

Narrating the Political Hero

The Construction of the Fictional Political Leader in the Obama Era

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Like a distorted mirror, mass culture products generally give back an exaggerated reflection of the sociocultural context. In this regard, from a historical perspective, 9/11 attacks launch a warning to global society that no individual or nation was completely safe. This has created a climate of fear that would be intensified with the Iraq war and the global economic crisis. This atmosphere will translate to audiovisual fiction as stories where anyone can be the enemy, even political leaders. So the boundaries between heroes and villains are uncertain.

With the 2008 Presidential Elections, the United States started a new era whose predominant narrative would be to accept and overcome past mistakes, in order to be the great nation it once was. In sum, we aim to expose how fictional construction of political leaders has evolved since Obama's victory, illustrating this with examples from films and TV shows.

Mediated culture proposes fictional narratives and characters that sometimes are an altered or exaggerated reflection of the social

reality. However media show much of the functioning of the society and can be understood as a “window on the world” (Gregg, 1998, pp. 2-3) or as an artifact that shapes and constitutes “our understanding of social and organizational life” (Huczynski & Buchanan, 2004, p. 708). Perhaps for this reason, many researchers have highlighted the importance of critical interpretation of films and TV shows to understand the socio-political significance of the present. (Kellner, 2005, 2010; Dixon, 2003). In fact, “if we read various films attentively, we can see constancy and continuity” (Carver, 2010, pp. 428-429) that allow us to realize the relation between audiences and politics (Cogan & Kelso, 2009, p. 3). Moreover, analyzing political films and fictional political leaders is very useful to comprehend the relationship between public images of the presidency and the recent history (Kellner, 2002).

Previous research analyzes political cinema in a very qualitative way and focuses in one subject or gender of films (See Mitchell, 2001; Lawrence, 2003; Levine, 2003). However, we consider that exploring more general tendencies in a historical and transversal way to understand better political climates and realities, as Joseph E. Uscinski (2009) has suggested, is also necessary. This has been done by many researchers, which used period categories in order to analyze general narratives or themes of political films. (Christensen & Hass, 2005; Neve, 1992).

As it is well known political leaders have been represented in films and TV shows as heroes, fathers, gentlemen, cowards, fools, puppets, Saints, villains... But, what has happened since Obama's election? In this article we explore the transformation of fictional political leaders since 9/11. First of all, we analyze the previous period (the two presidencies of George Bush and especially the effects of 9/11), and then, we focus on fictional political leaders during the so-called 'Obama Era'.

Political leader identity and fictional images

The way in which political leaders are portrayed in audiovisual products is really important, thus it “can have an influence on perceptions of the overall political process” (Gladstone-Sovell, 2006, p. 2) and even in governance. As Kellner has proposed, successful presidencies have good movies and failed presidencies have bad movies. (2002, p. 467). Thus, fictional characters are powerful images

that could affect political processes and perceptions about political identities and leadership. Entertainment texts play a significant role in creating and maintaining social norms, values and ideologies that configure social identities (Curran, 2005). In that way, we cannot forget that when someone becomes a public figure, the audience feels the right to idealize, criticize or punish him/her. So, the general tendency, as Klapp has suggested, is that the character becomes a hero, a villain or a fool, the three most important roles of symbolic leaders (2009, p. 18).

Moreover, the fictional configuration of political leaders identities is related to marketing strategies (Street, 2004). Fictional products can be used in propagandistic ways, something particularly significant in U.S., where Hollywood “tends to overwhelmingly support the institution of the presidency, even though it may occasionally criticize certain aspects of the office or particular presidents” (Scott, 2000). But it is also possible that some stories present a certain ‘punishment’ to corrupt governments, for example (Heidelberg & Schultzm, 2010). On the whole, films and TV shows construct characters and images that influence audiences and politicians as well, and they are able to affect culture (Van Zoonen & Wring, 2012).

Fictional political leaders since 9/11

As many researchers have pointed out, 9/11 has had a deep impact in the U.S. popular culture and specifically in the media (Cascajosa, 2009, p. 25). But, did the image of political leaders has changed after that? Traditionally, the representation of fictional political leaders as heroes has been a mediated phenomenon in the U.S.. In fact, the majority of the heroes of the past are presidents (Nelson, 2006, p. 14). During Bill Clinton presidency (1993-2001), for instance, the image of presidents in films and TV shows was idealized, extolled and reinforced, associating these leaders with the defense of democratic values.

