinda. “Image and Text, the Creation of JFK as a Cultural Icon,” 2000: 69

107 Hellmann, John. “JFK: The Author and the Text.” *American Literary History* 2, no. 4 (1990): 743–55 : 744

and, because this status could impair his political career, his marriage to Jacqueline Bouvier, from another rich and political Bostonian family. Indeed, JFK's marriage to Jacqueline Bouvier can also be considered a tool bringing popularity. Jackie attracted journalists and the couple was a source of interest for the media, as suggested in episode eight from season two of *The Crown* for example. As the scene from the Kennedys' trip to France implies, Jackie had more success than JFK in France, hence his famous remark from 1961, also used in *The Crown*: "I am the man who accompanied Jacqueline Kennedy to Paris." [00:45:52] Together, the couple became famously loved by Americans, but also by the world, like actors, as Yamniuk quotes from Mailer:

'He would be not only the youngest president ever to be chosen by vote, he would be the most conventionally attractive young man ever to sit in the White House, and his wife – some would claim it – might be the most beautiful first lady in Our history' going on to add somewhat sarcastically, 'America's politics would now be also America's favorite movie, America's first soap opera, America's best-seller.'<sup>108</sup>

Finally, the hordes of photographers following Kennedy, as illustrated in films when he leaves Air Force One in Connecticut [00:25:56] and in Chicago [00:36:35] in *Thirteen Days*, but also in France [00:03:18] and when he arrives to Buckingham Palace [00:11:19] in *The Crown* show that Kennedy's image is an image made for the media. Indeed, people gawk when they see the couple, scream, the public wants to touch JFK's hand, and even notable people such as Prince Philip are impatient to meet the Kennedys, as suggested by episode eight from season two of *The Crown*. The controlled and flawless image presented the public with a "politician as a movie star"<sup>109</sup>, and he was thus endowed with crafted qualities and became a public icon, representing a hero, and even the country, or "democracy itself."<sup>110</sup>

### 3) Creating a character

JFK thus created his character, and his portrayal can be summarized into one word, as his wife Jacqueline Kennedy put it after his death in her interview for *Life Magazine* with journalist Theodore White: "Camelot." *Camelot* was a 1960 Broadway musical which revolved around the Arthurian legend, but it was also a favorite of Kennedy, and as Jackie explains in her interview, he used to listen to the records of the musical on numerous occasions:

'At night, before we'd go to sleep, Jack liked to play some records; and the song he loved most came at the very end of this record. The lines he loved to hear were:

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108 Yamniuk, Stephanie Melinda. "Image and Text, the Creation of JFK as a Cultural Icon," 2000: 78, quoting Mailer, 1963

109 Hellmann, John. "JFK: The Author and the Text." *American Literary History* 2, no. 4 (1990): 743–55: 748

110 Yamniuk, Stephanie Melinda. "Image and Text, the Creation of JFK as a Cultural Icon," 2000: 2

Don't let it be forgot/that once there was a spot/for one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot."<sup>111</sup>

"Camelot" encompasses ideas of an "American court," a new generation of Americans, governed by JFK, who were educated and prepared to lead the United States into the modern world with dynamism, or in other words: "He remains a powerful symbol of a lost moment, of a soaring idealism and hopefulness that subsequent generations still try to recover. His allure – the romantic, almost mystic, associations his name evokes – not only survives but flourishes."<sup>112</sup> In *Camelot*, JFK is a character, and "the once-ordinary citizen is now a moviestar superhero – and vice versa – because of what the public thinks they know about him."<sup>113</sup> The "one brief shining moment" from the musical lyrics that Jackie mentions in White's article thus summarizes particularly well what Kennedy now seems to represent. After she mentions Kennedy's youth spent reading in bed because of illnesses, Jackie links Kennedy to the heroes of History he read about: "For Jack, history was full of heroes. [...] Jack had this hero idea of history, the idealistic view."<sup>114</sup> It can be said that he was turned into a hero thanks to his control of his image, but also because of his death. Indeed, his brutal death meant that there would never be another "Camelot" again, in other words, America has lost its royal family and its "one brief shining moment" when Kennedy died, as the lyrics put it and as White recalls: "But she came back to the idea that transfixed her: Don't let it be forgot/that once there was a spot/for one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot and it will never be that way again."<sup>115</sup> The final words of this quote are also to be found in *Killing Kennedy*, when Jackie is seen giving White the interview [01:26:26] that led to the publication of his famous article. In the end, it is possible to say that JFK became the hero of his own Camelot, but that the curtain of his musical fell when he died.

Failures, if ever revealed in the press or on TV were presented as part of "the archetypal myth of the hero who acquires spiritual insight through suffering and experience' (Brown 20), just as his untimely assassination meant that he could be eulogized as a leader who had not been able to realize his full potential."<sup>116</sup> Indeed, because his control of his image produced a certain vision of the man in people's minds, JFK appears to be recognized as a hero in the common imagination, and it seems rather natural that he then was depicted as such in movies made about his life, even though archives, slowly made available, revealed negative

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111 White, Theodore H. "For President Kennedy: An Epilogue." *Life Magazine*, December 6, 1963

112 Brinkley, Alan. "The Legacy of John F. Kennedy." *The Atlantic*, September 18, 2013

113 Yamniuk, Stephanie Melinda. "Image and Text, the Creation of JFK as a Cultural Icon," 2000: 70

114 White, Theodore H. "For President Kennedy: An Epilogue." *Life Magazine*, December 6, 1963

115 *Idem*.

116 Yamniuk, Stephanie Melinda. "Image and Text, the Creation of JFK as a Cultural Icon," 2000: 31-32, quoting Brown, 1988



aspects of JFK's life. Because they “have been fascinated by and contributed to the canon of Kennedy history,”<sup>117</sup> directors and producers are thus the last actor in the forging of the Kennedy image, as they contributed to fuel his mythical portrait.

## **II) Characteristics of the hero**

The main character of a film, often the “hero” of a film, has to follow certain characteristics. In other words, heroes have to follow benevolent principles and act out of selflessness in order to help others, as *PT-109* perfectly exemplifies. Thanks to an overview of heroism, this part will allow to see how Kennedy fits into the role of the hero in films about him, but also in other films, such as in *The Butler* and *LBJ*, thanks to his personality, his charisma and his courage.

### **1) Overview of hero worshipping**

This paper has previously shown that JFK, and the people surrounding him, controlled his image in order to build a positive and flawless portrait of the president. As a consequence, elements provided to the population and to directors and screenwriters, despite archives being progressively available to the public, produced a heroic image of the man in the common imagination and in films, that in turn pushes people to worship and idealize him. In order to analyze Kennedy's heroic depiction in the films of this corpus, it seems useful to determine first the origins of heroes and what are their characteristics. The aim of this more theoretical overview of heroism is to allow this analysis to focus on the traits that link Kennedy with heroism, in the interest of pointing out the way in which he is idealized. Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle explains that everyone has a hero to worship.<sup>118</sup> This shows the importance and influence of heroes and worshipping in society. As a consequence, the term “hero” seems to encompass a variety of individuals who share, to a certain extent, the same values: be a model for society by enhancing, helping and protecting others courageously despite risks, or in other words, by having an “exceptional behavior”<sup>119</sup> which pushes people to worship, or at least appreciate them. Yet, even though every individual is capable of heroic behavior, heroes have been qualified as such according to features commonly considered close to Gods' and masculine since antiquity: “Heroes in antiquity were revered for their strength, courage,

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117 White in Morgan, Iwan W., ed. *Presidents in the Movies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011: 132

118 Paraphrasing Allison, Scott T., George R. Goethals, and Roderick M. Kramer, eds. *Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership*. Taylor & Francis, 2017: 1, quoting Carlyle, 1841

119 Kinsella, Ritchie, and Igou, in Allison, Scott T., George R. Goethals, and Roderick M. Kramer, eds. *Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership*. Taylor & Francis, 2017: 20

resourcefulness, and ability to slay enemies.”<sup>120</sup>

In order to classify heroes, three categories have been established by Kinsella, Ritchie, and Igou. The first one, which includes everyday heroes such as policemen, firemen and paramedics, is referred to as the martial one. JFK belongs in a sense to this first category thanks to his experience as a soldier during the Second World War. As a soldier, he contributed to the war effort, risked his life, and helped his country to win the war as this paper shall later develop thanks to the analysis of JFK's character in *PT-109*. In addition, there are civil heroes, who risk their lives for others without belonging to an institution providing them with a code of conduct. Eventually, the last category of heroes is composed of social heroes. Social heroes take risks, but not necessarily physically. Among the examples provided by Kinsella, Ritchie, and Igou for this category are “whistleblowers, scientific heroes, martyrs, Good Samaritans, underdogs, political figures, religious figures, adventurers, politico-religious figures, and bureaucratic heroes.”<sup>121</sup> Accordingly, this category is the one in which JFK could mostly be classified as a president, as he took certain risky decisions for the greater good of the country.

According to Campbell, a typical hero goes on a journey into an unfamiliar world and meets obstacles and villains on the way. In order to overcome obstacles and defeat villains, the hero needs the help of important figures such as his friends and his mentor. Throughout his journey, the hero learns truths about himself, grows and changes. He acquires an important quality that he lacked at the beginning of his journey and brings back a benefit to his world.<sup>122</sup> Indeed, “the universal hero myth, for example, always refers to a powerful man or god-man who vanquishes evil in the form of dragons, serpents, monsters, demons, and so on, who liberates his people from destruction and death. [...] The hero archetype is, at its most rudimentary level, the framework of an individual who combats the forces of evil.”<sup>123</sup> Accordingly, JFK could be considered a hero once again, thanks to his battle as the United States president against the Soviets, who would represent the “dragons, serpents, monsters, demons and so on.” Americans, or followers, would thus identify with their hero who defeated evil forces, and celebrate him. In other words, the aim of a hero is to improve the lives of others, and to do so, the hero has to defeat what is commonly feared, under the form of a villain as a person or a threat. Indeed, heroism is the “willingness to sacrifice or take risks on

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120 Allison, Scott T., George R. Goethals, and Roderick M. Kramer, eds. *Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership*. Taylor & Francis, 2017: 2, quoting Schein, 1984

121 Kinsella, Ritchie, and Igou, in Allison, Scott T., George R. Goethals, and Roderick M. Kramer, eds. *Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership*. Taylor & Francis, 2017: 24, quoting Zimbardo, 2007

122 Paraphrasing Allison, Scott T., George R. Goethals, and Roderick M. Kramer, eds. *Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership*. Taylor & Francis, 2017: 3, quoting Campbell, 1949

123 Davie, Gavin. “The Hero Soldier: Portrayals of Soldiers in War Films,” 2011: 4-5, quoting Jung, 1968

behalf of others or in defense of a moral cause.”<sup>124</sup> In that sense, it can be said that JFK was a hero, as he was at the time the leader and the protector of the nation against threats such as a nuclear war for example, as illustrated in *Thirteen Days* and *Killing Kennedy*.

Finally, as Bergstrand and Jasper suggest, “scholars also tend to agree to say that a hero's purpose is also to serve as a “rallying point, increase agreement among members, and boost commitment to a cause.”<sup>125</sup> Heroes are thus an important factor in terms of group and culture dynamics as they create a sense of belonging to a community and manage to create a certain unity of actions towards a more positive future:

On a group level, Klapp suggests that heroes organize and simplify collective responses by enlisting interest in causes and creating mass followings, heightening a sense of 'we', and strengthening morale by focusing collecting efforts and complexities on one individual. Groups of people may draw together to praise and support a hero, which reaffirms group values. Heroes may also perpetuate collective values and socially necessary virtues (such as courage, self-sacrifice, hatred of evil) across generations.<sup>126</sup>

Unity appears to be an important point for this analysis when dealing with Kennedy, as the president has to be able to create cohesion in the country in order to be appreciated and followed, and as a consequence, in order to take concrete steps to move the country forward. To a certain extent, as a Roman Catholic, he knew the importance of unity as he received criticism about his religion, notably during the primaries of the campaign, and later on during his presidency, even though he won the election as this analysis will develop in its last chapter. As a matter of fact, his religion played an important role in the election as he was nearly discredited because of it: “Kennedy won the presidency in one of the closest elections in American history—by a margin of 118,000 votes out of 69 million. There is solid evidence that religion helped Kennedy in several urban and industrial states but was, at the same time, a significant factor in his loss of Ohio, Kentucky, Florida, and Tennessee—and in his very close win in Texas.”<sup>127</sup> As a consequence, considering the fact that he was a minority himself, it is possible to say that JFK's choice to constitute an inclusive government was oriented toward the population, in order to represent it as completely as possible, and in order for people to feel included into the government. Indeed, as a Roman Catholic and a Liberal Democrat of Irish origins, he needed a Southern and Conservative counterpart, which he found by naming

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124 Allison, Scott T., George R. Goethals, and Roderick M. Kramer, eds. *Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership*. Taylor & Francis, 2017: 4, quoting Franco et al., 2001

125 Bergstrand, Kelly, and James M. Jasper. “Villains, Victims, and Heroes in Character Theory and Affect Control Theory.” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 81, no. 3 (September 2018): 228–47: 229

126 Kinsella, Ritchie, and Igou, in Allison, Scott T., George R. Goethals, and Roderick M. Kramer, eds. *Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership*. Taylor & Francis, 2017: 25

127 JFK Library and Museum. “John F. Kennedy and Religion | JFK Library.” JFK Library and Museum website.

Johnson his vice-president, as illustrated in *LBJ*. In addition, by naming Arthur J. Goldberg, who had Russian-Jewish origins, his Secretary of Labor, Abraham Ribicoff, who had Polish-Jewish origins, and then Anthony Joseph Celebrezze, who was born in Italy, his Secretaries of Health, Education and Welfare, C. Douglas Dillon, who was born in Switzerland, his Secretary of the Treasury, and finally Dean Rusk, who was a Presbyterian who grew up in poverty, as his Secretary of State, he broadened the ethics of his government. Furthermore, in the first year of his presidency, Kennedy established the President's Commission on the Status of Women, chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt, and which aimed at analyzing and reducing inequalities for women in the workplace. In addition, although her work is the subject of controversy, JFK also appointed the first female presidential physician, Janet Travell. Finally, although Gates Jr. points out in his article from the Roots website entitled "How black was JFK's Camelot?"<sup>128</sup> that JFK's political decisions on segregation and racism were part of a crafted political strategy, JFK nonetheless appointed African Americans to important positions. Among them, he notably named Andrew T. Hatcher Associate White House Press Secretary. Hatcher's mission was to "help Kennedy navigate the icy relationship between whites and Blacks in America at the time."<sup>129</sup> In addition, he also named Robert Weaver Administrator of the Housing and Home Finance Agency. Finally, in 1961, he designated Abraham Bolden White House Secret Service Agent, making him the first African American to hold a position in the Presidential Protective Division. Moreover, even though the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity's work is diminished in *LBJ*, JFK nonetheless created it to insure equality of employment without discrimination based on race, origin or religion. All in all, JFK can be seen as the unifier of the country, as he created a balance and managed to have a great variety of people joining his administration in the battles of the period against soviet threats and inequality. Yet, on top of his legislative actions, it can be said that Kennedy's personality matched with the typical traits attributed to heroes and played a role in his idealization.

## **2) The Kennedy mystique.**

In addition to actions or decisions facilitating his idealization as this paper showed, Kennedy's personality, or the Kennedy mystique, also attracted supporters. As a consequence, some important character traits usually related to hero worshipping appear to be essential to mention as they particularly apply to what is commonly believed about JFK, and thus also

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128 Gates Jr., Henry Louis. "How Black Was JFK's Camelot?," November 18, 2013

129 Chandler, D.L. "Little Known Black History Fact: Andrew Hatcher." *Black America Web*, November 10, 2016

contribute to the fueling of his idealized representation.

The first and most obvious one is charisma, which applies so remarkably well to Kennedy that a Kennedyesque version of charisma is said to exist. In order to define charisma and apply it to JFK, this analysis will focus on Potts' *A History of Charisma*, which offers a broad and complete vision of the uses of the term charisma through time, starting with the origin of charisma: religion. Charisma used to suggest a connection to God, or a spiritual gift of God's grace offered to a group. Although it emerged in the early Christian church of the first century, the term was forgotten after the third century and its revival occurred when Weber, a German social theorist offered a new definition for it, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in his 1922 *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*.<sup>130</sup> Weber's definition of charisma is broader than religion and goes as follows: "The term 'charisma' will be applied to a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities."<sup>131</sup> As this quotation points out, Weber emphasizes the charisma of single individuals who are endowed with certain exceptional qualities, and in that sense, he parts with the Christian definition of the term. One scene from *PT-109* may suggest that JFK is extraordinary compared to other soldiers. Indeed, when he arrives on his base in the Pacific, he has to cross the camp to join Lieutenant Cluster. A long shot allows the audience to see most of the camp and the men inhabiting it, and JFK, in the middle of it, appears as a source of light. Indeed, he is the only one wearing beige in a background of darker colors, such as blue, brown, black and green. [00:08:02]



Figure 5: screenshot from *PT-109*. Martinson, Leslie H. *PT 109*. 1963.

In addition, a medium shot allows to see him from the side, walking past a portal saying

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130 Potts, John. *A History of Charisma*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2009: 109

131 *Ibid.*: 117, quoting Weber, 1922

“THRU THESE PORTALS PASS THE BEST MTB MEN IN THE WORLD.” [00:08:10]  
This shot gives the impression that Kennedy, smiling, does not need to walk through this portal to be one of the best, he already is extraordinary because of his outfit and attitude. Finally, this scene ends in Lieutenant Cluster's office. When Kennedy enters the room, he has to wake up Cluster. The low angle shot of this moment in particular may suggest that Kennedy is superior to Cluster, who is also in his underwear while JFK is well-dressed. [00:09:08]

In addition to exceptional qualities, what connects charisma to heroism can also be found in the role that Weber attributed to charismatic leaders. Indeed, for him, charismatic leaders, like heroes, serve as a rallying point, as people create excitement around them, and are devoted “to the exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him’.”<sup>132</sup> In other words, people's attraction to charismatic leaders is thus in a sense natural, and although Weber uses the term “domination”, this “domination” relationship is, according to Potts<sup>133</sup>, contrary to “bureaucracy,” or hierarchy. Indeed, people react to charismatic leaders with their emotions, not because they have to submit. Accordingly, people's devotion to Kennedy is illustrated in the films of this corpus in the form of crowds, waiting for him on airport fields or in the streets, screaming, waving or holding banners notably at the Dallas Love Field airport or in the streets of the city [*Killing Kennedy*, 01:04:10 and 01:05:05; *LBJ*, 00:01:48 and 00:07:53], on the day of his death, but also in France or in London as shown in season two episode eight of *The Crown*. [00:03:18 and 00:11:08] In addition, JFK is pictured as a crowd man in *LBJ*, as the commentator can be heard saying: “The crowd is jockeying for a better look at the president. Wait, no. The president has walked *past* the motorcade... ...and he's making his way towards the crowd” [00:02:25] and as he takes time to meet the crowd and shake hands with people. Another important moment suggesting the support of people is represented in certain films: JFK's funerals. Indeed, Kennedy's funeral took place in Washington D.C. on the 25<sup>th</sup> of November 1963, and as pictured in *Killing Kennedy* [01:25:35] and *LBJ* [01:09:03], people gathered in the streets to see the procession of his casket. Eventually, one last scene seems important to understand the relation that JFK shared with the crowd. Indeed, as pictured in season two episode eight of *The Crown*, JFK can be perceived as an extraordinary orator, who was able to captivate the crowd when delivering a speech. During a dinner scene, as the wide shot shows, he is at the center of the frame, but also at the center of the room and of the tables. Moreover, he is standing, while others are sitting, which may suggest a superiority, but also a sense that his voice will reach people. The

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132 Potts, John. *A History of Charisma*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2009: 117, quoting Weber, 1922

133 *Ibid.*: 120

wide shot also allows to see people's faces, turned attentively towards him, as the silence suggests. [00:35:14] Finally, the few shots on people, especially women, as this paper shall later develop, listening to him, captivated and nodding [35:44, 35:49, 35:54 and 36:19] prove his extraordinary magnetism.

