

## 8 Clean Cuts

### Kennedy Modernism on Screen

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This essay returns to the braided relationships between the presidency, cinema, and television during the Kennedy era and its immediate aftermath. The conventional understanding that John F. Kennedy was the first television president—and that such a claim holds meaningful consequences for the nature of the presidency then and since—requires reinterpretation. Two strands of commentary have predominated in critical discussions. One, more sociologically and iconographically oriented, has concentrated on the process of cultivating and maintaining the presidential image.<sup>1</sup> A second, more literary strand has dwelled upon the odd and eerie coincidences that seemed to reverberate through the culture as a whole.<sup>2</sup> Each of these has a privileged, Kennedy-centered point of origin. Image-culture studies have their source in Theodore H. White's *Making of the President 1960* and Daniel Boorstin's *The Image* (1961), while the obsession with the cultural unconscious dates to Norman Mailer, particularly "Superman Goes to the Supermarket" (1960).<sup>3</sup>

Even though these two trends have guided what might be called "Kennedy studies," neither their intellectual origins nor the interplay between them has been subject to much investigation. Two sets of examples stake out different aspects of these "new frontiers": the collection of documentaries made by Drew Associates that became the model for Direct Cinema on the one hand and the constellation of political thrillers such as *Seven Days in May* and *Fail-Safe* and their comedic antidote, *Dr. Strangelove*, on the other. The first grounded the new administration's ideology of television within a long-standing belief in the media-critical powers of cinema. The second relied on the administration's inveterate crisis-mongering (over civil rights, in Cuba, at the UN, etc.) to project a host of alternative scenarios that would build toward moments of raw temporal succession, culminating in an executive decision.

Each of these tendencies internalized and reprojected its complement. So the most realistic, process-oriented films could find themselves enmeshed in the sort of magical thinking that led White and Boorstin to blame Nixon's loss in the Kennedy–Nixon TV debates on the "image-orthicon tube" and its "X-ray" effects.<sup>4</sup> And as if by conservation of cultural momentum, those films that began out of a fascination with occult design—the assassination

films—reach their climaxes in moments of almost real-time narration. Such intensely realist moments are so manifestly the outcome of a collection of particular decisions and events that they project, in ghostly fashion, their own alternate realities. What is more, those alternate realities became actual in the world. Attempts to maintain the separation between these two traditions fail to recognize that it was their collision and collapse that made the Kennedy moment possible to begin with—process and design, in flickering opposition.

Kennedy himself occupied the impossible midpoint of this opposition, colliding and collapsing the alternatives in *TV Guide* in 1959:

Honesty, vigor, compassion, intelligence—the presence or lack of these and other qualities make up what is called the candidate’s “image.” While some intellectuals and politicians may scoff at these “images”—and while they may in fact be based only on a candidate’s TV impression, ignoring his record, views and other appearances—my own conviction is that these images or impressions are likely to be uncannily correct. I think, no matter what their defenders or detractors may say, that the television public has a fairly good idea of what Dwight D. Eisenhower is really like—or Jimmy Hoffa—or John McClellan—or Vice President Nixon—or countless others.<sup>5</sup>

TV impressions are “uncannily correct,” even when they are subject to intense manipulation, says the new wave politician in the midst of his own paratelevisual image management. Taken one way, Kennedy is claiming that some power in the machine or the public keeps the communicating channel clear. Taken another way, Kennedy is implying that the channel always carries with it an admission of self-consciousness. Kennedy is creating “JFK”—he knows it, and so does his audience.

This essay will attempt to locate the shared origin and points of fracture in the Kennedy complex in a modernist ideology of the clean line, or, in this context, the clean cut. On the one hand, “clean-cut” might simply mean well groomed and apparently morally conventional. Kennedy himself was clean-cut in this way.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, “clean-cut” might refer to a morally straightforward presentation, a kind of decisiveness and clarity embodied in an action. Kennedy managed to be clean-cut in this way, too. White describes the scene on election night, with the campaign staff gathering to watch Nixon refuse to concede:

[Kennedy] said nothing as Nixon spoke, watching closely, his expression showing faint distaste. He himself, elegant and correct in all public appearances, had never permitted his wife to be exposed to this sort of thing; the heroic effort to smile by Nixon, the twisted, barely controlled sorrow of Mrs. Nixon, twinged him, almost as if he were embarrassed. It was not, could not be, the sort of thing he himself might do, for Kennedy likes matters clean-cut, correct.<sup>7</sup>

The presentational version of the clean-cut might manifest the moral version of the clean-cut as easily as Nixon's 5 o'clock shadow could manifest his relentless self-embarrassment. The new television era multiplied the avenues for such revelation. At one level, White is capturing—consolidating—what has become conventional wisdom: that the Kennedy campaign was the first modern television campaign. But Kennedy modernism required more than the medium; it revolved around the critique of the medium, and the invocation of an ideology of television that would define the Kennedy era.