After 9/11, Hollywood proposed lot of films of disaster (Matthews, 2007, p. 6) that tried to express that the war was against terrorism and evil. In that period we can find some films that gave support to the U.S. president and elevated him into a strong leader, such as *DC 9/11: Time Crisis* (2003), for example, in which Bush appears as an hero or *The West Wing* (NBC, 1999-2006), TV show that

clearly represents an idealized vision of the White House even after critical situations.

However, the popularity of Bush that follows the anthrax hysteria and the military intervention in Afghanistan after 9/11 becomes a wave of critics. But, how can we explain this progressive weakening of the presidential archetype? George Bush's management of the crisis and especially the way he reacted after the attacks was one of the keys to understand the devaluation of his image. As Woodward has explained "the president's eyes were red-rimmed when he walked in. His performance was not reassuring. He spoke haltingly, mispronouncing several words as he looked down at his notes" (2002, p. 19). In a climate of fear and anxiety, audiences intensify the attention on leaders' reactions and they are more sensitive about their behavior (Bucy & Newhagen, 1999; Bucy, 2000). That is because in time of crisis citizens need much more instructions about how they should act. Thus, the inefficacy of Bush's reaction after the attacks has a direct consequence in his mediated image. In fact during his presidency and after years, most of his representations in films lacks any kind of heroism. In that context there are not more national icons that take care of their citizens. That is the case of *The Day after Tomorrow* (2004), for example, where the president is represented as a coward and ineffectual, that flees due to the threat of the big storm and leaves the citizens alone.

Despite Bush's victory in the 2004 elections, his image became further deteriorated. So, during the so-called war of terror, we can find audiovisual narratives that have played a decisive role in the development of critical or negative images about political leaders. Here we can find different kind of fictional images about commanders in chief. The first characters are anti-leaders. These presidents are cowards, useless or sometimes they appear in a ridiculous way. Thus, we can find *Harold & Kumar from Guantanamo Bay* (2008), where Bush is portrayed as a coward and a fan of guns, drugs and women; or *World Trade Center* (2006) or *Good night and good luck* (2005) that criticize U.S. politics and George Bush directly. Regarding useless leaders we can find numerous films as *Silver City* (2004), where the future governor is a bland character and clumsy; *American Dreamz* (2006), a comedy where the president is a useless puppet bordering on madness; or *Get Smart* (2008), a parody that represents a president incapable of managing the nation. Signifi-

cantly, in that period the presidential characters have progressively been relegated to secondary roles or even have disappeared of the stories. And that is especially notable in war or apocalyptic films where the president absence reveals “a fracture of the emotional bond between audience and presidency” (Sánchez-Escalonilla & Rodríguez-Mateos, 2012, p. 3).

From heroes to villains...

Ultimately, during his last years of his presidency, Bush’s popularity began to decline sharply. Especially his management of foreign policy and the criticism over the war in Iraq, Afghanistan or Guantanamo bay concentration camp, among other issues, led to a complete devaluation of the president. Thus, during 2008 we assist to a different kind of approximation to fictional political leaders. In that context, it was not enough to criticize presidents for his worthlessness or mismanagement, but now they are condemned. Political leaders are not only useless or ambiguous characters, but they are directly suspicious or guilty of having created evil. This can be observed in films as *The Simpsons Movie* (2007), where the president encloses the population in a huge glass dome in preventing an ecological disaster and then orders the destruction of the city and its inhabitants; *Eagle Eye* (2008), in which the commander in chief gives green light to attack despite the small percentage of reliability in target recognition and the advice of his team to abort; or *W.* (2008), biopic in which Bush is portrayed as an incompetent and evil puppet. Here the White House team consists of unscrupulous persons who only care for their interests, and the message seems to be that all politicians can lie to stay in power because they are true villains.