Finally, as charismatic leaders also include American politics as Potts puts it: “ranging from ancient religion to contemporary (1913) American politics<sup>134</sup>”, a new link can be created between charisma and Kennedy. Indeed, as an American politician and as the President of the United States, he had to respond to situations of crisis with extraordinary qualities, as this paper shall later develop.<sup>135</sup>

Weber's definition of charisma adopted a new meaning in the 1950s, and this meaning remained the same until today. Indeed, the contemporary meaning of charisma is provided by Potts: “Charisma is broadly understood as a special innate quality that sets certain individuals apart and draws others to them.”<sup>136</sup> In that sense, as Potts explains, the definition still retains elements from Weber's definition in terms of charisma being an irrational force, yet it is at the same time adjusted to its contemporary meaning, which is more broadly and commonly used in the media for example, and which now includes celebrities, and takes into account the role of settings and followers. Furthermore, since the 1950s and 1960s, the increasing frequency of the use of the term came to play a role in politics as since that period, “politicians are frequently assessed on their charisma factor.”<sup>137</sup> In addition, charisma can play an important role in elections too, as

despite the controlling power of bureaucratic party machines, charisma retains a role in the democratic political process: Weber nominates the ‘charisma of rhetoric’ evident in electioneering ‘stump speeches’. The ‘purely emotional’ effect of charismatic rhetoric may occasionally build into a case of ‘charismatic hero worship’, where a political candidate or leader generates so much emotional appeal that even the party machine must fall into service of this charisma.<sup>138</sup>

This quotation suggests that charismatic leaders, like TV celebrities, could and can be so intensely appealing to the audience that they produce an excitement that overcomes reason, as the description of the TV broadcast presidential debates described earlier in this analysis illustrate. A link between charisma and Kennedy can be drawn once again, as JFK is one of the important figures people think about when they think about politics and charisma, thanks to his magnetism, his appeal, his sense of humor, his good looks and the excitement he

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134 Potts, John. *A History of Charisma*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2009: 122

135 *Idem*, quoting Weber, 1922

136 *Ibid.*: 188

137 *Ibid.*: 4

138 *Ibid.*: 125

created in people, in other words, “exceptional qualities” also called the “Kennedy Mystique”.

The Kennedy Mystique is translated by Kennedy's unfading smile in *PT-109*, but also by his sense of humor notably and accordingly by his easiness with people in all films. As a consequence, it is possible to hear JFK tell fine jokes even though the situation seems inappropriate such as in *PT-109*, when he is only given a few days to rebuild his patrol boat with no crew: “How long did they give you to put it in shape ?” ‘Well, we've used about half the time just talking right here.’ ‘What about the crew ?’ ‘So far I got uh... one land crab.’ [00:17:27] In similar fashion, even though the crew's cook can only make sandwiches, he manages to turn a desperate situation into a funny one: “Any of you men know how to cook?’ ‘Cook? Yeah, yeah, I used to fix some stuff for my kid brother, sir.’ ‘Good, you're our new cook. What kind of stuff?’ ‘Peanut butter sandwiches, sir.’ ‘Nothing else?’ ‘Oh, sometimes I'd stick some jelly on them, sir.’ ‘Well, ah.. maybe you could cook up a third speciality, huh?’” [00:21:07] Finally, whereas he and his men are stranded on an island after their patrol boat was torn down by the Japanese, he stays positive: “The odds are on our side.’ ‘Boy you kill me, you really do! Here we are, beat and burned and given up for dead, living on green coconuts and no water in the middle of 1500 Japanese soldiers and you decide the odds are with us!’ ‘It's a flaw in my character.’” [01:55:04] In similar fashion, just as the Cuban Missile Crisis ends in *Killing Kennedy*, he states: “Maybe tonight's the night I should go to the theater.” [00:33:44] Furthermore, some jokes in the other films also suggest that he is not pretentious about his life nor his position, such as in *Killing Kennedy* for example: “The reporter... A young woman, very attractive, asked me uh... ‘Senator Kennedy, how did you do to become a war hero?’ when I told her that it was completely involuntary, they sank my boat” [00:03:50], “I would say that being president is a fine job... It's a fine job. I get to walk to work and the pay is nice;” [00:16:36] and in similar fashion, as he meets the White House staff in *The Butler*: “Hello everyone.’ ‘Mr President.’ ‘Uh... I am thrilled to be working with all of you over the next four years.’ ‘Eight years Jack.’ ‘Well you see who wears the pants around here!’” [00:48:05] Eventually, some of his jokes suggest that he is not scared to tease people, and the fact that they laugh and do not get hurt proves his easiness and ability to make people comfortable, such as in *Thirteen Days* when he exits Air Force One and asks the crowd: “Doesn't anybody in Connecticut have to work today ?” [00:26:08] or in *LBJ*, as JFK explains to Johnson that he won the democratic nomination for other reasons than because he was better than him: “Better men won.’ ‘I'm not better. Better looking maybe.’” [00:18:01]

In fact, according to Potts, Kennedy changed the definition of charisma: “The significant factor in this shift is the advent of John F. Kennedy to the American presidency,



and the use of television in transmitting his personal appeal, not only to American viewers but also to international audiences.”<sup>139</sup> Because of his appeal conveyed through TV, as this paper explained earlier, he “was described as 'charismatic' by commentators in the press, and on the electronic media of radio and TV.”<sup>140</sup> Scholars even talk about a “Kennedy Charisma”: “Even an encyclopedia of religion published in the mid-1980s acknowledged the the secular form of charisma as 'a human quality ... as when one speaks of 'the Kennedy Charisma'”<sup>141</sup>, or about a “Kennedyesque” version of charisma: “The touchstone for political charisma remains John F. Kennedy. Any contemporary politician considered charismatic will at one stage be compared to Kennedy, or will have the adjective 'Kennedyesque' applied.”<sup>142</sup> Charisma thus was an important asset of JFK's personality, as it made it easier for him to build a community of followers among the population, excited by his appeal in addition to his ideas and his politics. Yet, Kennedy's charisma was not the only element he had in common with traditional heroes. Indeed, added to his personality and despite his health problems, Kennedy's heroic actions during the war also contribute to categorize him as an extraordinary man.

### **3)The brave knight of Camelot.**

Because it was released in 1963, *PT-109* is the first film featuring JFK as a character, but it is also the only film about JFK that came out while Kennedy was president and still alive. Therefore, the depiction of Kennedy in *PT-109* is extremely idealized, and this paper shall as a consequence focus more on this film for this part of the analysis.

JFK's experience at war facilitated the construction of his idealized portrayal thanks to the depiction of the physical strength and courageous deeds, in other words, the bravery, that he demonstrated while in the Pacific, and that the film *PT-109* thus displays. Indeed, physical strength allows heroes to be resistant and thus perform actions that most people could not perform, and for which they are considered heroes: protecting people and saving lives whenever needed and even though the situation may be risky.<sup>143</sup> Accordingly, when talking about bravery, Jayawickreme and Di Stefano suggest that bravery is not common to everyone as “it involves the ability to overcome fear and do what has to be done, regardless of the consequences. Important elements of bravery include the voluntary nature of the action, an

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<sup>139</sup> Potts, John. *A History of Charisma*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2009: 127

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*: 128

<sup>141</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*: 202

<sup>143</sup> Davie, Gavin. “The Hero Soldier: Portrayals of Soldiers in War Films,” 2011: 5, quoting Sullivan and Venter, 2005

understanding of the risks involved, and the acceptance of those risks and the presence of danger, risk, or potential injury.”<sup>144</sup>

Even though physical strength is not the most obvious heroic trait concerning Kennedy, he showed evidence of it throughout his life, despite his illnesses, notably at war, and it can be argued that “Wars provide the opportunities for soldiers to prove themselves heroes through deed,”<sup>145</sup> as Davie puts it. Indeed, on the night of August 1<sup>st</sup> 1943, during the second World War, the patrol torpedo boat 109, or PT-109, on which JFK was the skipper, was sunk by a Japanese destroyer. The shipwreck caused Kennedy to hurt his already painful back (JFK had suffered from many operations for back problems throughout his life as this analysis shall later explain) and the men under Kennedy's command were also more or less injured. When they reached the decision to leave the remains of the patrol torpedo boat and swim to one of the nearby islands of the Salomons, Kennedy nonetheless showed great physical strength as “He cut loose one end of a long strap on McMahon’s Mae West and took the end in his teeth. He swam breast stroke, pulling the helpless McMahon along on his back. It took over five hours to reach the island. Water lapped into Kennedy’s mouth through his clenched teeth, and he swallowed a lot.”<sup>146</sup> This particular moment is depicted in *PT-109* and the emphasis is put on Kennedy's character. Indeed, many medium close-ups show Kennedy by himself, pulling McMahon, the strap of his life-vest clenched in Kennedy's teeth. [1:33:25, 1:34:22 and 1:35:05] On the other hand, the rest of the crew is shown as a group thanks to long shots. Furthermore, except for ensign Leonard J. Thom, starred by Ty Hardin and thus recognizable thanks to his blonde hair, the others are nearly indistinguishable.

After they arrived on one of the islands, Kennedy departed to swim again from this island to another in order to find other PT boats near Ferguson Passage. The full shot picturing his departure also accentuates the special status Kennedy receives throughout the film. Indeed, as he enters the water, he seems to stand alone confronting the ocean [01:42:44], while the others are behind him, grouped on the island. Moreover, the notes playing in the exact four seconds it takes him to enter the water [from 01:42:44 to 01:42:48] recall notes from the American anthem, the Star Spangled Banner, suggesting the bravery he demonstrates for his country. Finally, the warm tones of the scene, which are due to the setting sun, may also suggest optimism.

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144 Jayawickreme, Eranda, and Paul Di Stefano. “How Can We Study Heroism? Integrating Persons, Situations and Communities.” *Political Psychology* 33, no. 1 (2012): 165–78: 169

145 Davie, Gavin. “The Hero Soldier: Portrayals of Soldiers in War Films,” 2011: 8

146 JFK Library and Museum “John F. Kennedy and PT 109.” JFK Library and Museum website.



Figure 6: screenshot from *PT-109*. Martinson, Leslie H. *PT 109*. 1963.

Although Kennedy nearly died returning from Ferguson Passage because of the currents, he nonetheless spent the next days swimming again from one island to the other, looking for food and fresh water. As a consequence of his trips, JFK encountered two natives who happened to be American allies. He wrote a message on the back of a coconut that said “NAURO ISL COMMANDER . . . NATIVE KNOWS POS'IT . . . HE CAN PILOT . . . 11 ALIVE NEED SMALL BOAT . . . KENNEDY<sup>147</sup>,” hoping that the islanders would bring it to American troops. Kennedy received a positive response and the natives brought him to the nearby American base. There, he organized the rescue of his crew. For his deeds in the Pacific, JFK received the Navy and Marine Corps medal and the Purple Heart medal. Thanks to the courage Kennedy demonstrated by risking to encounter enemy troops while swimming at sea to find resources and help, and thanks to the strength he deployed to pull one of his crew members for miles in the Pacific, it can be said that in a way, JFK saved his crew. War thus revealed Kennedy's physical strength, courage and leadership, despite his health and special condition as a Kennedy. His traits and actions while at war facilitated his idealized depiction and made it easier for people to worship him. His status as a war hero added to the already constructed Kennedy mystique and contributed to the forging of his ideal political image, which helped him to overcome crises once president.

### III)The Hero overcomes Crises

Since the beginning of his life, John F. Kennedy has been a source of fascination and inspiration for creation because of his heroic traits and actions, which are transcribed and used in the movies and series made about him as previously seen. These films and series, in which

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147 JFK Library and Museum “John F. Kennedy and PT 109.” JFK Library and Museum website.

JFK's character is either central or a considerable figure, find their starting point in the 1960s (*PT 109*, 1963) and continued to be produced until very recently (*LBJ*, 2017 ; *The Crown*, Season 2 Episode 8, 2017), showing the evergoing fascination for the man, even decades after his death. Yet, heroization in productions is made easier by some narrative tools such as National Security Cinema, which will be dealt with thanks to three films from this corpus: *PT-109*, *Thirteen Days* and *Killing Kennedy*, and the depiction of moral crisis such as in *The Butler* and *LBJ*. In other words, cinematic productions and directors allow to reinforce the Kennedy myth as this part shall demonstrate.

### 1) National Security Cinema or Creating a Threat

Productions display crisis, mostly in order to call for heroism and to praise the president who brings peace back to the country and the world thanks to the traits that make him a hero, compared to the rest of the population. In other words, as Franco puts it:

When faced with a crisis, it is the hero's ability to act differently than many of her companions [...] that in part defines her actions as heroic. One of the simplest definitions of a 'crisis' [...] can be summarized as follows: A crisis is an event or occasion in which things that are widely valued by human social systems are deeply threatened in an unanticipated manner, and the demand for resources to address the catastrophic even outstrips available capacity.<sup>148</sup>

Because they are historical films, many productions featuring JFK as a character focus on the management of the Cuban crisis, the USSR and more generally, relations with the enemy: an important theme of JFK's presidency. In productions, this particular theme can be identified as “National Security Cinema”<sup>149</sup> and it derives from the “Production of Strategy”<sup>150</sup> according to scholar Jean-Michel Valantin.

In National Security Cinema, the country is seen as a Utopia, a “city upon a hill” in Valantin's words, confronted to danger, threatened by enemy forces that do not match with the American model and thus produce fear. The threat can take many forms such as another country (in American productions: the USSR and Middle-East particularly, or Germany, Japan, and Vietnam in American war films), terrorists, supernatural forces or even extra terrestrial individuals. In that respect, threats to the United States can be perceived as villains according to Character Theory (CT). CT defines characters such as heroes, villains and victims based on their traditional features. It uses two basic dimensions to differentiate

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<sup>148</sup> Franco paraphrasing Quarantelli, 1985 in Allison, Scott T., George R. Goethals, and Roderick M. Kramer, eds. *Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership*. Taylor & Francis, 2017: 187-188

<sup>149</sup> Valantin, Jean-Michel. *Hollywood, the Pentagon and Washington*. Anthem Press, 2005 : ix

<sup>150</sup> *Idem*

characters: “moral quality as shown through good or bad intentions and actions”<sup>151</sup> and “power, separating those who are relatively weak or ineffectual from those who can get things done.”<sup>152</sup> Heroes are defined, of course, as powerful and well-intentioned, and they perform righteous actions. On the other hand, anti-heroes, or villains, are powerful as well, but lack the goodness of heroes. Indeed, National Security Cinema strategically deploys villains characterized as “malevolent and strong enough to menace others, lending some urgency to stopping them. [...]. To present villains as both powerful and secretive is to heighten the urgency. We construct villains for the powerful emotions they inspire in audiences who fear and hate them.”<sup>153</sup> The presence of evil villains, and the contrast revealed by the interactions between heroes and villains allow to reinforce the qualities of the hero, and the innocence and distress of the victims (citizens of the US and the world in the cases studied for this analysis.) In National Security Cinema films, Kennedy is thus pictured as a hero thanks to his actions and his moral integrity in opposition to the villains’.

The most recurrent villain portrayed in films about JFK is embodied by the Soviets. Because of the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962, the term “Soviets” in American productions is often associated with nuclear weapons and fear. In *Thirteen Days*, which entirely deals with the Cuban Crisis, the sense of fear and threat is created as soon as the first shot of the film appears: a nuclear missile exploding into a mushroom cloud, and indeed: “The opening of the film itself, which shows a series of nuclear explosions, dramatizes the stakes in the missile crisis. The intent is to show what could occur if Kennedy (and, by implication, Khrushchev) got it wrong.”<sup>154</sup> As American films follow the 13 days of the Cuban Crisis from the point of view of the American side, the Soviets are obviously portrayed as aggressive and unreliable: “How could Khrushchev do that?’ ‘Last night he sent you a cable saying he'd pull those missiles out.’ ‘And now this... public announcement demanding we pull our missiles out of Turkey.’” [*Killing Kennedy*, 00:32:16] Henceforth, the Soviets’ acts are described as the “subject of the highest national urgency” [00:45:25] in *Thirteen Days*: they have no sense of goodness or rationality as they illegally introduced missiles on Cuba that, if launched, could kill millions of Americans up to Seattle, as stated in the film. The idea that the Soviets are the villains is reinforced by expressions employed to refer to the USSR: “those red bastards,” [*Thirteen Days*, 00:28:39] “the big red dog,” [*Thirteen Days*, 00:31:52] “The Soviet understands only one language: action. It respects only one word: force.” [*Thirteen*

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151 Bergstrand, Kelly, and James M. Jasper. “Villains, Victims, and Heroes in Character Theory and Affect Control Theory.” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 81, no. 3 (September 2018): 228–47: 230

152 *Idem*.

153 *Ibid.*: 231

154 White in Morgan, Iwan W., ed. *Presidents in the Movies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011: 141

Furthermore, in *Killing Kennedy*, the sense of fear is emphasized by the fact that no Soviet really appears on screen, only the weapons they install on Cuba are presented thanks to archive footage of TV news and pictures of the launching pads and missiles on the island. Even though the same technique is used in most of *Thirteen Days*, two important Soviet figures appear towards the end of the film: Alexander Feklisov, who is part of a private talk and a back channel between the USSR and the American Government, and Soviet Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Dobrynin, who discusses a secret deal with Robert Kennedy. The narrative role that both play is of great importance as they transmit information to Khrushchev that allows to resolve the conflict, yet, both are portrayed as repulsive, cold and strongminded individuals. Indeed, Feklisov's black turtleneck makes him mysterious and his smirks provoke distrust, and Dobrynin's Russian accent and closed face make him the embodiment of the Soviet Union.

Finally, elements such as the presence of archive footage of people and pupils rehearsing and protecting themselves in case of nuclear attack intensifies the sense of emergency, and thus push the public to fear the unknown and threatening Soviets, as White suggests.<sup>155</sup>

Another people is recognized as a threat in *PT-109*: the Japanese. Indeed, as a war production, the film deals with JFK's experience in the Pacific during the second World War. Indeed, JFK and his crew are not in a position of power: they have lost their boat and as a consequence, they have to swim from one island to the other to look for food, fresh water and rescue. On the other hand, the Japanese are the threat as they are portrayed in positions of power, patrolling their boats or bombarding the islands with their planes. Finally, they often appear at night, in dark colors so that their faces are barely visible, and their appearances are often accompanied by a menacing Japanese music.

Threat can also come from a single individual, as illustrated in *Killing Kennedy* by Lee Harvey Oswald. Oswald is pictured as a dangerous man in *Killing Kennedy* as he tried to abandon his American nationality in order to become a citizen of the Soviet Union. Because of this and even though he did not abandon his American citizenship in the end, he is being followed by FBI agents who suspect him of being a communist. The questions they ask him reinforce Oswald's identification with the communist regime and are part of the questions asked by the government during the Red Scare that took place in the 1950s. In similar fashion, Oswald is also perceived as a traitor as he blackmails Ambassador Snyder at the American

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155 White in Morgan, Iwan W., ed. *Presidents in the Movies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011: 140

ambassy office in Moscow: “I’ve told the Soviets that I know things. I had a very high-security clearance. I was a radar technician for the United States government. I am valuable.’ ‘You’d be a traitor.’ ‘I believe that what I’m doing is right. And now the Soviets will see that I’m serious. This will show them.’” [00:03:09] His traitor status is also reinforced by details such as his newspaper clipping stating “U.S. Marine Defects to Soviet Union,” [00:07:23] his participation to a Trade Union Dance in Minsk, and his being clearly referred to as a spy. Finally, because of alarming elements such as his leaving his pro-American mother, his pride for his gun (with which he wants to be photographed), his beating his wife, his fierce opposition to the invasion of Cuba, his attempt to assassinate General Edwin Walker, and finally his fascination for Kennedy, Oswald is gradually portrayed as an evil man who will predictably attempt to kill the president.