A third example from White will clarify the overlay of craft and manipulation that attended the invocation of the clean-cut. In the wake of the TV debates the campaign worried that religious prejudice would overwhelm the image of the “clean-cut Democrat.” They had been out in front of the issue for a month, though. It was in early September 1960 that Kennedy faced an assembly of ministers in Houston, Texas, to deliver his statement on the separation of church and state and to take their questions. White captures the oddly disarticulated temporality of the moment: once the “decision happened in Kennedy's mind” (an odd enough phrase) time itself elongated: “all the while he was finding his way to the future as he traveled the Pacific Coast, his mind focused on the past.” Kennedy and the campaign loved such moments of decision: “We can win or lose the election right there in Houston on Monday night,” said speechwriter Theodore Sorensen.<sup>8</sup> The event epitomized the Kennedy philosophy: “the candidate, always happiest as a man when confronting crisis with action, felt better. As if miraculously, his cracking voice began to clear ... ” (262). It was clean-cut. It was planned. It was magic. It was televised. It was also cinematic. Kennedy's presentational decisiveness was ideally suited to the television of the moment, but it was the Kennedy campaign's consciousness of that fact that forced them to turn to cinema to elaborate their critical vision of a televised culture. The meeting in Houston was broadcast the next day, but for the Kennedy volunteers, “the filmed record” was “their basic document.” The campaign showed it “over and over again in both Catholic and Protestant areas of the country for the next seven weeks.”<sup>9</sup> As the television debates faded, the cinematic portrayal of the television man took its place.

Two further aspects of this scene in Houston merit attention. The film is played “over and over again,” as film is meant to be, yet it is hard to avoid associating that endless reiteration with the reiterated images of Kennedy's assassination three years down the road. That spookiness, then, is the second aspect of this scene—even White is struck by it, although he couches the coincidence in appropriately religious terms: “as if miraculously.” In a context where a certain professional anticipation is essential to the work—campaigns have to try to look around the corner—successful anticipation can begin to seem eerie. Media iterations have indeterminate effects—“no measure is available of how many millions saw the film played and replayed, still less is there a measure available of its effect”<sup>10</sup>—but that

indeterminacy is rearticulated as a reiteration, the “over and over” of a perpetual confrontation with crisis.<sup>11</sup>

The 1960 Democratic primaries, the convention, and the general election campaign nodalize the forces that will issue in the distinctive forms we think of as 1960s culture. The first major artifact of this new configuration was the Robert Drew Associates’ film of the Wisconsin primary, *Primary*, shot in April. It helped launch the Direct Cinema movement in the United States and abroad, but it also depended crucially on technology, as Kennedy’s entire campaign would. Drew Associates shared the technohumanist beliefs of the New Frontier. Documentary had relied on highly portable small-load cameras since World War II, but *Primary* would not have been possible without the new Nagra sync-sound taping system. The Nagra liberated the camera operator from the sound recorder. This liberation in turn encouraged (but certainly did not require) a mode of storytelling in which onscreen voices seemed to narrate their own acts. For the Direct Cinema pioneers, the technological liberation of the recorders fit with an ideological determination to liberate subjects from the requirements of filming. Such liberations extended to an injunction against voice-over narration. *Primary* still contained some voice-over (although several members of the team fought against it), yet it is radically immersive, and it inaugurated an era of telegovernment.