With Obama’s victory –even though they are not majoritarian– titles that criticize the previous government management persisted, with special emphasis on the Iraq War. This is the case of the film *Fair Game* (2010) or the TV show *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011-). The first suggests that, despite Bush’s statements about weapons of mass destruction, the United States knew that these did not exist. Moreover, the award-winning series, which counts Obama among its fans (Hackett & Westfall, 2011), echoes how U.S. ordered to attack non-military targets during the war, becoming responsible for the death of innocents. In this case, responsibility lies in the Vice President, who is killed by the USMC Sergeant and current Con-

gressman Brody, after having identified the first as a domestic enemy of the country. Brody loves his country and, despite being persecuted and labeled as terrorist, he is not just a soldier who has crossed over to the enemy, but a discontent and disillusioned citizen with U.S. foreign policy.

The independent movie *The President Goes to Heaven* (2011), winner at the American International Film Festival, is even more radical by suggesting that the Bush administration was behind the attacks against the Twin Towers. September 11 attempts remain present in some titles, not to narrate the tragedy, but pretending to elucidate the reasons that led to it. Like in BJ Davis' *September Morn*, reflection of 9/11 truth movement, and whose release is expected by 2013, according to Internet Movie Data Base (IMDB).

Criticism focuses, generally, on specific politicians or particular government teams, real or fictional, and less on the opposition party, like *Game Change* (2012) reveals; the docudrama discusses the appropriateness of the choice of Sarah Palin as vice presidential candidate in the 2008 elections. In this production, the intention is not to show the ineptitude of the Republican Party, but to criticize Palin's lack of preparation. In fact, McCain is portrayed as an honest politician who wants to be loved, but who is aware of how difficult it would be to win, taking into account the Bush administration's legacy as well as the mistakes of the former Alaska's Governor¹; a disadvantageous scene enjoyed by Democrats.

... And back to the heroes

On November 4th, 2008, Barack Hussein Obama II was elected as the 44th President of the United States. His campaign was focused on the hope and the power of people to change the world; which can be summarized in the phrase "Yes We Can". His inaugural address on January 20th, 2009 was bleaker (Leith, 2011), because it made clear the critical situation of the country, "subject to data and statistics", but also derived from "a sapping of confidence across our land" (Obama, 2009). However, despite the seriousness of the scenario, the newly elected President continued to defend the possibility of a better future from the union and reconciliation among the members of the American people, a message that should find its translation on mass culture:

On this day, we gather because we have chosen hope over fear, unity of purpose over conflict and discord [...].

[...] Starting today, we must pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and begin again the work of remaking America (Obama, 2009).

In the pilot of *The Newsroom* (HBO, 2012 -) titled "We Just Decided To", a female college student asks: "Why America is the greatest country in the world?", but Will McAvoy answers: "sure used to be", but not anymore. The journalist adds that "the first step in solving any problem is recognizing there is one", implying that the country's problems are solvable. The character played by Jeff Daniels admits that the U.S. fails in education, economy and health service, so they must forget the false belief that their nation is the greatest and work to regain the title. McAvoy recognizes the failures of the past, but only as a means to learn to manage the present and the future. Thus, although after a first reading it could seem that *The Newsroom* is a criticism of the media industry and the U.S. Government, it actually reinforces an idealized and positive image of the White House, like Sorkin did previously in *The West Wing* (Hall, 2005; Holbert, 2005). In this line, the episode "5/1" (01.07) can be pointed out; in said episode, the journalists must report about Bin Laden's killing. In this occasion there is no place for critical analysis of the event, because the terrorist has been defeated and, incidentally, an error from the Bush Administration has been fixed. This complicity with the Government becomes evident in the words of Charlie Skinner, president of the news division: "There's nothing wrong with waiting for the White House to tell us it's reportable. This isn't Watergate. They're not the enemy". Obama was acclaimed as the president that ended the country's number one enemy and who got what Bush could not. A message which also conveys *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), despite its critics against the ineffectiveness of the government (Fernández Pichel, 2012).