The last source of threat that can be identified in the National Security Cinema films under study, although it does not appear as such at first sight, is the Army. Indeed, threat can also come from within the country if opinions are not shared, as power is divided between the White House, Congress and the Pentagon. Though it depends on the perspective, conflicts, when coming from the inside, often originate from the military as Valantin argues, and the military is often pictured as “dangerous anti-Soviet fanatics who require very close control”<sup>156</sup> in films dealing with American-Soviet relationships. Indeed, this can be illustrated by the statements they make in *Killing Kennedy*, and by their obsession for strikes against the Soviets and Cuba in the film: “It is imperative that the United States provide air support,” [00:11:18] “I say we launch a full-scale attack and invasion. B-52s out of Barksdale.’ ‘What, and start a war with Russia? You really want to risk an all-out nuclear war?’ ‘In a matter of days, those missiles will be operational. We have to act.’” [00:27:07] or “We need to act, and we need to act now.” [00:11:43]

Moreover, the army also displays an active resentment against Kennedy in *Thirteen Days*, as Valantin suggests as well.<sup>157</sup> Because they think “Let’s hope appeasement doesn’t run in the family. I feel weakness does,” [00:23:31] the Joint Chiefs decide to launch operations without consulting the president and thus disobey the executive orders and follow their own rules. Because they want action rather than a deal, they are putting the country in danger, and signal that the United States wants to escalate by firing fake bombs near one of the Soviet ships during the Cuban blockade. Kennedy thus has to reassert his authority over the army: “I must suffer from amnesia. I am the authority, I am the commander in chief of the US and I say when we go to war.” [01:20:49] In similar fashion, the army is pictured as having tricked

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156 Valantin, Jean-Michel. *Hollywood, the Pentagon and Washington*. Anthem Press, 2005: 4

157 *Idem*.

JFK into invading Cuba during the events of the Bay of Pigs in *Killing Kennedy*: “You people are so anxious to cover your own asses, all you want to do is dump this on the President,” [00:13:44] causing the president to think that he was “stupid” [00:12:46] to believe them, and “too young, too soft. [...] I’m supposed to be the most powerful man in the world and I... I’m omnipotent.” [00:12:52]

As a consequence of these different and numerous “hero against villain” oppositions, Kennedy’s heroic depiction is made easier in these films thanks to the devices of National Security Cinema. In films dealing with American-Soviet relationships, whereas the Soviets are sneaky, quarrel-picking and bullying, on the contrary, Kennedy embodies the millions of Americans that could lose their lives and their beloved ones in the conflict. His worrying for his family can be illustrated by the shots in which he is pictured disturbed by news of the Bay of Pigs while playing with his family in *Killing Kennedy*. [00:10:12] Indeed, the shaky, grainy and vintage shots, which are supposed to resemble archive footage, include close-up shots in JFK and Jackie’s faces, displaying their large smiles on screen while playing with their children in a garden. Yet, as soon as O’Donnell arrives to announce that there is a “major problem in Cuba,” [00:10:37] the shots are not grainy anymore and the happy faces disappear. The scene ends on a full shot of Kennedy leaving in the background, whereas Jackie and the children are left on the ground, puzzled, in the foreground. In similar fashion, other scenes suggest his concerned feelings: Kennedy can be seen looking worryingly at his family playing outside the White House through the window of the Oval Office in *Thirteen days*. This scene appears to be particularly important as the black and white medium shot of Kennedy looking through the window recalls first a picture of the the president and his brother in the Oval office, (although on this picture by Arthur B. Rickerby, the one standing by the window is Bobby Kennedy) but also a more famous picture of the president entitled “The Loneliest Job” which was taken in 1961 by George Tames.





Figure 7: Top left: Arthur B. Rickey's shot, Top right: George Tames' shot, Bottom: screenshot from *Thirteen Days*. Donaldson, Roger. *Thirteen Days*. 2000.

Finally, JFK's conversation on the phone with Jackie in *Killing Kennedy*, during which he states that he “just wanted to hear [her] voice” [00:26:18] and that he wants “[her] to come back to the White House” [00:26:28] proves his deep feelings. As a family man, JFK worries for his family and wants them close to him, and at the same time, he also worries for the whole country, as he is the father of the nation: “The implication is that concern about his family and the families of others is what will be uppermost in his mind during the missile crisis, not any sort of macho need to triumph at all costs over his Russian adversaries.”<sup>158</sup>

As far as Oswald is concerned, because *Killing Kennedy* nearly only focuses on Oswald's negative traits and actions, the public is made to perceive Oswald as an utterly negative man, contrary to Kennedy who gradually becomes a better president, as he learned a lesson after the Bay of Pigs events, and a better husband, as he is less adulterous and gets closer to Jackie throughout the film, while Oswald is beating and distancing himself from his wife.

As for the army, after being tricked, Kennedy assumes his role of leader in *Killing Kennedy* and takes responsibility for the Bay of Pigs events and states that “there's an old saying that victory has a thousand fathers, but defeat is an orphan. The responsibility's mine. I am the president.” [00:14:06] As a consequence of the lesson that he learned after the Bay of

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<sup>158</sup> White in Morgan, Iwan W., ed. *Presidents in the Movies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011: 141

Pigs, the president appears as more strongminded during the Cuban crisis in *Thirteen Days* and *Killing Kennedy*. Indeed, instead of listening to the Joint Chiefs and the Army and escalate the Cuban crisis into a “third world war,” he wisely chooses to respect international rules through the United Nations and avoid invasion or conflict, as illustrated in *Thirteen Days*. By doing so, he appears as a rational man who protects the nation by opposing military actions, as he thinks about the consequences first. According to White in Morgan: “In this way JFK is seen as both strong in character (for being able to stand up to the generals) and progressive in outlook (his opposition to the military implies ethical concerns about the use of force).”<sup>159</sup> Just when the public is pictured demonstrating in front of the White House for a deal, Kennedy introduces the same idea to resolve the conflict in *Thirteen Days*. Although it is through back channels, the form of non-violent pressure through communication appears in adequacy with the public opinion, reinforcing once again the relation between the hero and the victims, and at the same time here, his followers. On the other hand, the villain, here the army, is constrained to abandon its original purpose. The threat was made even greater as the conflict was international, making the villains more evil and the hero more worthy as he did not follow the easy path but the right one: “While a hero could make an excellent villain, he does not become that villain. His commitment to doing the right thing is always a motivating factor behind his actions.”<sup>160</sup> This representation in films thus coincides with the image that JFK and his government shared with the public in the 1960s: a pragmatic, moral and rational man in times of conflict. Yet, conflict was not only present on the international scene in the 1960s, as legislative battles were taking place at home as well; and the depiction of the fight for Civil Rights in the films selected for this corpus also contribute to the idealization of JFK, as this paper shall next demonstrate.

## **2)Defender of persecuted groups**

Another type of crisis enables directors to display Kennedy's heroic traits: the moral crisis. Indeed, JFK became president in 1961, that is to say, in the middle of a violent fight for Civil rights for African Americans, and his legislative actions are depicted in productions, thus enhancing his character, as this paper shall examine.

After decades of slavery and segregation afterwards, events such as the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision of 1954, Rosa Parks' refusal to give her seat to a white man in a Montgomery bus in December 1955, and the Montgomery bus boycott that followed until December 1956, manifested the first signs of change for African Americans of

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<sup>159</sup> White in Morgan, Iwan W., ed. *Presidents in the Movies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011: 141

<sup>160</sup> Davie, Gavin. “The Hero Soldier: Portrayals of Soldiers in War Films,” 2011: 9

the 20<sup>th</sup> century, who were supposed to be free and able to fully enjoy their rights since the end of the civil war through the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> amendments. Indeed, because of his decisions in the process of equality (represented most importantly by his June 11<sup>th</sup> 1963 speech, asking Congress to put an end to segregation and violence. Yet, it also seems important to mention a few other elements such as the creation of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs among others and the support he offered to Martin Luther King Jr. after his arrest.) Kennedy was perceived as a champion of Civil rights in the 1960s and he embodied change. He can thus be considered as a “Stand-off” hero as he confronted a controversial crisis for the time:

While good leaders typically try to resolve conflict and allow for 'smoothness' in social relationships, heroic leaders also know when to dig their heels in to address an underlying, often under-recognized, or deliberately hidden crisis. Some issues need to come to a head in order to be resolved clearly and decisively, and sometimes stand-offs can also be used to create important compromise that ultimately move groups and even nations forward in ways that might not be achievable without putting a spotlight on the unspoken crisis.<sup>161</sup>

Accordingly, as he vindicated African Americans' rights, Kennedy made his own decisions no matter what his cabinet and part of the population thought at the time, but he also risked his 1964 reelection by defending equality. By doing so, he proved his heroism through morality and integrity and became a rallying point for African Americans:

According to Schlenker, Weigold and Schlenker (2008), heroes [...] point out that 'doing the right thing is a basis for acts of heroism' and, like other researchers, underscore the prevalent risk theme because heroism 'often involves personal sacrifice' (Schlenker et al. 2008, p. 323). Furthermore, they indicate that the moral aspect of heroism often involves making not only the right decision but also a tough decision.<sup>162</sup>

JFK thus moved the nation forward through Johnson, his successor after his death, who completed Kennedy's projects mainly with the 1964 Civil rights Act, the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and the 1968 Housing and Urban Development Act. JFK's death created a bond with African Americans as illustrated by the main character Cecil Gaines crying after receiving the news of Kennedy's death in *The Butler*. As he was recognized as a real champion of Civil Rights, films about Kennedy's presidency depicting the moral crisis mostly picture him as a moral and altruistic man, who did what was right, rather than what was good for his image.

*The Butler* manages to emphasize the longevity of the fight for Civil rights for African Americans, as it starts in 1926 in a cotton plantation in Georgia and ends with Barack

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161 Franco in Allison, Scott T., George R. Goethals, and Roderick M. Kramer, eds. *Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership*. Taylor & Francis, 2017: 194

162 Davie, Gavin. “The Hero Soldier: Portrayals of Soldiers in War Films,” 2011: 6-7, quoting Schlenker, Weigold and Schlenker, 2008

Obama's presidential election in 2008. Elements such as bodies hanging in the streets after being lynched in *The Butler* contribute to reinforce racial tensions, but they also emphasize the violence of racial inequality. The use of archive footage throughout both films under study point to their veracity. They stress the importance and urgency of action in a context of violence: "In another current trouble spot: Plaquemine, Louisiana. Mounted state troopers and police used tear gas and high-pressure water hoses in Plaquemine last night to break up a Civil rights demonstration that almost erupted into a race riot," [*LBJ*, 00:42:31] "The cause of integration is a national issue." [*LBJ*, 00:31:40]

As demonstrated earlier on in this analysis, heroes need villains, and their different behaviors allow to differentiate them. Yet, although Vice-President Nixon obviously appears as a villain in *The Butler* because of his utterly negative behavior and statements: referring to Kennedy as "that Kennedy boy" [00:34:55] and "that spoiled son of a bitch fuck," [00:34:58] and putting pressure on the White House staff, Kennedy does not obviously appear as an entirely good hero at the beginning of the film, as he is not dedicated to Civil rights. Indeed, this position showed in the film transcribes Kennedy's ideology at the beginning of his presidency, and which is indeed put into words in the film: "Bobby told the President that they shouldn't be worried about the Negro sit-ins. Polls showed the US does not support Civil rights." [00:50:44] Yet, this more realistic depiction will be dealt with in the last chapter of this paper. In *LBJ* however, although Lyndon B. Johnson is the main character, Kennedy is presented as the one who built the basis of Johnson's actions on Civil rights. Indeed, the first half of the movie suggests a gap between Kennedy and Johnson: Kennedy has the behavior of a charismatic and moral hero, whereas Johnson is quite different. Kennedy is relatively appreciated by people, as illustrated by his easy relationship with the public as seen earlier on. He is depicted as respectable, calm and even smooth, as Johnson mentions: "I've never seen a politician look that good on TV." [00:11:33] In opposition, LBJ is brusque and abrupt when he makes a racist joke while an African American waiter takes his dishes away: "What did Abe Lincoln say after he woke up from a three-day drunk?" 'I don't know.' 'I freed the what?'" [00:28:24] Furthermore, Johnson is perceived as a liar in *LBJ*, notably by Bobby Kennedy, as he lies about his intention of running for president, saying: "I have zero intention of running for president" [00:08:50] yet running for presidency no matter what. Eventually, he is once again compared to Kennedy during the campaign: while Kennedy is said to campaign from one state to another, and to win, Johnson on the contrary wants the presidency "hand[ed] to him." [00:10:39] To a certain extent, Johnson can be identified as a caricature of the lazy and racist South, whereas Kennedy represents the distinguished and equal North. In other words,

the portraits of both men at the beginning of the film are made to depict Kennedy as a hero, and Johnson as a villain, making the audience side with Kennedy. Notwithstanding, Johnson is in fact a hero in the making, as he will do his best to have Kennedy's decisions and projects respected and implemented.

Kennedy's strength of mind is also emphasized in *LBJ*. Indeed, he is pictured making his own decision when it comes to choosing his vice-president and even though the choice is part of a strategy: "If we wanna win, we need Johnson," [00:18:35] Kennedy defends Johnson when Bobby and Kenny O'Donnell mock him: "Last month, Johnson was the most powerful Democrat in all of Washington. Now he answers to my kid brother and his Harvard roommate. Nobody's gonna do anything to embarrass my vice-president." [00:23:54] Yet, he does not hesitate to face his vice-president either when it comes to the tackling of the issue of the Civil rights bill, in which Johnson does not believe: "The president doesn't have a Civil rights law. He has a Civil rights bill." [00:22:14] Yet, after a surge of violence in the streets in June 1963, and after the issue has been blocked in Congress, Kennedy suggests that he needs to act, no matter if his demand takes the form of a bill or a law: "Kenny... can we get this bill passed?' 'I don't know, sir. It's not gonna be easy.' 'Well, we don't do these things because they're easy. We do them because they're hard.'" [00:44:36] Just after this scene, JFK bypasses Johnson, who suggested that it was not the right time to ask Congress for action, based on his knowledge of Congress, as he is pictured delivering his June 11<sup>th</sup> 1963 speech on Civil rights: "Next week, I shall ask the Congress of the United States to act to make a commitment it has not fully made in this century to the proposition that race has no place in American life or law." [00:48:08]

Nonetheless, the depiction of the president as reluctant to act in *The Butler* allows to draw attention to the crisis. Indeed, Kennedy's first appearance is soft and calm and therefore not in harmony with the state that the country is in. In similar fashion, the scene in which Cecil is pictured reading a children's book to Caroline, Kennedy's daughter, is interspersed by images of the freedom riders being harassed and violently persecuted by the Klu Klux Klan. Yet, this can be interpreted as a sign of hope for the future: the new president shall bring peace. Indeed, Kennedy appears as an equal to the staff within the White House. This can be illustrated by the scene in which the Kennedy family arrives to the White House to meet the staff. [00:47:52] In this scene, whereas the new president is shaking hands with each member of the staff, most of the medium shots are on the faces of the staff members, except for two exceptions showing the president's face in over-the-shoulder shots of the staff. In similar fashion, the special links he shares with Cecil support the image of a moral, altruistic and

equal man. Their relationship can be illustrated by the scene in which Cecil helps the president to get up from the ground, on which he is lying, to take his back pills. [00:59:43] This brief moment, transcribed through a rare but significant top shot, allows to see both men holding tight to one another's hand. As it allows to see the president lying flat on the ground, the shot may also suggest Cecil's superior health, as he is the one standing, pointing to the futility of social status regarding health.



Figure 8: screenshot from *The Butler*. Daniels, Lee. *The Butler*. 2013.

Gradually, Kennedy is pictured worrying for African Americans, stating: “I don't know what country I'm looking at” [00:57:03] and “My brother says these kids have changed his heart... they've changed mine too.” [01:00:51]

In *LBJ* on the other hand, Kennedy's link to African Americans and to the cause of equality is suggested from the very beginning and throughout the film. He is said to appeal to African Americans: “But the Kennedy did get elected by appealing to the colored man,” [00:30:05] and while driving through Dallas on November 22<sup>nd</sup> 1963, part of the crowd behind him is composed of African Americans, cheering. Furthermore, as *LBJ* depicts important moments of JFK's legislative fight for equality, the film features dialogues and scenes that suggest Kennedy's involvement. Among them, the creation of the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity, or Executive Order 10925, created on March 6<sup>th</sup> 1961. Although this committee is said to be created to give Johnson missions that would keep him distant from the government and its decisions in the film, it nonetheless serves “to ensure all government agencies and contractors exercise fair hiring practices with regards to race. It's his first major initiative in Civil rights,” [00:24:54] as Kennedy states, and its actions must be visible: “I need this committee to show a strong record right from the start. Something that demonstrates concrete changes on Civil rights. We can't do that if we're giving a huge contract to a discriminatory plant.” [00:37:05]

Eventually, in both films, Kennedy appears to be the champion of Civil rights, who builds the basis for change, that will be conducted into actions – by LBJ after his death, as put into words by Johnson himself in the film *LBJ*, “John Kennedy gave people hope. Now we are gonna give them results.” [01:31:16] JFK's depiction and positions in the struggle for Civil rights in the films under study meet with the heroic traits he showed in life, and that this analysis described earlier. His integrity can be said to have paved the way for a more hopeful future – that is embodied by Barack Obama, as *The Butler* suggests. It seems important for this analysis to study the impact that those positive depictions had on viewers, in order to close the cycle of the thesis defended by this second part, which is that films mostly protect JFK by idealizing him.

## **IV) Impact**

This part shall point out how, as a consequence of his ideal and heroic depiction, films impact viewers and Kennedy's image is distorted in people's minds. Indeed, people expect to see John F. Kennedy as a hero, and films comfort them in their views. Yet reviews, which acknowledge how hard it is to render on screen an interpretation of JFK that lives up to the extraordinary man he was in life, also represent the first ambivalent elements. Indeed, they put the emphasis on the missing elements in films, notably in *Thirteen Days*, which lacks background on the origins of the Cuban Crisis. As a consequence, they highlight the first ambivalent elements which more or less stain Kennedy's portrait.

### **1) Expectations**

The fact that Kennedy's heroic traits are emphasized in films about him have an impact on the viewer, and certain feelings are expected from the public. The films mostly support his policy of control of his own image, and the mythical hero merges with the real life hero, and provoking feelings of admiration and idealization in people, but also strong emotions, as his death illustrated.

These emotions are triggered by certain elements in JFK's portraits in films that connect Kennedy to the public:

Emotional involvement is given by the different forms of perspectival appraisal of characters and their situations. It is also given by the huge number of emotion-triggering properties, among them especially bodily, mental, or social capabilities and disorders; beauty, disease and death; group membership, positions of power and status; egoistic or altruistic motives; prosocial or anti-social actions as well as

the emotional expressions of the characters themselves.<sup>163</sup>

This strategy can be identified in the films of this corpus as films made about Kennedy are first addressed to an American audience. They display an American president, very much liked by the American public, against Soviet or Japanese villains as seen in the National Security Cinema part of this analysis. Accordingly, American flags and landmarks can be found throughout the films, reinforcing the American pride of these productions. Furthermore, the shots showing the president either worried for his family, or playing with his children and cuddling with his wife reinforce the link between Kennedy and the public: he is a president, but also family man. In addition, Kennedy's personality also plays a role in the connection that these films create. Indeed, his modesty and calm temper during periods of crisis convey the image of a man who can be trusted. His smoothness with people put the ones surrounding him and the public at ease. Moreover, the music intensifies important moments in films, and the black and white shots, which are supposed to represent well-known photographs of moments of his presidency or famous speeches, connect the public with events and images that it already knows, which in turn creates a sense of comfort and confidence, as the public thus also already knows the outcome of the story. Eventually, films manage to use Kennedy's death to prove his connection with people. Indeed, after his death, grief is shared both by his relatives and cabinet, but also by the public as the films illustrate.