Returning to *The Newsroom*, the first season ends with the college girl from the pilot episode asking for an internship, because she wants to be part of the program spirit. McAvoy demands her to ask him again the troubled question. However, this time the news reader has another answer: "You do". Sorkin, consistent with Oba-

ma's message, propose that is the people that make the U.S. the greatest country in the world. There is no doubt, therefore, that entertainment industry tries to recover those political leaders who have become true standard bearer of the union and conciliation of American people. An example is Abraham Lincoln, who is portrayed in various films in recent years, as *Lincoln* (2012), *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* (2012), and the mockbuster *Abraham Lincoln vs. Zombies* (2012). Not forgetting *The Conspirator* (2010), focused on the trial after his murder; *Killing Lincoln* (2013) and *Saving Lincoln* (2013), whose release is expected in 2013 (IMDB), or even the "variations of the 'Lincolnesque' [...] from the leadership of Sheriff Woody (voiced by Tom Hanks, a distant relative of Abe) in *Toy Story 3* to Jamie Foxx's avenger in Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained*" (Scott & Dargis, 2013).

Hollywood remembers one of the country's most iconic leaders, and associates him with the current socio-political situation. These films spread a message of hope, because the unity of the people can promote a better future for the nation. As Lincoln proclaimed on his first inaugural address (1861): "We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies." Therefore, it becomes clear that a political leader may need the opposition support to carry out his mission, either to kill monsters or ratify the Thirteenth Amendment.

Special relevance takes the biopic directed by Spielberg. In this production, Lincoln was just reelected as President and he feels the urge to take over the legislation to abolish slavery, which in turn would serve to end the Civil War. "At all rates, whatever may be proven by blood and sacrifice must've been proved by now," and now it is the time to believe in the strength of the united people, and fight for the ideals of American democracy. The comparison with Obama is inevitable. Like Lincoln, the 44th president has just been reelected, and intends to carry out a number of economic and social reforms to ensure every citizen "a basic measure of security and dignity" (Obama, 2013). Inalienable rights for any human being, in the terms marked by the Preamble to the U.S. Declaration of Independence, that Obama remembered during his second inaugural address.

Lincoln is about the power of men to change things, but above all concerns the ability of a singular leader to reconcile opposed interests and guide the electorate toward a better future. A future where

all men are equal, and a non-white President may occupy the White House. But do not forget that Lincoln was a Republican, and, as shown in the movie, the Democratic Party opposed the Emancipation Proclamation; a dilemma which is solved by providing a halo of heroism to those Democrats that, against his party and looking toward that hopeful future, voted YES. And just as Democrats supported Lincoln in order to advance socially, Republicans should do the same with Obama. A teamwork commitment that comes even to the superheroes' universe in *The Avengers* (2012), who are recruited by a black Nick Fury, according to the re-imagined Ultimate Marvel.

Another movie that aims to recall those leaders who have set themselves as mythical heroes of social and political achievements of the American people is *Milk* (2008). This one, which portrays the life of the first openly gay man to be elected to a public office in the United States, was released shortly after the first non-white man with an Arabic name won the Presidential elections. In line with this, several studies have analyzed how film and television can help change stereotypes about leadership, concluding that when Obama came to the White House, American people were more prepared for an African American president than for a female president (Goren, 2013). However, according to Hoberman (2012, p. 11), Obama won the elections after September 2008 crash for a reason: because, as Hollywood has shown, a black man can become President of the United States only when society is doomed or when the end of life as we know it has arrived. Anyway, the presidential patriarchy perseveres in the mass media, up to the point that women hold the position almost accidentally and "only when she is backed by men" (Horwitz & Sywers, 2009, p. 125), "cementing the cultural notion that men are the legitimate leaders" (Vaughn & Michaelson, 2013, p. 141).

After the failed *Commander in Chief* (ABC, 2005-2006), about the first female U.S. President of the United States, who gets the job after the elected and legitimate president died from stroke, several movies and television series have echoed the lack of women as leaders in the audiovisual discourse, like the comedy *Veep* (HBO, 2012-), which satirizes about the incompetence of the Vice President of the United States and his team, or the drama *Political Animals* (USA Network, 2012). In the latter, Sigourney Weaver portrays the Democrat Elaine Barrish, former First Lady, and current Secretary of State, after losing

in the primaries against the current President of the United States. The similarities with Hillary Clinton from the political point of view, as well as those of her husband with Bill Clinton, are remarkable, and growing every day. That is because, as well as Barrish considered in fiction, the ex-First Lady has just resigned from the office of Secretary of State, and although “she still does not plan to run” for 2016 election (Hughes, 2012), there are some speculations about that (Wallace & Steinhauser, 2013).