In turn, the impact of films on the public reinforces Kennedy's heroic portrait, according to Affect Control Theory (ACT). As this demonstration showed earlier on, characters such as heroes or villains are defined according to their traits, yet, "Affect control theory explains why characters resonate with audiences. ACT describes the processes through which cultural perceptions of identities, behaviors, settings, and other concepts affect people's thoughts, emotions, and actions."<sup>164</sup> The elements described above, connecting Kennedy to the public, illustrate how ACT is at work in the films under study. In that sense, the vision that people have of Kennedy in films is distorted by directing and setting tools in order to produce an emotional response from the public: "CT may have insight into which elements of appearance audiences react to most strongly, complementing ACT research on how emotional displays influence evaluations."<sup>165</sup> As a consequence, Kennedy first appears as utterly good, and the vision that the films spread may be Manichean: "Characters are caricatures, oversimplifications that exaggerate certain features of a player and ignore many of its

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163 Eder, Jens. "Understanding Characters." *Projections* 4, no. 1 (June 1, 2010): 16–40: 36

164 Bergstrand, Kelly, and James M. Jasper. "Villains, Victims, and Heroes in Character Theory and Affect Control Theory." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 81, no. 3 (September 2018): 228–47: 233, paraphrasing Heise 1979, 2007 ; MacKinnon and Heise 2010 ; Smith-Lovin 1979

165 *Ibid.*: 235, quoting Tsoudis and Smith-Lovin 1998



complexities. They essentialize. Character workers exaggerate their heroes' goodness and their opponents' viciousness."<sup>166</sup>

Accordingly, it seems impossible at first to perceive a hero as a villain, an element which, once again, contributes to the building of Kennedy's heroic portrait: "When there is a mismatch between what we expect and what we see, this produces 'deflection': people are motivated to maintain meanings in their world, and when such meanings are disconfirmed, this produces uncomfortable tension or stress that motivates action to restore the meanings."<sup>167</sup> 'Deflection' could be replaced by the term 'ambivalence' in this quote, as reactions to ambivalence correspond to reactions to deflection, as seen in the introduction of this paper. Deflection is even more relevant in films displaying presidents, as they represent the nation, but also order and pride. As ACT illustrates, it seems possible to say that films produce change: they change the way people see history and here, Kennedy, and they thus contribute to the writing of history and this is the principle of prosthetic memory, as seen earlier on. Yet, as perception and messages in films are complex, Kennedy's depictions, although mostly heroic might have played a role in the triggering of the current revisionist movement that seeks to balance the image of the 35<sup>th</sup> president and challenge beliefs. Indeed, what this analysis shall demonstrate is that, even though Kennedy was the embodiment of the hero in the films under study and in life, his thus idealized image can be deconstructed. All in all, Kennedy's portrait is less Manichean than it appears, and ACT is subverted. JFK's depiction in films displays both traits attributed to heroes and traits attributed to villains, and as it produces deflection and admiration at the same time, it is thus ambivalent.

## 2) Reception

A final element contributes to the building of JFK's heroic portrait: reviews. Indeed, most reviews of the films under study point out the incapacity of actors to embody the real Kennedy (except for *The Butler*, but Kennedy only appears for a short time in the film, and *Thirteen Days*), strengthening his unique and unattainable portrait.

Reviews mention the tradition of "unconvincing" actors "missing" characteristics of the real Kennedy: "Yet, and despite a vague resemblance, Kennedy escapes him — making Lowe just the latest in a long line of actors similarly denied. [...] But for now the Kennedy charisma remains inimitable and non-transferable,"<sup>168</sup> "the quicksilver core of Kennedy's

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166 Bergstrand, Kelly, and James M. Jasper. "Villains, Victims, and Heroes in Character Theory and Affect Control Theory." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 81, no. 3 (September 2018): 228–47: 232

167 *Ibid.*: 233

168 Lloyd, Robert. "Review: 'Killing Kennedy' Is Not the Stuff of Legend." *Los Angeles Times*, November 8, 2013, sec. Television

character stay stubbornly elusive,”<sup>169</sup> “Buttressed by a sly, low-key performance by Jeffrey Donovan as JFK,”<sup>170</sup> “PT 109 might have advanced the cult of personality if Robertson seemed at all like Kennedy; since he does not, it is no worse than boring.”<sup>171</sup> On the other hand, other critics praised James Marsden's and Bruce Greenwood's interpretations of Kennedy, in *The Butler* and *Thirteen Days* respectively: “James Marsden is a high-minded and uxorious Kennedy,”<sup>172</sup> “Bruce Greenwood delivers a compelling and movingly human performance as President Kennedy,”<sup>173</sup> and finally “The praise was particularly pronounced for the performances of Greenwood and Culp, especially the former. Mick LaSalle, for example, said that his portrayal of JFK was 'the best thing in the movie.'”<sup>174</sup>

The same impression is conveyed by the comments on the quality of these films in reviews. Indeed, the reception is mixed, pointing out the “checklist drama” character of *Killing Kennedy*, which promotes the legend after all. *LBJ* is said to be entertaining but conventional. In similar fashion, *PT-109* is referred to as the usual war movie, promoting JFK in all ways, and “lacking romantic interest.”<sup>175</sup> Eventually, *Thirteen Days* was relatively well received, although its promotion of JFK is *cliché*, relying on well-worn cinematic devices distracting the viewer according to most critics.

Yet, what is interesting to note in reviews is the fact that critics also put an emphasis on elements that are not heroic in films such as JFK's extramarital affairs: “There’s a scene where JFK is skinny dipping in the White House pool with other women and the Secret Service tells Jackie the pool is closed, though she can hear the squeals of trollops with her husband,”<sup>176</sup> “we get a good gander at him splashing around in the White House pool with a couple of naked secretaries,”<sup>177</sup> and “Knowing what we now know about JFK's affection for extramarital pleasures, O'Donnell's family is a necessary substitute for a film that wants desperately to restore calm by restoring the protecting father amidst his innocent children and grateful wife.”<sup>178</sup>

Eventually, some critics also underline the fact that some events of history are missing

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169 Carson, Tom. “The GQ Review: Killing Kennedy Is Way More Fun Than the Zillion Other JFK Biopics.” *GQ*, November 8, 2013

170 Wloszczyna, Susan. “‘LBJ’: Woody Harrelson Delivers an Outsize Performance in a Film That Somehow Feels Small.” *Washington Post*, November 2, 2017

171 Hodgins, R. M. “Review of PT 109. Lt. (j. g.) J. F. K.” *Film Quarterly* 17, no. 1 (1963): 56–56: 56

172 Bradshaw, Peter. “The Butler – Review.” *The Guardian*, November 14, 2013, sec. Film

173 Cull, Nicholas J. “Review of Thirteen Days.” *The American Historical Review* 106, no. 4 (2001): 1511–12: 1511

174 White in Morgan, Iwan W., ed. *Presidents in the Movies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011: 138

175 Hodgins, R. M. “Review of PT 109. Lt. (j. g.) J. F. K.” *Film Quarterly* 17, no. 1 (1963): 56–56: 56

176 Johnson, Adrienne. “‘Killing Kennedy’ Makes You Feel Nothing.” *The News&Observer*, November 10, 2013

177 Carson, Tom. “The GQ Review: Killing Kennedy Is Way More Fun Than the Zillion Other JFK Biopics.” *GQ*, November 8, 2013

178 Simon, Art. “Review of Thirteen Days.” *Cinéaste* 26, no. 2 (2001): 43–44: 44

in the films under study, as they would stain the heroic and coherent portrait of JFK. Indeed, the 1961 Vienna summit, during which JFK met with Nikita Khrushchev is not shown in any of the films under study: “There's something endearing about a Kennedy docudrama that can't make room for his fateful 1961 summit meeting with Nikita Khrushchev in Vienna—having sized up JFK as a weakling, the Soviet premier concluded he could place missiles in Cuba with impunity [...],”<sup>179</sup> or “Unmentionned in the backstory is the meeting between JFK and Nikita Khrushchev in Vienna in 1961, when the Soviet leader, wrongly, sized up the new president as a pampered rich boy who might be easily rolled in Berlin and the Caribbean.”<sup>180</sup> In addition, the war against Castro that the Kennedy administration had started as soon as its first year in office is not mentioned either, nor are the missiles that the United States placed in Turkey, in order not to present the US as responsible for anything:

The Bay of Pigs invasion represents a blunder to overcome rather than a possible explanation for Cuban actions. Likewise, the depth of RFK's efforts to remove Castro, [...] gets elided, further eclipsing the context in which the missile crisis took place. As Gary Wills has pointed out, to an American public uninformed about their government's secret war on Castro, the location of Russian missiles on Cuban soil appeared sudden and unprovoked [...] A fuller context for the missile crisis is just not available to the chosen form of *Thirteen Days*.<sup>181</sup>

The Vietnam war, although an important aspect of Kennedy's presidency as well, as he started to send troops to Vietnam, and which later cost Johnson his political career, is not pictured either. This is pointed out by critics such as Wloszczyna: “Given the recent sharpening of racial tensions and violence, it's easy to imagine why a Hollywood liberal like Reiner would focus on that part of Johnson's legacy — rather than, say, Johnson's escalation of the Vietnam War, which would prove to be LBJ's downfall.”<sup>182</sup>

Moreover, JFK's commitment to Civil rights is presented as concrete and even flatters him in *The Butler*: “So Gaines has to bear an eye-catching fictionalised burden of very real historical issues, a burden that his animatronic employers cannot fail to notice, allowing them tacitly to claim a personal interest in Civil rights, which is extremely flattering, especially to John F Kennedy,”<sup>183</sup> when in fact, JFK only engaged late in his presidency on the fight for equality, and for calculated reasons, as this analysis shall later demonstrate.

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179 Carson, Tom. “The GQ Review: Killing Kennedy Is Way More Fun Than the Zillion Other JFK Biopics.” *GQ*, November 8, 2013

180 Doherty, Thomas. “Review of *Thirteen Days*.” *The Journal of American History* 88, no. 3 (2001): 1211–13: 1212

181 Simon, Art. “Review of *Thirteen Days*.” *Cinéaste* 26, no. 2 (2001): 43–44. Accessed March 22, 2020: 44

182 Wloszczyna, Susan. “‘LBJ’: Woody Harrelson Delivers an Outsize Performance in a Film That Somehow Feels Small.” *Washington Post*, November 2, 2017

183 Bradshaw, Peter. “*The Butler* – Review.” *The Guardian*, November 14, 2013, sec. Film

Eventually, one last element that reviews point out as missing from films, and indispensable for a fuller understanding of the context is Curtis LeMay's engagement in the air strikes during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Indeed: "There is no evidence that [General Curtis LeMay] attempted to trick Kennedy into war during the Cuban missile crisis. LeMay and the other hawks certainly recommended air strikes, but the picture of their maneuvering at climactic moments of *Thirteen Days* owes more to the world of contemporaneous fictions."<sup>184</sup> All these elements which, if featured in films would have blemished Kennedy's image, will be dealt with in the third part of this analysis, addressing the deconstruction of JFK's ideal portrait.

All in all, as the second part of this paper demonstrated, JFK managed to control his image throughout his life, in order to keep it clean and convey the idea of himself as a great president and a perfect father and family man. With the portrait that he created himself, he inspired directors to produce films that align themselves with and even reinforce the ideal image he produced. These films, in turn, contributed to his idealization. It can be further argued that the techniques directors used in films allowed them to display the president in specific situations, such as crises, that reinforce his immaculate portrait, as he always manages to control the situation and save people. Moreover, directors also used other more personal narrative situations displaying his family, thus creating a bond between the president on screen and the public watching him, making the public identify with and feel intimate with the presidential family. As a consequence, films thus close the cycle by relying on the public, which will in turn perpetuate the spreading of Kennedy's heroic portrait, based on what it saw in films. Nonetheless, a first element distances itself from the heroic portrait of JFK, and allows to see through the cinematic devices used in films and reveal new characteristics of JFK: the reviews. Even though reviews acknowledge that it is nearly impossible for actors to render an interpretation of JFK that lives up to the charismatic being that he was in life, they also emphasize the negative elements of his depictions in films, and the missing elements that would produce an even more negative image. Those negative and missing elements, which started to emerge around the 1980s were brought to the public's attention by scholars, as Kennedy's papers gradually became available. As a consequence, these revisions started to be featured in films dealing with the president's life. Although JFK first appears as an ideal man and a hero, new productions gradually tackle his misbehaviors. Indeed, whereas some controversies are only alluded to in films, others have become recurrent themes in productions, as the last part of this analysis shall demonstrate.

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<sup>184</sup> Cull, Nicholas J. "Review of *Thirteen Days*." *The American Historical Review* 106, no. 4 (2001): 1511–12: 1511

**Part 3: Deconstruction:**  
**John Foolhardy Kennedy**

After his death, Kennedy's image did not cease to shine. Indeed, a few weeks after Kennedy's assassination, *Life* magazine journalist Theodore H. White visited Jackie Kennedy in Hyannis Port in Cape Cod, Massachusetts, where the Kennedy family owned several mansions, in order to share Jackie's feelings with the country and the world in an epilogue for the December 6<sup>th</sup> 1963 edition of *Life* Magazine. This epilogue contributed to forge the Camelot myth surrounding Kennedy and his family as it was edited by Jackie.

Indeed, as mentioned earlier in this analysis, after JFK's death, Jackie told Theodore H. White that Kennedy loved to listen to a record from the musical *Camelot* before he went to bed, and that the lyrics “Don't let it be forgot, that once there was a spot, for one brief shining moment, that was known as Camelot” encompassed the Kennedy administration in a way. Jackie wanted to make sure that history would not forget her husband, and to do so, as Mark White explains:

At the end of the interview White quickly wrote the article, Jackie Kennedy edited it, and he phoned it in to his editors at *Life* magazine. When one of those editors suggested that the article made too much of the Camelot theme, Jackie Kennedy, who was in the room with White, shook her head to indicate that she wanted the Camelot theme to remain salient. 'I was her instrument in labeling the [Kennedy] myth', White ruefully acknowledged in later years.<sup>185</sup>

Although this particular moment only appears briefly at the end of *Killing Kennedy* [01:26:00] as far as the films from this corpus are concerned, the 2016 biopic about the first lady called *Jackie* features it in detail. [01:28:49] In fact, the film is a great example of Jackie's management of Kennedy's image after his death. By associating her husband with the Camelot legend, Jackie Kennedy consciously promoted an association between Kennedy and King Arthur. As a consequence, the Kennedy family was perceived as an American monarchy in the years following the president's death and this legacy still endures. JFK, who saved the world from a nuclear war, became a double of King Arthur. Both went on a quest for a better world in a shining armour, and JFK did it during a period of international but also domestic trouble and change. By doing so, as Mark White puts it:

Jackie Kennedy had ensured that future attempts (particularly by the American people) to interpret the Kennedy historical record dispassionately would be thwarted by the powerful mythology that now adorned JFK's reputation. With the collective sense of grief felt by millions of Americans in the wake of the assassination, it was inevitable that Kennedy would come to be viewed as a martyr, a fallen hero. But the infusing of that sense of tragedy with the Camelot mythology meant that it was even more the case than it would have otherwise been that millions of Americans simply accepted that Kennedy and his advisers, like King Arthur and the Knights of the Roundtable, had provided a remarkable,

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185 White, Mark. “Apparent Perfection: The Image of John F. Kennedy: Apparent Perfection.” *History* 98, no. 330 (April 2013): 226–46: 239

inspiring brand of leadership.<sup>186</sup>

As a consequence, in films, it seems that a checklist needs to be respected in order to star as Kennedy. All actors playing Kennedy in this corpus thus try to render the same physical and moral traits such as good looks and hair, large charming smiles, politeness, charisma, a great sense of humor, youth and dynamism, and the narratives also point to JFK's ability to take responsibilities, to lead a group, and to learn from his potential mistakes.



Figure 9: screenshots of the actors in the films of this corpus, showing the checklist of physical aspects that need to be respected in order to star as Kennedy. Daldry, Stephen. *The Crown, Season 2 Episode 8*. 2017. Daniels, Lee. *The Butler*. 2013. Donaldson, Roger. *Thirteen Days*. 2000. Martinson, Leslie H. *PT 109*. 1963. McCormick, Nelson. *Killing Kennedy*. 2013. Reiner, Rob. *LBJ*. 2017.

In addition to that, 29 years after Kennedy's assassination, the President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act of 1992 stated that all five million documents concerning the president's death, including the Warren commission's documents, already made public at the time, should be kept in a single collection held by the National Archives and Records Administration and made available to the public 25 years later. Today, most of the collection is accessible, yet, some documents remain secret and the president's death still arouses curiosity. Moreover, Jackie Kennedy and Bobby Kennedy also managed to burnish Kennedy's image thanks to the concealment of archives after JFK's death. They concealed Kennedy's personal misconducts, which could blemish the president's image, from the government<sup>187</sup> and the public, before Johnson came back from Texas after Kennedy's assassination, Robert Kennedy made sure that his brother's personal papers were kept safe. Indeed,

two weeks after the funeral, in his capacity as attorney general, [Bobby Kennedy] ruled that 'all correspondence [in JFK's papers] which deals with a personal medical matter should be regarded as a privileged communication, and should

186 White, Mark. "Apparent Perfection: The Image of John F. Kennedy: Apparent Perfection." *History* 98, no. 330 (April 2013): 226–46: 239

187 Paraphrasing Yuhas, Alan. "JFK: Declassified Documents Reveal a Cunning and Caggy President." *The Guardian*, October 7, 2015, sec. US news.

not go to Central Files. Later, when arranging the deed of gift of JFK's papers to the United States, Kennedy insisted on retaining control over papers pertaining to the 'personal, family and business affairs of the President.'<sup>188</sup>

Nonetheless, JFK's personal papers slowly became available after a few decades. Indeed, as the JFK Library and Museum website indicates, the John F. Kennedy Personal Papers Collection opened in 1969, yet some portions only opened in January 1977 and the medical records became available in December 2002. As a consequence, revisionist authors started to publish more nuanced biographies of Kennedy, beginning in the 1980s, and a new image emerged and encouraged the deconstruction of the hitherto crafted and burnished image of Kennedy. As Mark White points out: "By the 1980s and 1990s various writers were beginning to attack the rose-tinted view of John F. Kennedy that had prevailed since his assassination in 1963."<sup>189</sup>

This new wave of writers influenced the production of films dealing with JFK as films progressively began to deal with taboo elements, as the corpus chosen for this analysis illustrates. Indeed, *PT-109*, which came out in 1963, when Kennedy was still alive, offers an utterly positive portrait of the president. Released in 2000, *Thirteen Days* allows the public to see how JFK used back channels in order to resolve the Cuban Crisis. In 2013, *The Butler* revealed a first hint of JFK's poor health, and his lack of involvement in the fight for Civil Rights at the beginning of his presidency. That same year, *Killing Kennedy* also explicitly dealt with Kennedy's health, and his extra-marital affairs were added to the narrative. Finally, episode 8 from the second season of the series *The Crown*, which came out in 2017, presents the most negative depiction of the man. It nonetheless seems important to note that this choice may have also been influenced by the fact that the show is produced in the United Kingdom, and that it celebrates the royal family of England, which is humiliated by the Kennedys for most of this particular episode. Part three of this analysis shall thus analyze the negative elements, sometimes only alluded to but which create ambivalence, in order to deconstruct Kennedy's ideal image in films.

### **I)JFK as Commander in Chief: between Belligerence and Appeasement**

It can be argued that JFK's tactic as president can be considered a source of

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188 Hilty, James. *Robert Kennedy: Brother Protector*. Temple University Press, 2000.

189 White, Mark. "Apparent Perfection: The Image of John F. Kennedy: Apparent Perfection." *History* 98, no. 330 (April 2013): 226–46: 226



ambivalence. Indeed, in both foreign and domestic policies, he demonstrated a wish to appease some situations, but he was also eager to take actions and use force in others, sometimes changing his mind between the two options in short periods of time. As a consequence, some of the challenges he had to deal with while commander in chief are obscured or only alluded to in productions, as this part shall demonstrate thanks to four productions from this corpus: *Thirteen Days*, *Killing Kennedy*, *The Butler* and *LBJ*. These elements represent the first steps in the deconstruction of Kennedy's ideal portrait.

### 1)“That Vietnam thing”

When it comes to the elements in films about the 35<sup>th</sup> president that help to nuance his portrait, Vietnam appears as a major theme to mention. Indeed, most people were and still are not familiar with JFK's military involvement in the country during his presidency. In fact, Johnson was held accountable for the quagmire that Vietnam represents in US history, yet, even though around the end of his presidency, JFK planned to withdraw troops from Vietnam, his involvement in South East Asia started quite early. Inheriting a delicate situation from the Eisenhower administration in Vietnam in 1961, Kennedy authorized the sending of thousands of troops to Vietnam in the first year of his presidency in order to help Diem's government.<sup>190</sup>

By 1962, Kennedy's tactic was to impress North Vietnam by refusing any coalition government and by extension, to show that America would be strong in the conflict in order to have North Vietnam ask for a settlement so that American forces could leave the country. To do so, troops were needed and US involvement became greater than ever. As a consequence, as Dallek explains, the truth was hidden to the press, but by the end of the year, reports leaked to the press, revealing the situation in Vietnam. The leaks and thus US involvement are only mentioned in *Thirteen Days* as Kennedy discusses with O'Donnell two American planes that crashed in Vietnam, and which will only appear in the press on the next day: “ 'Look into that, uh...' 'That Vietnam thing.' 'What, the planes that went down?' 'Yeah.' 'It didn't make it before press time.' 'I haven't taken a look at the West Coast papers yet, but I doubt we'll see anything till tomorrow.' ” [00:09:20] The phrase “That Vietnam thing” seems to suggest to the audience that Kennedy is taking a certain distance with what is happening in Vietnam, which he was in a way as he did not want to get involved, yet, he continually sent troops to Vietnam at the time.

The following year, Kennedy remained on his skeptical position. Indeed, on the one hand, US military aid was needed in order for Vietnam to survive,<sup>191</sup> but on the other hand, he

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190 Dallek, Robert. *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917 - 1963*. Hachette UK, 2003: 354 and 445

191 *Ibid.*: 667

wished to withdraw American forces from the country<sup>192</sup>, but did not want to do so until he was sure to be reelected president in 1964. By the summer of 1963, Diem's reluctance to collaborate was conveyed by his persecutions on the Buddhist minority in the country, and it appeared that Diem and his brother were leading the country to its doom. As a consequence, a few months later, because he thought Diem incapable of winning the war and because he did not want to be involved in an unwinnable and foreign war, the National Security Action Memorandum No. 263 that Kennedy signed in October 1963 to withdraw a thousand U.S. military personnel from South Vietnam demonstrated the first sign of his withdrawal policy. But on November 1<sup>st</sup> 1963, army generals organized a coup which ousted Diem and his brother from the government before killing them. As Dallek explains, Kennedy wanted to make sure that everyone knew the United States was not involved, and at the same time, he thus hoped that the new government would help Vietnam to resolve the war, as the US would have to help otherwise. The coup nonetheless acted as a turning point in Kennedy's mind as it pushed him away from engagement in the country, and encouraged him to remove even more troops.

Yet, even though Kennedy wished to remove more troops from Vietnam around the end of his term, it seems important to note that “whatever he would have done in Vietnam, what Kennedy in fact did was to increase the number of US military officials there from around 800 to more than 16,000.”<sup>193</sup> Vietnam, as a consequence, is not a recurrent theme in films dealing with Kennedy's life or with Kennedy's presidency. Still, although it is only briefly mentioned in *Thirteen Days*, it would be wrong to argue that it is not dealt with in other films about JFK, as it is in fact alluded to in *JFK* and *Jackie*. Yet, in both films, Vietnam is, like many other subjects as previously seen, transformed into a positive aspect of Kennedy's presidency. Indeed, as White suggests, the president is celebrated in *JFK* because he planned to withdraw troops from Vietnam, yet, as he was thus perceived as too liberal and progressive, the government had him killed. No mention of his escalation in Vietnam appears in the film.<sup>194</sup> Furthermore, as White also suggests, “many cinemagoers came away from Oliver Stone's film with not only the suspicion that the American government had been complicit in Kennedy's murder but also the belief that the consequence of that act was a disastrous war that JFK would have avoided.”<sup>195</sup> This can be recognized as the direct

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192 *Ibid.*: 668

193 White, Mark. “Apparent Perfection: The Image of John F. Kennedy: Apparent Perfection.” *History* 98, no. 330 (April 2013): 226–46: 243

194 Paraphrasing White in Morgan, Iwan W., ed. *Presidents in the Movies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011: 136

195 White, Mark. “Apparent Perfection: The Image of John F. Kennedy: Apparent Perfection.” *History* 98, no. 330 (April 2013): 226–46: 243

consequence of the many mentions of Kennedy's plan to withdraw troops throughout the film, contrary to Johnson's decisions to head even more into the conflict.

In similar fashion, involvement in Vietnam is mentioned by Bobby Kennedy in the biopic about the First Lady entitled *Jackie*. After JFK's death, Bobby says to Jackie that the president's death is a waste, and that his administration could have done more. He cites domestic and foreign matters that could have had a better outcome, had the president lived, among which, the involvement in Vietnam. He can be heard saying: "We could have done so much. Civil Rights, the space program. Vietnam... We teed up Vietnam. Now Johnson gets to knock it down." [01:09:42]

It can be argued that, in the films from this corpus, Vietnam is only briefly mentioned because a further analysis of Kennedy's tactics in Vietnam could have tarnished his image, and because Vietnam represents the ambivalence that characterizes JFK as commander in chief, between belligerence and appeasement. To defend this idea, it can also be added that in the films in which the Vietnam war is mentioned, it therefore becomes part of the Camelot myth and the "what ifs" that contributed to build Kennedy's legacy, and the negative aspects of the war are not addressed. Nevertheless, Vietnam is not the only international conflict on which Kennedy's tactics as president were unclear. Indeed, Cuba represented another source of dilemma.

### **3)Cuban-American relations**

JFK's complicated relations with Cuba and by extension the mafia are marked again by ambivalence. In order to understand these relations, it seems important to explain links between notable mobsters such as Sam Giancana and Kennedy, and their involvement in the Bay of Pigs event. On top of that, the background of rivalries between the USSR and the United States over Cuba shall be pointed out in order to get a full understanding of the origins of the Cuban Crisis.

Indeed, Sam Giancana, the leader of the Chicago mob at the time of Kennedy's presidency, played an important role in JFK's election, as "Giancana knew Joseph Kennedy, [...] [who] asked Giancana for help in rounding up votes for his son's 1960 presidential campaign. Illinois was critically important in the 1960 campaign, and Giancana's ability to deliver votes in Chicago may well have clinched the presidency for John F. Kennedy."<sup>196</sup> Yet this was not the end of his intervention in the Kennedy administration and Giancana can be said to have played an important role in the Cuban-American relationships during Kennedy's time in office. Indeed, in 1960, Giancana, among other mob leaders, was contacted by the

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196 The Mob Museum. "June 1975: Chicago Mob Boss Sam Giancana Murdered." The Mob Museum

CIA in order to kill Castro. Although it is debated whether Kennedy knew about it or not, scholar Mark White advances an interesting point:

Beginning in 1960, the CIA made sustained efforts to kill Fidel Castro, initiatives that included hiring mafia bosses, such as Giancana, to organize an assassination. Hence the agency was in league with Giancana to murder Castro at the same time that Giancana was seeing a woman with whom Kennedy was sleeping. [...] Kennedy's affair with Campbell is relevant to this issue as she represented a nexus between the president and Giancana, a key figure in the CIA/Mob effort to kill Castro. It increases the chances that Kennedy did know about the assassination plots, especially given Campbell's claims that JFK had asked her to arrange meetings with Giancana and that she had passed on written messages between the two men. Khrushchev's decision to deploy missiles in Cuba was in part a response to America's antiCastro policy.<sup>197</sup>

Although Giancana and other mob leaders helped the Kennedy administration in its attempt to kill Castro, they did not manage to do so, and the Bay of Pigs invasion that followed was a total failure for Kennedy, as *Killing Kennedy* demonstrates. Indeed, thanks to archive images of news reports and of American prisoners on the Cuban beaches, and most importantly thanks to the commentator's voiceover, the utter failure of the invasion of the Bay of Pigs is revealed: "Beaches were not prepared by air or artillery bombardment. Those able to move beyond the beaches were trapped in swamp or high growth which was burned off, and the fire forced them out one by one into the hands of Castro's forces, prisoners of war, dupes of the United States government." [00:11:47] Castro was even waiting for the rebels on the beaches, as one of the Joint Chiefs mentions: " 'Right now, the rebels are pinned down here, on the beach. Castro himself is there.' 'Castro? On the beach?' 'In a T-34 tank,' " [00:11:04] and as the news coverage explains: "Castro knew the battle plan beforehand, prepared an ambush and assigned himself a prominent role in the battle." [00:10:55] In the film, the depiction of the few days during which the Bay of Pigs events happened also shows that the relations between Kennedy and the Joints Chiefs were ambivalent, if not hostile, as previously seen in this analysis. Indeed, the blame for JFK's belligerence and his lack of experience that led to the failure of the Bay of Pigs falls on the Joint Chiefs, as he "[was] told [that] the plan would work. You told me those men will be met by anti-Castro forces. And where are they? Are they there?" [00:11:28] As a consequence, in *Killing Kennedy*, although Kennedy was the commander in chief, and although leaks reveal his clear involvement in the TV news report shown in the film a little later on, the blame needs to fall on someone else: "And here on the beaches around the Bay of Pigs, the invasion floundered and the search for scapegoats began. The issue has been sharpened further by disclosure of the President's

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197 White in Morgan, Iwan W., ed. *Presidents in the Movies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011: 144

behind-the-scenes role.” [00:13:33] In similar fashion, Kenny blames the Joint Chiefs during the Cuban Crisis for the stain that the Bay of Pigs left on JFK's portrait in *Thirteen Days*: “This... This is a set-up. The Chiefs want to go in. They need to redeem themselves for the Bay of Pigs. They gotta go in this time. They got to do it right.” [00:56:10]

On top of that, in the films from this corpus, the only reference to Giancana, who helped the Kennedy administration in its enterprise to kill Castro, occurs in *Killing Kennedy*, when Bobby and John discuss the president's womanizing problem, and more precisely, Judith Campbell Exner. [00:22:01] Once again, a negative aspect of Kennedy's presidency, that is to say, the use of Giancana in the Castro assassination plot, is not mentioned, and this omission thus protects the president's portrait. What it mentioned about Giancana on the contrary is Bobby's investigation against him for his role as a mob leader: “Sam Giancana is a mobster. I'm aware of who Sam is. Jesus Christ Jack. I'm investigating Sam Giancana for racketeering!” [00:22:01] Indeed, once appointed attorney general, one of RFK's top priorities was to get rid of mobs: “one of President Kennedy's first steps when he took office was to appoint his brother, Robert Kennedy, attorney general, and one of Robert's priorities was going after the Mob.”<sup>198</sup> As far as *Thirteen Days* is concerned, as White points out<sup>199</sup>, in order for the film to be more complete, a certain background on Giancana would have been necessary, owing to the fact that the film revolves around the Cuban Missile Crisis and Cuban-American relationships. Nonetheless, once again, information appear to have been selected as to what would constitute the background of the films in order to polish Kennedy's image.

A year after the Bay of Pigs events, in 1962, Cuban-American relationships did not improve as the Cuban Crisis broke. Yet, this time, Kennedy managed to resolve the conflict in a peaceful manner. Nonetheless, this resolution is also a source of ambivalence in a way as it was not a total victory on Kennedy's part. Indeed, in order to understand the Cuban Crisis, it seems important to focus on its origins, which are obscured in *Thirteen Days* as they would otherwise stain Kennedy's utterly positive portrait in the film. “I wanna see limited military option” [*Killing Kennedy*, 00:27:28] and “It never was my intention to invade Cuba anyway until they put the missiles in there,” [*Thirteen Days*, 01:44:34] is what Kennedy can be heard telling his advisors in films, yet as White explains,

Examination of the roots of the crisis has induced some historians to conclude that Kennedy at the very least played a significant role in bringing it about. Clearly there would have been no missile crisis had Khrushchev not decided in the spring of 1962 to deploy nuclear missiles in Cuba. But a good many scholars now agree

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198 The Mob Museum. “June 1975: Chicago Mob Boss Sam Giancana Murdered.” The Mob Museum

199 White in Morgan, Iwan W., ed. *Presidents in the Movies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011: 143-144

that his missile ploy was in part a response to Kennedy's hostility toward Castro, manifested by the Bay of Pigs invasion of April 1961, Operation Mongoose, U.S. military maneuvers in the Caribbean, the ejection of Cuba from the Organization of American States, the establishment of a strict economic embargo on Cuba, and ongoing CIA attempts to assassinate Castro (which Kennedy probably endorsed and about which Khrushchev may have had an inkling). [...] In other words, had Kennedy not appeared so hostile to Cuba and hawkish on defense, it is unlikely that the Soviet leader would have felt the need to install the missiles in Cuba that were the trigger for the October 1962 crisis. Kennedy's handling of the Cuban issue, therefore, was something of a curate's egg—in other words, good only in parts. It earned high marks for his management of the missile crisis, low marks for his ill-considered policies prior to October 1962.<sup>200</sup>

On top of that, *Thirteen Days* shows that Kennedy has learned a lesson from the failure of the Bay of Pigs and emphasizes his wish to secure his country and the world by peaceful means. As a consequence, he is called “weak” by Dean Rusk for his reluctance to launch air strikes on Cuba: “Let's hope appeasement doesn't run in the family. I feel weakness does.” [00:23:31] This quotation, as mentioned earlier on, is also a reference to Kennedy's father, who advised Franklin Delano Roosevelt to find agreements with Nazi Germany instead of fighting during the war. The peak of tension in the film is reached on Friday, October 26<sup>th</sup> when Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara confronts Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Anderson, over the firing of starshells on Soviet ships. The confrontation between Kennedy, through McNamara, and the military, through Anderson, is encapsulated in the argument between both men:

'That ship was firing starshells. [...] Get out of our way, Mr. Secretary. The navy has been running blockades since the days of John Paul Jones.'

'I believe the President made it clear that there would be no firing on ships without his express permission.'

'With all due respect, Mr. Secretary, we were not firing on that ship.' 'What the hell was that?'

'Firing on a ship means attacking the ship. We were not attacking that ship. We were firing over it.'

'This was not the President's intention when he gave that order. What if the Soviets don't see the distention? What if they make the same mistake I just made? There will be no firing anything near any Soviet ships without my express permission, now is that understood, Admiral? Is it?'

'Yes, Sir.'

'And I will only issue such instructions when ordered to by the President.'  
[01:34:49]

On the one hand, the military is represented following old-fashioned directives, notably by quoting John Paul Jones, a naval hero of the American War of Independence. Furthermore, it is also portrayed as dangerous and unwilling to open to new strategies. On the other hand, Kennedy is criticized for his youth, which in fact pushes him to reflect upon the situation in

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200 White in Morgan, Iwan W., ed. *Presidents in the Movies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011: 139-140

order to avoid dramatic consequences, or in other words, in order to avoid a second Bay of Pigs. The film pictures Kennedy as a man looking for modern ways of communication, as McNamara suggests: “John Paul Jones... you don't understand a thing, do you, Admiral? This isn't a blockade. This is language, a new vocabulary the likes of which the world has never seen. This is President Kennedy communicating with Secretary Khrushchev.” [01:36:17] Yet in fact, in 1962, Kennedy was considerably torn between belligerence and appeasement, as

A somewhat rose-tinted view of JFK is also conveyed by the way his management of the missile crisis is either presented or concealed. For example, at the start of the crisis declassified documents and other sources make clear that Kennedy was strongly in favor of an air strike on the missile sites in Cuba. [...] If he had felt it necessary to make a snap decision, the evidence indicates he would have opted for a military strike, to which Khrushchev would have presumably retaliated in some way. [...] In *Thirteen Days*, however, the sense of JFK's early hawkishness is muted. [...] The evidence suggests that it was not until the third day of the crisis, after the ExComm debate had evolved so as to encompass the idea of blockading Cuba as well as the military alternatives, that JFK showed signs of countenancing a nonmilitary approach. Hence the portrayal in *Thirteen Days* of Kennedy's initial handling of the missile crisis is skewed in his favor.<sup>201</sup>

In addition, the film also suggests that the Turkey missiles deal that allowed to resolve the crisis was Kennedy's idea: “We get a hold of Walter Lippmann, and we leak the idea of pulling our Jupiter missiles out of Turkey, and the Soviets pull their missiles out of Cuba,” [01:22:32] when in fact, “there is no solid evidence for this.”<sup>202</sup> On the contrary, the idea comes from Khrushchev in *Killing Kennedy*. [00:32:24] On top of that, during the meeting between Soviet Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Dobrynin and Bobby Kennedy, Dobrynin is the one who raises the conditions for peace. Indeed, as *Thirteen Days* emphasizes, one of the primary conditions given by the Soviets is that the United States will not seek to remove Castro from power: “At this moment, the President is accepting the terms of Secretary Khrushchev's letter of Friday night. If the Soviet Union halts construction, immediately removes the missiles, and submits to U.N. Inspection, the United States will pledge to never invade Cuba or aid others in that enterprise.” [02:09:32] Furthermore, the second condition asked by the Soviets in order to find peace and resolve the conflict in the film is the removal of the Jupiter missiles in Turkey. At first, the Kennedy administration refuses to remove its missiles, but once Dobrynin lets Bobby Kennedy understand that the refusal to remove the missiles of Turkey would lead to war, Bobby's answer shifts: “Now, our Jupiter missiles in Turkey are obsolete and have been scheduled for withdrawal for some time. This withdrawal should take place within, say, months.” [02:10:30] This scene suggests that

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201 White in Morgan, Iwan W., ed. *Presidents in the Movies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011: 144-145

202 *Ibid.*: 145

the Soviets are the ones in power in the decision process, as they impose their conditions; and Bobby's reaction to Dobrynin's threats are a proof of the power relation in this negotiation.

As far as other films dealing with Kennedy's life are concerned, *JFK* also mentions the mafia a few times throughout the film. Indeed, the film focuses on Attorney Jim Garrison and his team, who investigate the conspiracy theories that surround the President's death. In the film, the mob is turned into one of JFK's enemies and not one of his allies once again. As one of Jim Garrison's associates states it : "We should be investigating our Mafia leads here in New Orleans. I can buy that a hell of a lot easier than the Government. Ruby's all Mob, knows Oswald, sets him up. Hoffa - Trafficante - Marcello, they hire some guns and do Kennedy and maybe the Government doesn't want to open up a whole can o'worms there because it used the Mob to get to Castro." [02:22:54] Yet except for him, the other members of Jim Garrison's team do not believe that the mafia could have played a role in Kennedy's assassination.