In spite of the fact that the political plot is important in the mini-series, the true protagonist are family problems. This has a correspondence with the real life, because as Uscinski states, although Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin could mean a change, mass media seems more interested in their home life and their clothing than in their political skills. “Neither of these experienced and qualified women was treated the way a man would have been” (2013, p. 132). Indeed, in the satirical *Game Change* we can see a typical scene of Hollywood comedies, in which Palin tries different clothes on, while music plays in the background.

The traditional role of women gives preference to the political, and family problems are made worse when the wife and/ or mother holds the position. This is shown in *Political Animals*, as well as in *Veep* or in the Danish *Borgen* (DR1, 2010 -). In this one the Moderate Party leader becomes the first female Prime Minister of Denmark, portraying a scenario which would be later experienced by Helle Thorning-Schmidt. The TV show was anticipating reality and prepared Danish people for what would happen in 2011 elections (Seale, 2012). In summary, Elaine Barrish (*Political Animals*), Birgitte Nyborg (*Borgen*) and within their genre, Selina Meyer (*Veep*), are women who must deal with a too patriarchal environment, and not always easy to reconcile with private life. Their career contribute to disrupt their families, up to the point of considering the withdrawal of their profession in order to protect their own. Nevertheless, they achieve to manage the conflict, and come out strengthened in their dual role like family members and political leaders, as reflected in the last episode from the second season of *Borgen* entitled “An Extraordinary Remark” (*En bemærkning særlig karakter af*).

Finally, another important actor in the contemporary political fiction is represented in these TV shows: the Press. Thereon, the role played by the fourth estate seems clear: when the politician gets it

wrong, at least from the perspective of the journalist, they should do everything to destroy him; when he does well, or at least implied that fight for the good of the citizens, a little help is feasible –e.g., *The Newsroom*, *Political Animals*, *Boss* (Starz, 2011-2012) –. The ideal of politics is linked to the ideal of journalism, and both of them must follow the principles of transparency and objectivity.

Is there an Obama's audiovisual fiction?

After analyzing the features of some films and TV shows during Obama's presidency, compared with titles belonging to previous Bush's administration, the question whether there is a real split in the audiovisual fiction between these two periods or not, arises. In this regard, according to Estrada it would be more accurate to talk about a post-Bush period, characterized by the lack of power, noting as example the Nolan's Batman trilogy (2012, p. 24). We agree with Estrada when he talks about continuity rather than a break, not related to Bush period's stories, but to the American cinema's trajectory, in general. So, at least in regard to the representation of political leadership, Hollywood tries to strengthen the role of both the President and the Government, allowing only critics about specific people or teams, either real or fictional. Thus, while individual's actions are condemned or applauded, political offices become idealized.

But beyond this common goal, we can indeed find certain characteristics in Obama administration's fiction, such as the increase of women in relevant positions or the greater role of the Press, symbol of transparency, objectivity and mediation between government and citizens. Nevertheless, the most important values are the ideals of unity, reconciliation and hope. The time of the aggressive criticism is over, and for further progress, American people should assume past mistakes and join forces so that together, led by the President, can rebuild their nation.

However, the notions of union and hope are not exclusive to the current administration, but typical of recession periods. This suggests that present audiovisual fiction respond to a socio-cultural context, rather than to the influence of President's policies. And indeed, despite the message of fraternization, there are still many stories that insist on distrusts of the "other" because anyone can be an enemy, foreign or domestic. So, can we talk about an Obama

audiovisual fiction? The answer remains uncertain: in some aspects yes, in others no. In sum, although there are particular features that are not seen in the previous period, many of them are heirs of a context that goes beyond the jurisdiction of the White House's commander in chief.

Notes

- 1 Revelations from the Campaign, 2010. CBS [online] 12 January. Available at: <<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2010/01/07/60minutes/main/6067628.shtml>> [Accessed 08 February 2013].

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