As demonstrated, relationships between Cuba, the Mafia and the Kennedy administration were ambivalent. The mafia represented a source of help for Kennedy in certain times during his presidency rather than a problem. Nonetheless, the only times during which it is mentioned in films about Kennedy is to dissociate the president and the mafia. On top of that, what seems important to point out is the lack of background on the mafia's role in Cuban-American relations during JFK's presidency, and more often, the total absence in films. This problem appears even greater when films dealing directly with the Cuban Missile Crisis, like *Thirteen Days*, are concerned. In the end, "in its laudatory view of JFK, and in its depiction of him as a moralistic, progressive leader, *Thirteen Days* is emblematic of the general postassassination thrust in American popular culture to remember Kennedy by idealizing him. It is representative of the way in which film and television have sustained the myth of Kennedy's presidential brilliance—a myth in which the nuances and contradictions of his life and political career are obscured."<sup>203</sup> Finally, it can be argued that the situation at home was not less complicated than on the international level. On the next part, Kennedy's ethnic background shall be exposed in order to understand his positions on Civil Rights, in a challenging political context, embodied by the Republican party.

#### 4) Ethnicity

Kennedy's relation to ethnicity seems to represent another problem and thus a source of ambivalence in Kennedy's life and presidency, and as a consequence in films. It could be argued that his relation to ethnicity may have influenced his decisions in the fight for Civil Rights: his complex relation with the army, because of his background, led to compromises

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203 White in Morgan, Iwan W., ed. *Presidents in the Movies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011: 147



when it came to African American rights. Kennedy seemed eager to act, but did not in order not to vex Republicans and WASPS, and risk his reelection.

Indeed, Kennedy's background can convey a sense of sympathy as he was a Catholic Bostonian with Irish origins in a country and region dominated by WASPs: White Anglo-Saxon Protestants, which means that he, and his family before him, were met by difficulties to integrate the governing class because of prejudices on their origins and religion. Kennedy's accent and faith came from his Irish background. Indeed, the Irish settled massively in Boston in the second part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, spreading a certain accent and the catholic faith in the region as a consequence. Because of those differences and the fear that they represented, they were ostracized by the Protestant majority: "Industrialization in the 1840s attracted Irish Catholic immigrants, whose lack of skills and education confirmed Protestant stereotypes about Catholics' incompatibility with political independence and freedom of conscience. The Know-Nothing movement and Native American Party enjoyed brief success in the 1850s by appealing to northeastern Protestants, who feared an unholy alliance between a southern oligarchy of slaveowners and the American Catholic Church."<sup>204</sup> Kennedy's ancestors were part of those Irish immigrants, as the "Fitzgerald family was from the rural County Limerick village of Bruff in western Ireland. Between 1846 and 1855, some of the Fitzgeralds migrated to America to escape the devastating potato famine. [...] During the same period that the Fitzgeralds migrated to America, Patrick Kennedy, a cooper, left his ancestral home in Dunganstown, County Wexford, and sailed for the United States."<sup>205</sup> Like most Irish at the time, they started as underdogs, and "had to overcome the harsh, widespread discrimination against Irish-Catholic immigrants at that time. The early Kennedys and Fitzgeralds worked as peddlers, coopers and common laborers; later they became clerks, tavern owners and retailers."<sup>206</sup> It was only after decades of settlement that the families made their ways into politics, when both of JFK's grandfathers served as Boston politicians.

Although Bostonians started to make their ways into political careers, an Irish and Catholic president was still something unachievable at the time, as Alfred E. Smith illustrates. Indeed, Al Smith was the 1928 Democratic candidate for the presidency, but prejudices towards his Irish origins, and most of all his religion, led to a total failure and a landslide victory for Hoover, which in turn led both parties to avoid Catholic candidates afterward.<sup>207</sup>

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204 Carty, Thomas. *A Catholic in the White House?: Religion, Politics, and John F. Kennedy's Presidential Campaign*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2004: 15

205 JFK Library and Museum. "John F. Kennedy and Ireland | JFK Library." JFK Library and Museum website.

206 *Idem*.

207 Carty, Thomas. *A Catholic in the White House?: Religion, Politics, and John F. Kennedy's Presidential Campaign*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2004: 7 and 11

The second ever Catholic candidate to be nominated by a party was Kennedy, but religion once again proved to be the main point of contention in 1960. Indeed, Kennedy faced waves of criticism as a candidate, and the circulation of “Mass-produced pamphlets, from extreme anti-Catholic organization, recapitulated the centuries-old belief that the Roman Catholic pope ruled as a living antichrist.”<sup>208</sup> On top of that, “Some Protestant ministers argued that Catholics, including Kennedy, would inevitably choose loyalty to the pope above allegiance to the United States,”<sup>209</sup> and “Others feared that clerical pressures would determine Kennedy's political decisions. One colleague declared that 'Irish priests' would manipulate a Catholic president 'as if he were their toy.' ”<sup>210</sup> As a consequence, the Democratic party got dissolved: “'Religious bias was the principle obstacle to election victory. It was always there, in every state.' By Sorensen's account, 'life-long Democrats who were Protestant' abandoned the Democratic Party 'in droves' due to Kennedy's Catholicism.”<sup>211</sup>

This resentment can notably be felt in *LBJ*, as Kennedy's faith is questioned in the film by Johnson: “A Catholic won in a Catholic state. Big fucking deal. You think he could do that in West Virginia? This country is not gonna elect a Catholic president.” [00:09:48] But it is also questioned by the whole country throughout news reports on TV, and the turning point that the primary elections in West Virginia represented in the presidential race is mentioned: “His victory today was bolstered, in part by the large Catholic presence in Wisconsin. [...] The next real test for Mr. Kennedy will be in West Virginia.” [00:09:17] In fact, the victory in the state came from the “Catholic voters [who] overwhelmingly supported Kennedy [...] some West Virginians even endorsed Kennedy merely to demonstrate the state's religious tolerance. In this 95 percent Protestant state, Kennedy's repeated pledges to support the absolute separation of church and state allayed libertarian doubts, and he won easily.”<sup>212</sup> The news report of the astounding victory also appears in *LBJ*: “In a surprising upset Senator John Kennedy has won the West Virginia primary. Many believed the issue of his religion was insurmountable.” [00:11:05] After his victory at the Democratic Convention, the party was reunited under JFK, and his “repeated endorsements of absolute church-state separation allayed libertarian doubts, and liberal organizations and individuals rapidly provided Kennedy with the necessary cachet to distinguish the party's nominee from Republican standard-bearer

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208 Carty, Thomas. *A Catholic in the White House?: Religion, Politics, and John F. Kennedy's Presidential Campaign*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2004: 3

209 *Ibid.*: 5-6

210 Carty, Thomas. “The Catholic Question: Religious Liberty and JFK's Pursuit of the 1960 Democratic Presidential Nomination.” *The Historian* 63, no. 3 (2001): 577–99: 577

211 Carty, Thomas. *A Catholic in the White House?: Religion, Politics, and John F. Kennedy's Presidential Campaign*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2004: 2

212 Carty, Thomas. “The Catholic Question: Religious Liberty and JFK's Pursuit of the 1960 Democratic Presidential Nomination.” *The Historian* 63, no. 3 (2001): 577–99: 591-592

Richard Nixon.”<sup>213</sup>

Yet, Kennedy's religion remained a subject of criticism, to which he responded in a speech in September 1960 in which he stated: “I am not the Catholic candidate for president. I am the Democratic Party's candidate for president, who happens also to be a Catholic. I do not speak for my church on public matters, and the church does not speak for me.”<sup>214</sup> But opposition did not end when Kennedy became president, as his conflicts with the army and Joint Chiefs during the Cuban Crisis in *Thirteen Days* discussed earlier on notably illustrated.

Although they were powerful Irish-Americans and Catholics, John and Bobby Kennedy, but also Kenny O'Donnell, were still considered as underdogs in the WASP-dominated establishment as the film points out. It can be argued that the appearance of churches in the film are made to reassert the importance of Kennedy's religion during critical moments of the crisis [00:43:37 and 1:12:21]. These churches can be identified as Catholic churches. Indeed, the first time Kennedy is seen in church is during a mass, on “Sunday, October 21<sup>st</sup>.” [00:43:40] Sunday mass is an important feature of the Catholic religion; and in fact, Catholics were required to fast for three hours until mass on Sundays until 1964, which, it can be noted, is not the case of the O'Donnell family in the film, as Mrs. O'Donnell asks if “everybody [is] ready for church?” [02:14:21] whereas the family is having breakfast in its dining room. The second time a religious building is present in *Thirteen Days* is when Kenny stops in front of a church which offers to confess and “pray for peace,” as inscribed on a hand-written sign. [01:12:32] After a tilt shot, which allows to see the church's stained glass windows, the name of the building can be seen on top of the sign: “Columbia Catholic Church” [01:12:31], reasserting the place of the Catholic religion for Kennedy and Kenny. The particular moments during which the churches are featured in the film may convey the impression that churches are places in which men, and especially the President in the film, are allowed to take a break to think before crucial events happen, as White also explains: “Toward the end of the first week of the crisis, Kennedy is shown with his family in church, looking thoughtful. Likewise, in the second week of the crisis O'Donnell decides to go into a church he is walking past so that he can pray for peace. In other words, religious scruples, not just Cold War imperatives, are presented as the guiding influence on Kennedy and his advisers at this dangerous juncture.”<sup>215</sup>

Eventually, in order to point out JFK's Bostonian origins in films, what mostly stands out is Kennedy's Bostonian accent in the productions. Yet, although the accent serves as a way

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213 *Ibid.*: 593

214 JFK Library and Museum. “ADDRESS TO THE GREATER HOUSTON MINISTERIAL ASSOCIATION.” JFK Library and Museum website.

215 White in Morgan, Iwan W., ed. *Presidents in the Movies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011: 141

for him, but also for Bobby and Kenny, to distinguish themselves from the others, the attempt was, each time, one of the most recurrent subjects of criticism about the films. Critics all seem to agree on the difficulty to render the Bostonian accent, and thus quote: “Kenny O'Donnell (played by Kevin Costner wrestling with the vowels and post-vocalic Rs of a Boston accent)”<sup>216</sup> and “As O'Donnell, Costner assumes a New England accent that toward the beginning brings a touch of Vaughn Meader to a role that otherwise demands little beyond a variety of stern looks,”<sup>217</sup> Vaughn Meader being a humorist who impersonated JFK. The same opinion is given on Michael C. Hall's accent in *The Crown*: “Michael C. Hall, of *Dexter* fame, plays JFK, and he makes the tragic mistake of going all-in on Kennedy's famous New England accent. Almost no actor has *ever* been able to make that accent work on screen, and Hall's is one of the worst examples of the bunch.”<sup>218</sup> As far as *LBJ* is concerned, the bad accent was even noted as part of The Catalyst's review title: “At a Theater Near You: LBJ: Bad Accents and Fake Noses in the Shadow of JFK,” and the article features the following comment and caricature: “Other flaws in the film include the Kennedy brothers' drawl; it was a stretch to try and emulate the classic Massachusetts accent.”<sup>219</sup>

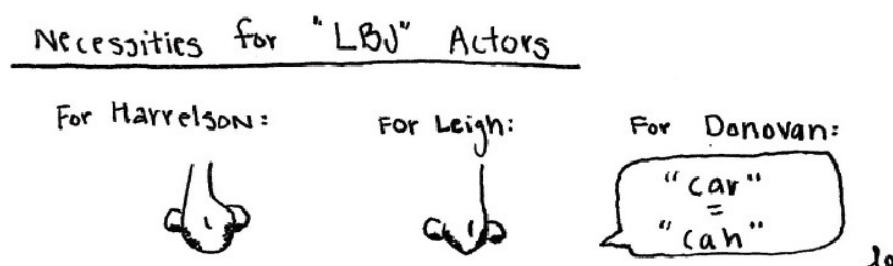


Figure 10: caricature from The Catalyst's review on *LBJ*

The three other productions selected for this analysis on the other hand received different reviews. *PT-109*, and thus Cliff Robertson, were ranked last by the MTV ranking “JFK ON SCREEN: RANKING THE BEST (AND WORST) ACCENTS” in fact because “Robertson didn't change his voice to sound like him at all.”<sup>220</sup> James Marsden's accent in *The Butler* is not what caught the attention of critics, although he prepared for it: “Marsden prepared for the role by listening to podcasts of JFK's speeches, and yet getting the Kennedy accent right was 'virtually impossible,' the actor told Conan O'Brien.”<sup>221</sup> What caught

216 Doherty, Thomas. “Review of Thirteen Days.” *The Journal of American History* 88, no. 3 (2001): 1211–13: 1212

217 Simon, Art. “Review of Thirteen Days.” *Cinéaste* 26, no. 2 (2001): 43–44: 44

218 Evangelista, Chris. “The Crown Season 2 Review: Netflix's Royal Drama Is Better Than Ever.” *Film* (blog), December 8, 2017.

219 The Catalyst. “At a Theater Near You: LBJ: Bad Accents and Fake Noses in the Shadow of JFK.” *The Catalyst*, November 16, 2017, sec. Life.

220 Sullivan, Kevin P. “JFK On Screen: Ranking The Best (And Worst) Accents.” *MTV News*, sec. Movies.

221 No author. “JFK Portrayal Was a Challenge for Screen Actors.” *Gulf News*.

attention was the fact that “McConaughey reportedly felt he would struggle with Kennedy's Boston accent and refused the role,”<sup>222</sup> showing how unique the Kennedy accent is. McConaughey even explained in an interview that the accent was what defined the role according to him: “*The Butler*, it's not going to happen for me. It was going to take some good hard work on my part for sure -- and it was more than an accent. I've done accents before. And you can see you can tell when it's just coming out from the neck up. When you see it done well, they walk different, they sit different -- it's coming out of their feet.”<sup>223</sup> Finally, of all the productions, *Killing Kennedy* is the one that stands out in terms of accent, and Rob Lowe was praised for “doing a fine Boston accent,”<sup>224</sup> which is also considered the highlight of the film. *Killing Kennedy* was consequently ranked first by the MTV ranking of JFK's best accents on screen.<sup>225</sup> What is interesting to note about all these comments on the Bostonian accent is that it seems to serve a twofold purpose: it sets Kennedy, his brother and Kenny apart in a positive and negative way at the same time. Indeed, it is positive as it enhances the men, their accomplishments as outcasts, and their attachment to their origins, thus making them unique compared to the WASP community that surrounds them, especially the army in the films. Yet, the accents have an ambivalent impact on the audience as their poor and forced performances sometimes draw more attention than storylines and casts them as underdogs.

All these elements thus convey a sense of support for JFK, whose relation to ethnicity first appears fraught with pitfalls, but whose origins make him unique. But it could be argued that his difficulties to fit in the Northern establishment because of his religion, and his difficulties to ally with Southern Democrats because of his origins compelled him to neglect civil rights for strategical and political purposes: Civil Rights were not a priority for Republicans at the time, and vexing the party could have cost Kennedy his reelection in November 1963. Indeed, a line from *The Butler* suggests that Kennedy's actions towards the African-American population were in fact calculated and that the president purposely waited to call for the Civil Rights Bill in 1963, thus conveying contradictory feelings and provoking ambivalence: “Bobby told the President that they shouldn't be worried about the Negro sit-ins. Polls showed the US does not support Civil rights.” [00:50:44] In fact, Kennedy's involvement, or lack of involvement in the Civil Rights movements originates from his years in Congress and went on later on during his presidential campaign, as he realized the importance of Civil Rights, not as fundamental rights denied to a part of the population but as

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222 Daniels, Colin. “James Marsden to Play JFK in *The Butler*.” *Digital Spy*, July 21, 2012.

223 Puchko, Kristy. “Matthew McConaughey Will Not Play JFK In Lee Daniels' *The Butler*.” *CINEMABLEND*, June 7, 2012.

224 Johnson, Adrienne. ““*Killing Kennedy*’ Makes You Feel Nothing.” *The News&Observer*, November 10, 2013.

225 Sullivan, Kevin P. “JFK On Screen: Ranking The Best (And Worst) Accents.” *MTV News*, sec. Movies.

a factor influencing votes.<sup>226</sup>

Thus, after some controversial votes while in Congress such as when he opposed the 1957 Civil Rights Act<sup>227</sup>, Kennedy needed to mend his positions and to do so, he publicly supported King's wife when Martin Luther King Jr. was sent to prison in 1963. Yet, the leads did not originate from Kennedy himself, and taking King's defense was not one of his ideas, showing that he did not hold the issue at heart.<sup>228</sup> Because of such actions, Kennedy won African American support and eventually votes, that allowed his election as President of the United States: "Across the nation, more than 70 percent of African Americans voted for Kennedy, and these votes provided the winning edge in several key states. When President Kennedy took office in January 1961, African Americans had high expectations for the new administration."<sup>229</sup> Nonetheless, after the election, Kennedy did not match with the high expectations that African Americans saw in him. Indeed, JFK delayed any action on Civil Rights, arguing that Congress would block initiatives<sup>230</sup> and that it would, as a consequence, alienate southern support on other matters and heighten violence.<sup>231</sup>

It can be argued that, on the issue of Civil Rights, Kennedy's ambition to be reelected in 1964 so that he could potentially do more was a virtuous idea, yet, the liberties and lives of people were at stake. Nonetheless, reelection took over: "Theodore Hesburgh, a member of the United States Civil Rights Commission and later its Chairman, says of John Kennedy, 'he felt sincerely about the issue [of civil rights] . . . and the fact that we ought to do something about it. But it wasn't a great crusade with him.' "<sup>232</sup> Still, before his death, Kennedy asked Congress for a Civil Rights Bill in a televised speech on the evening of June 11<sup>th</sup> 1963 that would later build the foundation of Johnson's Civil Rights reforms. Yet, the bill appears late in spite of the situation, and as the Kennedy Library itself explains: "President Kennedy may have been reluctant to push ahead with civil rights legislation, but millions of African Americans would not wait. Eventually, the administration was compelled to act."<sup>233</sup>

To conclude, JFK's presidency appears to be full of ambivalence. He seems torn between belligerence and appeasement, and thus JFK's life, and the films dealing with his life, convey first a sense of sympathy for the man, who struggled with a complex situation both at

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226 Stern, Mark. "John F. Kennedy and Civil Rights: From Congress to the Presidency." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 19, no. 4 (1989): 797–823: 798-799

227 *Ibid.*: 801

228 *Ibid.*: 812

229 JFK Library and Museum "Civil Rights Movement | JFK Library." JFK Library and Museum website.

230 Stern, Mark. "John F. Kennedy and Civil Rights: From Congress to the Presidency." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 19, no. 4 (1989): 797–823: 815

231 *Ibid.*: 816

232 *Ibid.*: 817

233 JFK Library and Museum "Civil Rights Movement | JFK Library." JFK Library and Museum website.

home and internationally, and who was criticized for and opposed by other politicians and by the army because of who he was. Yet on the other hand, the fact that he was sometimes eager to act, or acted out of personal interests, put the country and the world in danger. As a consequence, on many different occasions he simultaneously convey feelings of antipathy.

Yet, all the elements mentioned in this part are somehow only alluded to in the films. Other misbehaviors on the other hand appear to be more obvious and are thus tackled more directly in productions, creating an even greater ambivalence in shocking scenes that contribute to further deconstruct JFK's portrait.

## **II)When the Hero becomes a Villain**

As previously seen, heroes and villains are two contradictory characters. The hero is benevolent and helps others, whereas the villain is out of self-interest and does not care about people. When it comes to Kennedy, it can be argued that the hero transitions into a villain when his portrait is revised. Indeed, following the revelations and gradual availability of Kennedy's papers since the 1980s, scholars, and then productions, have started to nuance Kennedy's portrait according to new discoveries. The transition started with forgivable elements – such as his health problems – but little by little, more ambivalent and disrupting sides of Kennedy's personality appeared in films and series – such as his addiction to drugs as a way to relieve his pain or his bully behavior with women, until *The Crown* presented the President in an entirely negative way in 2017. This part shall thus introduce the most ambivalent elements featured in films and conclude on the future of Kennedy's image.

### **1)Health**

The first topic which really is tackled in films and which allows to deconstruct Kennedy's heroic image is health. Kennedy in fact did not match entirely with the attributes associated with heroes such as physical strength for example, attributes cited in the second part of this analysis, because of his poor health. Yet, this topic, which is the most recurrent negative topic concerning JFK in the films selected for this analysis, remains the most forgivable to present. Indeed, as his health problems were out of his control, they thus create a feeling of ambivalence in the audience: Kennedy's health arises the sympathy and pity of the audience, but at the same time, the treatments he decided to seek challenge his image as a great leader, as this analysis shall demonstrate through its corpus.

As a consequence, it seems important for this paper to review Kennedy's health in

order to analyze how it is presented in films, and to do so, Robert Dallek's *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963* will be used, as it appears to be the most objective and complete biography, notably on medical records. As Dallek explains, Kennedy's health problems started early in his life and went on through his teenage years. Because of his different ailments, JFK gained no weight growing up and was thus diagnosed with spastic colitis in 1934. The treatment found by the doctors for his colitis was DOCA pellets (desoxycorticosterone acetate pellets to put under the skin). As Dallek explains, the use of DOCA pellets may have pulled the trigger of Kennedy's other health problems, such as his weak back and his adrenal dysregulation, causing the destruction of his lower spine and the diagnostic of his Addison's disease later on.<sup>234</sup>

As a consequence, in 1938, Kennedy started to suffer from back pains. Although he failed the military physical entry tests for this reason, the future president nonetheless asked his father to pull strings in order to manage to let him enroll, which he did in 1941. No mention of Kennedy's colitis was featured in his file as Dallek points out. After a series of medical issues which forced him in and out of duty, Kennedy was sent to the Pacific in 1943 to ride the PT-109 on the Salomon islands. The first hint of Kennedy's poor health in this corpus is in fact to be found in *PT-109*: although it is possible to attribute his gesture to the shock of the crash, Kennedy is nonetheless pictured holding his back in pain for a few seconds after the Japanese destroyer hits the PT-109 [01:21:58], thus suggesting his back ailments. In 1944, JFK finally undergone a back operation but suffered from muscle spasms afterward, which were treated with narcotics. In October 1944, he was declared unfit for service.

After finally being diagnosed with the Addison disease in 1947, Kennedy nonetheless campaigned for Congress at the beginning of the 1950s, but his back led him to undergo two surgeries in 1953 and 1954, the first one of which nearly killed him. Although colitis, diarrhea, dehydration, prostatitis, urinary tract infections, fevers, weight loss and respiratory difficulties had come back around 1955, Kennedy nonetheless ran for the democratic primaries and for presidency in 1960. As Dallek indicates, after his acceptance speech at the Democratic convention in Los Angeles, “his disappointing performance convinced him in the future to increase the amounts of steroids he normally took whenever he faced the stress of giving a major speech or press conference.”<sup>235</sup> As a consequence, Kennedy started to secretly see Dr. Max Jacobson during the campaign, who had the reputation to treat “celebrities with 'pep pills,' or amphetamines, that helped combat depression and fatigue. Jacobson, whom

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234 Dallek, Robert. *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917 - 1963*. Hachette UK, 2003: 76

235 *Ibid.*: 275



patients called 'Dr. Feelgood,' administered back injections of painkillers and amphetamines that allowed Kennedy to stay off crutches, which he believed essential to project a picture of robust good health.”<sup>236</sup> *Killing Kennedy* is quite explicit about Kennedy's back pain and injections, as the products and needles used are presented in a close-up a medical tray [00:27:57] just before a doctor, potentially Jacobson although he is not named, injects them into Kennedy's lower back [00:28:06 and 00:28:10] and says “Anti-spasmodic. [...] Hydrocortisone. [...] And testosterone.” [00:28:05]



Figure 11: Close-up the syringes used by the doctor (probably Jacobson) in *Killing Kennedy*. McCormick, Nelson. *Killing Kennedy*. 2013.

*The Crown* goes even further in the episode from season two featuring Kennedy and entitled “Dear Mrs. Kennedy” as Dr. Jacobson, or “Dr. Feelgood” is mentioned [00:46:17], and his “cocktails [...] [of] vitamins, but other substances too” [00:46:18] are as well. Yet, as McDermott recalls “the problem is that he [made people feel better] using his own concoction of amphetamines and steroids. He lost his medical license in 1975 following a state investigation into the laboratory where he made his serums, which showed them littered with rat droppings and other toxic materials.”<sup>237</sup> The main difference between *Killing Kennedy* and *The Crown* lies in the fact that JFK is injected in his back in *Killing Kennedy* while he is directly injected in the forearm in a dark setting in *The Crown*, somehow picturing him as a drug-addict. [00:46:18]

236 Dallek, Robert. *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917 - 1963*. Hachette UK, 2003: 398

237 McDermott, Rose. “The Politics of Presidential Medical Care: The Case of John F. Kennedy.” *Politics and the Life Sciences* 33, no. 2 (2014): 77–87: 84



Figure 12: Scenes of injections in *Killing Kennedy* (left - McCormick, Nelson. *Killing Kennedy*. 2013), and *The Crown* (right - Daldry, Stephen. *The Crown, Season 2 Episode 8*. 2017.)

In addition, Kennedy does not care about what he is injected with and he is pictured becoming violent whenever he is deprived of his medication, as he leans backward, nearly in trance, when injected. What is interesting to note in this scene from the series is the fact that when Kennedy is pictured as a violent man, the shot is obstructed by an object, as if the camera was hidden [00:46:01] and as if this behavior was not Kennedy's normal behavior, as if it was something to be ashamed of, and thus something that should not be shown or should be concealed.

Thus, once elected president, as Dallek remarks in his book<sup>238</sup>, Kennedy embarked the American people with him on an adventure but denied them the opportunity to know what they got into. Indeed, each important period of his presidency is also marked by important health problems and thus by treatments that could have impaired his judgement while dealing with the different crises he had to face. For example, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, “he took 10 additional milligrams of hydrocortisone and 10 grains of salt to boost him before giving a brief report to the American people on the dismantling of the Soviet missile bases in Cuba,”<sup>239</sup> and this is what is going on in the injection scene in *Killing Kennedy* as JFK discusses the Cuban Missile Crisis with Jackie while he is being injected. [00:27:58] In similar fashion, *The Butler* is quite open when it comes to Kennedy's health during the Civil Rights crisis as the President is pictured lying on the floor, probably easing his back as he asks Cecil, who is bringing his pills: “ 'On an average, how many pills do you think I take a day Cecil ?' 'About... 103, sir.' ” [00:59:29] After this sequence, Cecil helps the President to get up and Kennedy can be heard groaning while holding his back in pain.

On top of that, not only was Jacobson a questionable doctor, but JFK was in fact

238 Dallek, Robert. *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917 - 1963*. Hachette UK, 2003: 300

239 *Ibid.*: 576

seeing two different professionals at the same time. Indeed, Janet Travell, another doctor appointed by JFK and who had been treating Kennedy's health, and especially his back, since 1955, did not know that someone else was giving Kennedy injections that could have had fatal outcomes when mixed with her own treatments. Indeed, "To relieve his suffering, which in the spring and summer of 1961 had become almost unbearable, Travell injected him with procaine two or three times a day. [...] Travell's shot were in addition to the concoction of painkillers and amphetamines that Max Jacobson was administering."<sup>240</sup> As a consequence, Kennedy was recommended by another doctor, Dr. Hans Kraus, to stop the back injections and to start exercising to strengthen his back and, as Dallek explains, the president thus alienated Travell in 1962 and started swimming exercises which considerably improved his back condition.

Although Travell's methods also appeared questionable, she nonetheless recommended Kennedy to use a rocking chair to ease his back, which became one of the symbols of his presidency, as McDermott explains: "She had a rocking chair in her office and this object, which soon become a veritable symbol of his presidency, immediately alleviated some of the pain in his back."<sup>241</sup>. Indeed, it is featured in a certain number of films from this corpus as the element testifying of Kennedy's back problems, even in *LBJ*, in which there appears to be no mention of Kennedy's health problems, and thus no mention of his back problems, except for the rocking chair present in the Oval Office.



Figure 13: Top left: *President John F. Kennedy Sitting*, picture by Paul Schutzer/The LIFE Picture Collection/Getty Images, 1961 ; Others : screenshots from the films selected for this corpus. Donaldson, Roger. *Thirteen Days*. 2000. McCormick, Nelson. *Killing Kennedy*. 2013. Reiner, Rob. *LBJ*. 2017.

240 Dallek, Robert. *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917 - 1963*. Hachette UK, 2003: 472

241 McDermott, Rose. "The Politics of Presidential Medical Care: The Case of John F. Kennedy." *Politics and the Life Sciences* 33, no. 2 (2014): 77–87: 78

One last film from this corpus does not deal directly with Kennedy's health, except for the presence of the rocking chair and a suspicious cold, yet, it has been much more criticized by scholars than *LBJ* as it deals with the Cuban Crisis. Indeed, as White points out in Morgan, as Kennedy's treatment may have had an effect on his decisions during the Cuban Missile Crisis, directors should have included scenes explicitly showing the injections Kennedy received in *Thirteen Days* :

Had the makers of *Thirteen Days* chosen to incorporate aspects of Kennedy's private life into their movie, it would have done more than merely serving the purpose of enlivening the film's narrative. In particular, JFK's continued reliance on quack doctor Max Jacobson, initially enlisted during the 1960 presidential campaign, was arguably relevant to his handling of the missile crisis. [...] [Archives] confirm that Jacobson treated Kennedy during the early days of the missile crisis, which prompts speculation that his initial belligerence in contemplating an air strike on the Soviet emplacements was due in some measure to the steroids and speed.<sup>242</sup>

In addition, the only element to be truly mentioned in the film concerning Kennedy's health is a fake cold he is said to have caught in Chicago when in fact, the cold is just an excuse to go back to Washington: "The president has a cold, he is canceling the remain of his trip and returning to Washington at the advise of his doctor." [00:38:45] Kennedy's health is thus only mentioned publicly as a lie in *Thirteen Days*.

Finally, although Kennedy suffered from numerous diseases throughout his life, his back remained the most important element concerning his health. Indeed, as Dallek puts it, if Kennedy's back had been in better shape on the day of his assassination, he may not have received the last bullet that killed him: "Were it not for a back brace, which held him erect, a third and fatal shot to the back of the head would not have found its mark."<sup>243</sup> The back brace can actually be seen in *Killing Kennedy* as the president gets ready on the morning of the 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 1963 in Dallas. [01:01:46]

All in all, the presentation of Kennedy's poor health may arouse feelings of sympathy from the audience, but it distances him from the ideal image that he built throughout his life at the same time. The management of his various ailments while president also connects him with the anti-hero status as he was on drugs while managing the country to a certain extent, and this was dangerous for the nation and the people. In addition, trusting and asking different doctors to administrate him different types of drugs at the same time could have killed him and once again endangered the country. Kennedy's health thus represents the first major

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242 White in Morgan, Iwan W., ed. *Presidents in the Movies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011: 143

243 Dallek, Robert. *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917 - 1963*. Hachette UK, 2003: 694

element tackled directly in productions, contributing to the feeling of ambivalence and to the deconstruction of his ideal depiction in films. Yet, it can be argued that JFK's health problems were out of his control and could excuse his use of drugs to cure his ailments. His use of dangerous back channels in order to resolve the Cuban Crisis, on the contrary, is less forgivable.

## 2) Back Channels

As previously demonstrated by this paper, Kennedy is celebrated in films about the Cuban Missile Crisis for his pacifist position during the conflict and his wish to engage in a deal with Soviet Premier Khrushchev in order to save the world from a nuclear war that could have destroyed it. Nonetheless, in the two productions dealing with American-Soviet relationships, only *Thirteen Days* shows how Kennedy managed to come to the outcome now written in history.

Indeed, in *Thirteen Days*, back channels are essential to the narrative as they allow the President and Premier to agree on a deal. Back channels are thus embodied in the film by Aleksandr Feklisov [00:40:41], who, as suggested earlier, conveys mystery and distrust because of his black turtlenecks and his smirks. Furthermore, Feklisov's role in politics is not justifiable as the Kennedy administration does not know for whom he speaks: "The truth is, Mr. President, we don't even really know whom [Feklisov] speaks for." [01:39:24] Yet, as Kenny O'Donnell later discovers by looking at Feklisov's and Khrushchev's files side by side, Feklisov was sent by Khrushchev because they were "war buddies." [01:41:59] His participation in the back channel thus first appears risky as, as McCone recalls in the film that "The alternative, Mr. President, is that this could be a trap. [...] Why else would they approach us in this way? It's deniable. The Soviets have done nothing but lie to us. This could be more of the same." [01:38:50] Nonetheless, Feklisov is used by Kennedy as a back channel as Kenny suggests that he may be a new and more effective channel to speak with the Soviet Premier: "That may be why Khrushchev's introducing this guy. We've been burned by his usual players in the formal channels, so he brings in an honest broker." [01:39:08]

In addition, later on, the film also displays a secret meeting held on the 27<sup>th</sup> of October 1962. [02:07:38] Indeed, because "the Kennedy brothers suspected RFK's interlocutor of having become a source of disinformation about Soviet missile activities in Cuba, they switched the back channel from Bolshakov to the Soviet ambassador, Anatoly Dobrynin."<sup>244</sup> Together, the Attorney General and Soviet ambassador secretly met and agreed on the terms

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244 Naftali, Tim. "JFK Had His Own Russian Back Channel. It Helped to Prevent War." *Slate Magazine*, May 27, 2017

of the deal that put an end to the Missile Crisis. It seems important to note that, on both occasions, although Kennedy's administration agrees to deal with back channels, JFK never meets directly with any of the men and thus is never associated with any of them.

Yet, it appears relevant to point out that before turning to Feliksov and Dobrynin, Kennedy used another back channel, who happened to be “RFK's interlocutor” as Naftali put it: Georgi Bolshakov. Indeed, as Yuhas and Naftali explain: “From 1961 through the Cuban missile crisis, for instance, Kennedy sent his brother Robert to hold secret talks with Soviet spy Georgi Bolshakov. Recordings also reveal that Kennedy decided to pursue negotiations against the advice of his cabinet, and with his brother’s help”<sup>245</sup> and “Starting in late May 1961, Robert [and Bolshakov] would meet at least 35 times [...] Unsurprisingly, the press and public knew nothing about these meetings. But Kennedy also kept most of them a secret from the rest of his administration. [...] the FBI might have caught whiff of these tête-à-têtes, but the CIA was in the dark.”<sup>246</sup> Nonetheless, although scholars point out his importance in the passing of information between the White House and the Kremlin, Bolshakov is not featured in *Thirteen Days*. This might be explained by the fact that Bolshakov represented a greater risk than Feklisov and Dobrynin as he lied to Robert Kennedy, and thus came to represent a source of portential risk. On top of that, it could be argued that he could not be represented on screen as his depiction would have acknowledged on screen that JFK lied to the public, the press, but also to his closest advisors, as Naftali explained. His association with the Kennedy administration would thus have tarnished Kennedy's image if featured in the film.

Although back channels may have allowed to protect the world from an international nuclear conflict, they appear as a risk. The totality of the US government and the American people were not aware of these meetings, which could potentially have allowed the Soviets to collect information about the United States in order to attack the country later on. As Thomas puts it: “Back channels can be a terrible idea. They can sow confusion by subverting normal diplomacy and, potentially, precipitate disaster by expressing the unchecked will and wiles of headstrong leaders.”<sup>247</sup> Nonetheless, back channels are not the issue most tackled in films. JFK's womanizing habit is, with Kennedy's health, the most recurrent subject to be featured in films when it comes to the darker sides of JFK's personality, as the last part of this analysis shall point out.

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245 Yuhas, Alan. “JFK: Declassified Documents Reveal a Cunning and Cagey President.” *The Guardian*, October 7, 2015, sec. US news.

246 Naftali, Tim. “JFK Had His Own Russian Back Channel. It Helped to Prevent War.” *Slate Magazine*, May 27, 2017

247 Thomas, Evan. “Opinion | We May Owe Our Lives to a Back Channel with Russia.” *Washington Post*, June 2, 2017, sec. Opinions.

### 3)Women

Eventually, although Kennedy is recognized in films as a family man and thus as a good husband as this analysis showed earlier on, some productions nonetheless also nuanced his portrait on this point, as this paper shall finally demonstrate.

Indeed, although he was dubbed the “playboy”<sup>248</sup> of Washington by newspapers in 1947, the president was protected by the press in the 1950s and 1960s since, at the time, a president's personal life was a line not to cross for journalists according to Hagood<sup>249</sup>, but more recent revisionist works influenced the production of films, leading them to picture Kennedy as a womanizer having extra-marital affairs. Hagood suggests that Kennedy's womanizing habit, which he developed at an early age, can be explained by the fact that his father also had extra-marital affairs with many women and that the whole family knew about it.<sup>250</sup> That is why in college, JFK exchanged letters with his friend Lem Billings, in which he describes his affairs: “went down to the Cape with five guys from school – EM [Edward Moore, Joe Sr.'s administrative assistant and confidant] got us some girls thru another guy – four of us had dates and one guy fucked 3 times, another guy 3 times (the girl a virgin!) + myself twice,”<sup>251</sup> and “Still can't get used to co-eds but am taking them by my stride. Expect to cut one out of the herd and brand her shortly, but am taking it very slow as do not want to be known as the beast of the East.”<sup>252</sup> These selected quotations point out how Kennedy objectified women from a young age. They also show his obsession for sex, which went on once he was elected in Congress and later on as president, as he

had affairs with several women, including Pamela Turnure, Jackie's press secretary; Mary Pinchot Meyer, Ben Bredlee's sister-in-law; two White House secretaries playfully dubbed Fiddle and Faddle; Judith Campbell Exner, whose connections to mob figures like Sam Giancana made her the object of FBI scrutiny; and Mimi Beardsley, a 'tall, slender, beautiful' nineteen-year-old college sophomore and White House intern, who worked in the press office during two summers. (She 'had no skills,' a member of the press staff recalled. 'She couldn't type.') There were also Hollywood stars and starlets and call girls paid by Dave Powers, the court jester and facilitator of Kennedy's indulgences, who arranged trysts in hotels and swimming pools in California, Florida, and at the White House.<sup>253</sup>

The only two productions from this corpus in which JFK's strong attraction to women

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248 Dallek, Robert. *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917 - 1963*. Hachette UK, 2003: 151

249 Hagood, Wesley O. *Presidential Sex: From the Founding Fathers to Bill Clinton*. Wesley Hagood, 1996: 139

250 *Idem*.

251 Dallek, Robert. *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917 - 1963*. Hachette UK, 2003, quoting a letter from Kennedy to Lem Billings: 47

252 *Ibid.*: quoting a letter from Kennedy to Lem Billings 48

253 *Ibid.*: 476



is present, *Killing Kennedy* and episode eight of the second season of *The Crown*, thus manifest the president's womanizing habit on screen. Indeed, Kennedy's objectification of women in films can be considered a source of ambivalence, as it serves to glamorize the president by presenting him as a handsome playboy who wants to live life at its fullest, considering his health problems. Yet, it simultaneously arouses contradictory feelings as it emphasizes his lewdness and contempt for women. JFK's playboy attitude is especially shown in episode eight of season two of *The Crown*. Indeed, while JFK is delivering a speech, he is surrounded by women. Wide shots allow to show the whole audience listening, yet, only specific women are in focus. [00:35:46, 00:35:50 and 00:36:18] Those women are attentive, but they are not presented nor named, and thus their anonymity could suggest their universal dimension, in other words, they could be any of the women attracted to and seduced by JFK or with whom JFK had affairs. On the other hand, although those women are drawn by what Kennedy is saying, the first unsettling element comes from the fact that they are targetted and thus in focus because Jackie is looking at them: the audience thus sees Jackie's point of view, and understands that the playboy is in fact an adulterous man.



Figure 14: Screenshots from “Dear Mrs. Kennedy”: Top left: the whole audience, composed of men and women, listening to JFK delivering his speech, Others: the specific women in focus, targetted by Jackie. Daldry, Stephen. *The Crown*, Season 2 Episode 8. 2017.

In similar fashion, after the speech, the President can be seen with these women, whispering in the ear of one of them while holding another one, [00:37:07] once again suggesting a glamorous attitude with ladies. Yet, the close-up of his hand on the back of that specific woman may suggest a form of contempt and power, but also a fetishism. Indeed, as Mulvey indicates in her article entitled “Visual pleasure and narrative cinema,” women can represent a threat for men because of their absence of a penis. As a consequence, in films, to cope with this threat, there is a “substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into



a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous.”<sup>254</sup> In the scene from the episode of *The Crown* selected here, Mulvey's theory applies as only a part of the woman's back can be seen. She is thus cut and only one part of her body is here to represent her, thus objectifying her and turning the playboy into a possessive man, finally making the scene disturbing.



Figure 15: screenshot from “Dear Mrs. Kennedy”, showing JFK's hand on the back of an anonymous woman.  
Daldry, Stephen. *The Crown, Season 2 Episode 8*. 2017.

In her article, Laura Mulvey also introduces the idea that genders play a role in film narratives and that these roles are always attributed the same way when it comes to the gaze: males are active, they look and act, females are passive, they are the ones watched, they stop the story. Indeed, the pleasure of looking, scopophilia, is central in films, as Mulvey explains, and so: “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. [...] The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation.”<sup>255</sup> Mulvey's theory applies in *Killing Kennedy*, as Fiddle and Faddle and Judith Campbell Exner are present, yet they do not add any narrative element to the story, which revolves around Kennedy's presidency and assassination. In addition, Fiddle and Faddle, the two secretaries, can be seen skinny-dipping with the president in the White House pool [00:21:00], an activity which was not a secret as Flanagan explains:

The overheated White House swimming pool [...] was, according to a number of respected sources (among them Seymour Hersh and three on-the-record Secret Service agents), the locus of endless lunchtime sex parties. Two young secretaries named Priscilla Wear and Jill Cowen—the now infamous Fiddle and Faddle—

254 Mulvey, Laura. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (October 1, 1975): 57–68: 64

255 Mulvey, Laura. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (October 1, 1975): 57–68: 62

often left their desks to splash and skinny-dip with Jack, returning to their desks with wet hair so they could go on with their important work of autographing his photographs and wondering how to type.<sup>256</sup>

This activity may also convey ambivalent feelings as it disrupts the dynamic established throughout the film: the presentation of Kennedy as a rather good husband. The skinny dipping scene in *Killing Kennedy* thus suggests that his marriage with Jacqueline Bouvier in 1953 was just a way for him to be taken more seriously into politics after his playboy years in Congress. After the scene, Jackie goes to the pool only to find a floating bra [00:21:33], which does not only suggest her husband's philandering, but also that the two secretaries can be reduced to an object, and here an intimate or sexual object.

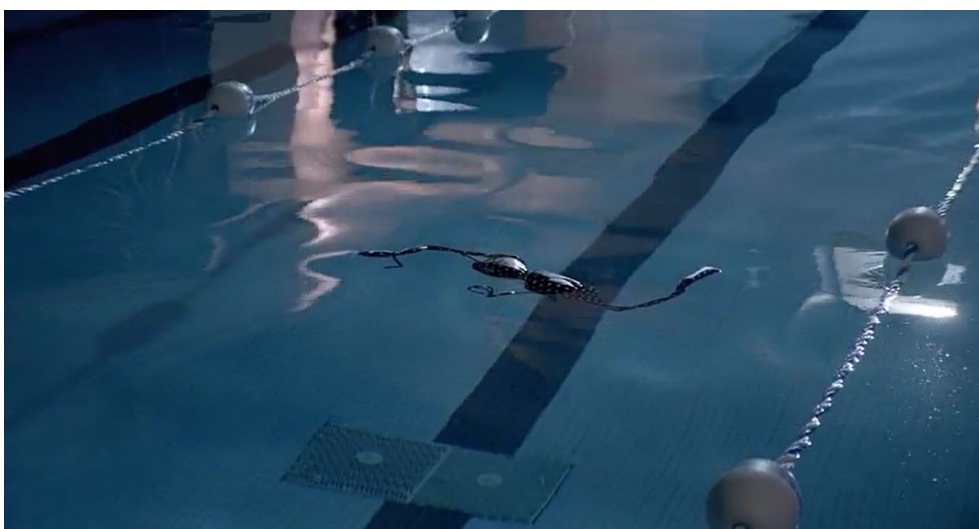


Figure 16: screenshot of the floating bra in *Killing Kennedy*, which can be interpreted as a reduction of the women who had affairs with Kennedy. McCormick, Nelson. *Killing Kennedy*. 2013.

In similar fashion, Judith Campbell Exner is only shown through a photograph in the film. [00:21:47] It could be argued that she is a cut-out, or a one dimensional “icon” to use Mulvey's term. Indeed, through this photograph, Judith Campbell Exner is not given any depth nor character, she is flat and her story is not developed and appears as a parenthesis in the narrative.

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256 Flanagan, Caitlin. “Jackie and the Girls.” *The Atlantic*, June 13, 2012, sec. Politics.



Figure 17: screenshot from *Killing Kennedy* showing the image accompanying the only mention of Judith Campbell Exner in the film. McCormick, Nelson. *Killing Kennedy*. 2013.

Jackie, contrary to the women with whom her husband is seen having affairs, is given more importance. She is often the focalizer, as previously seen in the selected episode of *The Crown*. Yet, the difference between the two treatments she receives by her husband in *Killing Kennedy* and *The Crown* creates a sense of ambivalence because of the discrepancies they present. Indeed, in *Killing Kennedy*, she brings elements to the narrative: she discusses critical matters with her husband such as the Bay of Pigs invasion or the Cuban Missile Crisis and she is central to the story in Dallas. In the episode of *The Crown* however, the treatment she receives by her husband suggests once again his contemptuous habit to use women as objects. Indeed, the episode suggests that, after Jackie criticized Queen Elizabeth and Buckingham Palace during their 1961 visit to London, the Queen decided to embark on bold geopolitics and visit Ghana. There, she showed that she was a good leader and that she was not “boring” as the First Lady thought she was and, by dancing with Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah, she managed not to let Ghana fall to communism. Because of this, Kennedy told Jackie in a scornful manner: “I just wanted to thank you that's all. For the second time in recent weeks you've been instrumental in changing a significant matter of foreign policy.” [00:38:02] The positions in which Kennedy and his wife appear in this scene, that is to say the fact that Kennedy stands up and lights a cigarette, and the fact that Jackie is sitting motionless on the bed, suggests a relation of power. Kennedy, mocking Jackie, goes on to explain, as he smirks and pushes her shoulder with his:

'And an African state that was fast running into the arms of the Communists has been turned around and kept in the West.' 'Oh. What does that have to do with me?' 'Dreary Queen, Thick-Ankles?' 'What?' 'Her Majestic Dullness? The Incurious Crown? Apparently, just some of the things you said about her at a dinner in London, which then got back to Queen Elizabeth and, it seems, spurred

her on. Without those insults, she wouldn't have defied a Cabinet, risked her reputation and gone to Ghana, against all advice, to bring President Nkrumah back on side, but she did. Pulled off some incredible stunt with a dance. And it's all thanks to you.' [00:38:14]

This quotation suggests that Kennedy only thanked his wife for her participation as an object in geopolitical affairs, and he does not care about her feelings or what her insults might have caused. In other words, he is “perfectly fine with using his wife for political means.”<sup>257</sup>

All in all, in the productions of this corpus featuring JFK's philandering, although the female audience in *The Crown* may highlight JFK's appeal, female characters are represented in such a way that they are objectified. They do not bring elements to the story and they are not given depth either. They can be reduced to objects, instruments, or body parts thus suggesting Kennedy's contempt for women. For these reasons, this episode of the series allows to link JFK to the #MeToo movement mentioned in the first part of this analysis, and to a certain extent, to all the revisionist movements that emerged in the past 40 years. Indeed, the depiction of JFK's attitude towards women in *The Crown* shows that an evolution is present in the representation of the 35<sup>th</sup> president in films, and that the path appears to be leading towards more rigorous portraits of JFK in cinematic productions in the future. Episode 8 of the second season of the series could thus be considered a “turning point” in the depiction of the President in cinematic productions. Indeed, it is the first time that Kennedy's portrait is presented as totally negative on screen, so it can be considered the result of the revisionists movements that seek to challenge JFK's ideal portrait. On the other hand, recent polls and testimonies seem to confirm that JFK is still largely appreciated by the public, as the first part of this analysis demonstrated. As a consequence, the coming years and decades will tell what turn JFK's legacy will take. Will the tradition of protection and excuses take over once again? Or is deterioration of the portrait only starting, and will it continue to nuance Kennedy's image to the point that films will influence poll results? If Scott is right when he argues that “It is only the start of symbiotic storylines and fantastic fables that will continue to trace the movements of incumbents and their personalities from the Oval Office to TV series and films for the foreseeable future and beyond”<sup>258</sup> then the future will probably offer more depictions of the 35<sup>th</sup> president, which shall in turn dictate the turn its legacy will take, providing scholars with new opportunities of research.

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257 Evangelista, Chris. “The Crown Season 2 Review: Netflix’s Royal Drama Is Better Than Ever.” *Film* (blog), December 8, 2017.

258 Scott in Morgan, Iwan W., ed. *Presidents in the Movies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011: 42

## Conclusion

To conclude, as they follow certain rules imposed by historical and political films, but also as some of the productions from this corpus received funds from protectors of Kennedy's image, the films under study show an idealized portrait of the President at first sight. The man fits into the classical definitions of heroism and is displayed in films as the hero fighting villains for his country and for the greater good. This is further emphasized by the fact that Kennedy's natural temper can be considered close to qualities attributed to heroes, but also by the fact that he crafted and protected his image so remarkably well while alive that even decades after his death, some of the negative sides of his personality are still unknown to most of the population. Yet, although the man is mostly idealized in films and series, nuances are starting to appear in his portrait. Indeed, according to the revelations, testimonies, and the gradual availability of his personal papers since the 1980s, Kennedy's image in productions adopts, little by little, more and more ambivalent elements. The ones most dealt with, such as his health, can be considered easily forgiven as they were somehow out of his control. Films then also started to tackle his womanizing behavior – a less forgiveable trait – but also the back channels he used during the Cuban Crisis – this time a risky political move that could have cost the lives of millions, if not the end of the world as we know it today. On top of that, other political decisions or facets of his character such as the Vietnam war, the role of the mafia in Cuban-American relations, and the delayed Civil Rights bill are only briefly mentioned. These elements, if featured in more depth in films, could have further stained Kennedy's ideal image in popular culture, or at least made it closer to whom JFK appeared to be in life. Yet as they are not, and as historical and political films follow certain rules as mentioned earlier on, films and series contribute to the preservation of Kennedy's legacy, which is in fact still rather enduring, even more than 60 years after his death, as polls and testimonies have proven in the first part of this analysis.

What was interesting to see through the research process that this paper required is that Kennedy's image is *expected* to be obviously positive at first sight, notably because of the influence of Kennedy's control of his own image while alive. But what is surprising is the discovery of other facets, darker elements of his personality in films, which are usually best known by scholars but unknown to the general public, and which provoke ambivalent feelings as a consequence.

The conclusion of this paper is, however, not quite surprising. Films and series overall protect Kennedy, and his legacy lives on. Nonetheless, as this analysis showed that political

films remain a prolific genre, it could be argued that more nuanced and more negative portraits of the man are expected to appear on screen in the future, as it already was the case with Episode 8 of the second season of *The Crown*. These future productions might, in the long run, change the conclusion of this thesis.

From the six pieces of work selected for this corpus, the two most recent ones are *The Crown* (2017) and *LBJ* (2017), but other productions dealing with Kennedy himself or with the Kennedy family in general are also contemporary to those two, such as *Jackie*, which came out in 2016, *The Kennedys: After Camelot*<sup>259</sup>, from 2017, *Chappaquiddick*<sup>260</sup>, released in 2017, and the fifth episode of the second season of *Timeless*<sup>261</sup>, called “The Kennedy Curse”, which is from 2018. *Jackie*, as previously seen, is a biopic about the First Lady, but as a consequence, the film displays the strong affection she had for her husband, and mostly shows how she took control of Kennedy's image and legacy after her interview with Theodore H. White for *Life* Magazine in December 1963, which forged the Camelot legend. *The Kennedys: After Camelot* and *Chappaquiddick* both deal with later events, such as Ted Kennedy's – JFK's younger brother – involvement in a single-car crash after he left a party, which resulted in the drowning of 28 year-old Mary Jo Kopechne. Indeed, after rescuing himself from the sinking car, Ted Kennedy left his companion to drown in the waters of the island of Chappaquiddick, Massachusetts in 1969. Although the story casts a dark shadow on the Kennedy name, it nonetheless also shows that the Kennedy family is still a subject of interest for directors and the public. Indeed, it appears to be quite rare that directors nowadays choose to focus on local politicians, who happen to be the brothers of late presidents, who themselves happen to have died decades ago now.

As far as *Timeless* and *The Crown* are concerned, both prove once again that Kennedy still is a particular source of interest. Indeed, although the series *Timeless* features lots of Presidents, as the main characters travel through time to protect the course of History, Lincoln, Johnson, Grant, Roosevelt, Wilson and Reagan only appear for a few seconds in their respective episodes.<sup>262</sup> On top of that, Nixon is not even seen clearly on screen in the episode called “The Watergate Tapes.”<sup>263</sup> Kennedy on the contrary is involved in two episodes, and he is the central figure of one of them called “The Kennedy Curse,” in which his character is a 17 year old Kennedy taken to 2018. On top of that, this episode of *Timeless* serves to reinforce

259 Cassar, John, and Katie Holmes. *The Kennedys: After Camelot*. Intuition Film Productions, Muse Entertainment Enterprises, Three Putt Productions, 2017.

260 Curran, John. *Chappaquiddick*. Apex Entertainment, Chimney, DMG Entertainment, 2018.

261 *Timeless*. MiddKid Productions, Kripke Enterprises, Davis Entertainment, 2016.

262 *Ibid.*: in order: Season 1 Episode 2: “The assassination of Abraham Lincoln,” Season 1 Episode 11: “The World's Columbian Exposition,” Season 2 Episode 7: “Mrs. Sherlock Holmes,” and Season 2 Episode 8: “The Day Reagan Was shot.”

263 *Ibid.*: Season 2 Episode 6: “The Watergate Tapes.”

the thesis defended by this paper. Indeed, JFK's health and womanizing habit are openly tackled throughout the episode, showing that the dark sides of his personality originated early in his life. But two lines seem to be important as they attest that the Kennedy Mystique is still at work and that his legacy endures: “We need to keep John alive long enough, so we can return him so he can become arguably the most beloved president of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,” [00:06:06] and at the end of the episode: “ 'You are going to make the world a much better place. There are worst fates.' 'Was I a good president?' 'One of the greatest.' ” [00:38:40] In addition, “Atomic City”<sup>264</sup> revolves around Judith Campbell. As a consequence, Kennedy is briefly seen at the beginning of the episode, this time as an adult. This episode appears to be important in the line of productions dealing with Kennedy as it pictures both Judith Campbell, giving her a major role on screen for the first time, but also Sam Giancana, who was missing from the corpus of this analysis. The episode thus acknowledges Campbell's role as an intermediate between the men, but also Kennedy's relation with Giancana. Eventually, it seems interesting to note that Kennedy was given two episodes in *Timeless* although he was President for less than three years, whereas other Presidents, who, it can be argued, have played more critical roles for the country, appear only briefly on screen.

The same phenomenon is present in *The Crown*. Indeed, as previously seen, Kennedy is one of the only two American presidents given a full episode in *The Crown*. The other President to be featured in the series is Lyndon B. Johnson, who, like Kennedy, is pictured having a difficult relationship with Great Britain. Nonetheless, in the only episode in which another American President is featured, Johnson is constantly compared to JFK: “And then everybody would laugh at me and they'd say I wasn't no Jack Kennedy,” [00:17:07] and “ 'I met him once. Kennedy. I was left distinctly... underwhelmed.' 'Margaret.' 'I'm sorry. Did I say something wrong? I do know these days one's not allowed to think anything other than what a great statesman Kennedy was.' 'Say nothing Lyndon.' 'Of course he'll say nothing. He was his loyal deputy, which I think I can understand better than most. The frustrations and resentments that can build up from a life as number two. The support act. Even of someone you adore.' ” [00:29:51] As these recent productions showed, Kennedy is still often the most represented of all 46 American Presidents, and each time, although he is criticized for his behavior or political positions, the outcome tends to remain positive in the end.

Just like in films and series, Kennedy still manages to be everywhere, even nowadays. Indeed, his time still resonates in everyday life and, as his memory is preserved, the elements of his life the public is mostly confronted with today are rather positive. For example, each

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264 *Timeless*. MiddKid Productions, Kripke Enterprises, Davis Entertainment, 2016, Season 1 Episode 3: “Atomic City”

time a step forward is reached in space, the public is reminded of Kennedy's 1962 address at Rice University, which started the American Space Conquest, which allowed the creation of many technological advancements without which it would be impossible to live today. In similar fashion, the birth of the Black Lives Matter movement throughout the 2010s and more importantly its actions these past few years following the murders of many black Americans by white police officers recall the situation of the country in the 1960s. Finally, the JFK Library and Museum in Boston launched the "Profile in Courage Award", which seeks to recognize "a public official (or officials) at the federal, state, or local level whose actions demonstrate the qualities of politically courageous leadership in the spirit of *Profiles in Courage*, President Kennedy's 1957 Pulitzer prize-winning book, which recounts the stories of eight U.S. Senators who risked their careers by embracing unpopular positions for the greater good," and which is now a tradition since 1989.<sup>265</sup> But last year, in 2020, as the Coronavirus pandemic struck the world, the JFK Library awarded a special prize called the "Covid Courage" which celebrates those who "are risking their own health to help heal the sick, protect our most vulnerable, and provide critical support services to citizens across the country."<sup>266</sup> Once again, this award proves that Kennedy manages to be everywhere all the time.

It can be argued that Kennedy's memory is so greatly protected that his negative sides are somehow "excused" each time by his supporters. Even though his portrait has suffered some degradations because of the revisionist movements, he nonetheless is a legend now. His experience in the Pacific turned him into a hero, his family provokes feelings of nostalgia for a period which most of his supporters have never lived, the comparison between JFK and King Arthur, and between his administration and the knights of the round table is unsettlingly dreamy, his assassination lead people to regret him when he did not do much politically speaking, and his large smile and charisma, which have charmed people for decades now, seem forever unfading. Legends are the stuff of films, and the Kennedy era will probably remain *the* reference for utopia, and the man will probably remain *the* reference for the hero. Though long dead now, the world has not seen the end of John F. Kennedy.

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265 JFK Library and Museum "The John F. Kennedy Profil in Courage Award." JFK Library and Museum website.

266 JFK Library and Museum "Events and Awards: Profile in Courage Award | JFK Library." JFK Library and Museum website.



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