In *Primary*, *Adventures on the New Frontier*, *Yanki, No!*, and *Crisis*—all films that aired on television—Drew Associates set the terms of an intermedia entente at a moment when TV had reached particularly Kennedy-esque self-consciousness. The new head of the FCC, Newton Minow, told broadcasters on May 9, 1961, that they presided over a “vast wasteland.” His notorious speech was typical of Kennedy rhetoric. On the one hand, he conjured an abject present gazing out at a future of equal parts peril and promise. “The power of instantaneous sight and sound is without precedent in mankind’s history. This is an awesome power. It has limitless capabilities for good—and for evil. And it carries with it awesome responsibilities—responsibilities which you and I cannot escape.” On the other hand, and concomitantly, he elevated the decision maker: “I did not come to Washington to idly observe the squandering of the public’s airwaves. I believe in the gravity of my own particular sector of the New Frontier.”<sup>12</sup> This vision of television would help spawn a widespread “documentary boom” in the United States, a drive toward edification that would capitalize on the medium’s tendency toward presence, instantaneity, and immersion. Direct Cinema could foster that illusion of television within a context that preserved cinema’s hard-won claims to be the medium of media disenchantment. Those claims had been forcefully articulated in Popular Front films such as *Citizen Kane*, *His Girl Friday*, and *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* and would find new purchase in films such as *Ace in the Hole* and *A Face in the Crowd*. Now *Primary* would fold such claims into television.<sup>13</sup>

The essential scene has Kennedy sitting in a chair while a photographer arranges his hands, his cuffs, and the table. The eight brief shots

seem to simply capture the behind-the-scenes of campaign photography. If this campaign is one of image, then the scene is both a revelatory and a deflating account of the production of that image. Ricky Leacock's camera shares its mechanism with the photographer's, which suggests the idea that in baring the operations of the modern media campaign, *Primary* implicates itself in those operations. But to read this moment merely ideologically or merely allegorically would be a mistake. The film is far too assured of its own superiority to the photographer's image for a simple equation to be the point of the scene. For Leacock (and Drew, and Maysles and Pennebaker) the implication and the allegory fail to get at the strength of their intentions. They want less from their identification with photography than from their identification with Kennedy himself. It is not that they *record* the campaign, but that they *measure up to* it. When the photographer finally takes the pictures, he instructs Kennedy to look "just above the camera," an ideal spot for a standard portrait, just off-lens. As it happens, Leacock's camera is "just above the camera," and the shot captures Kennedy head on. Photography forces people to bend themselves to its requirements; cinema, at least this cinema, requires no such accommodations.

Throughout the sequence, the photographer's silhouette bobs and weaves in front of Leacock's camera, at times obscuring Kennedy, at other times ducking out of the way to provide us with a sudden view. In the fourth shot, the photographer steps between us and the haggard candidate, and the screen goes black. But when the photographer leaves the frame, Kennedy is smiling broadly.



Figure 8.1 Kennedy smiling.

He is, suddenly, the iconic JFK. Grinning at the photographer's fussiness, he delivers a crucial line: "It's not time to smile yet, Wally." Yet he cannot help himself. His effortless self-narration and his mistimed smile are perfectly timed for the film of the campaign.

It was perfectly timed for the history of cinema as well. For two months later, Michelangelo Antonioni would deliver his famous speech at Cannes. The director seems enmeshed in the same discourses as Kennedy, but his consciousness is far less happy: "I am convinced that today the individual, who takes such pains to widen the frontiers of his scientific knowledge, does nothing to advance himself from a moral point of view. He is still bound by old conventions, by obsolete myths, despite the fact that he is perfectly conscious of this state of affairs."<sup>14</sup> Crucially, that perfect consciousness was shared by both Kennedy and the filmmakers. Drew, commenting on *Primary* for the DVD release, announces without equivocation and with a properly timed smile: "Alright folks. This is *the* big moment of the film. ... We shot continuously throughout this photo studio session. And when it was over we got into the car, and looked at each other, and smiled, and we knew that something historic had happened in filmmaking." *Primary* investigates, and argues for, a political world in which a candidate's metamedia campaign is as important to his success as the media campaign itself. Indeed, the film considers it to be something of a contemporary utopia. The alternative to this convergence of media-subjection and media-savvy, of action and consciousness, is obsolescence. As we leave the scene, the photographer is still attempting to get Kennedy to adjust. "Could you swing your body a little bit more to the camera there?" Yet over his line we see not Kennedy but Hubert Humphrey, frozen, posterized, slapped on the front of a bus falling farther and farther behind us in the rain. Sound and image, no longer in sync, leave us with a tidy, clean-cut irony. The old photographic-era politician shrinks to life-size, and that scale is no longer sufficient.

*Primary* comes by its premonitory effects by way of a thoroughgoing commitment to the present. Its complement, *The Manchurian Candidate* (Frankenheimer, UA, 1962), made forecasts of the future the products of the culture of the present—a matter of programming. It is easy enough to imagine an assassination scenario and then build a film to make it plausible—*Suddenly*, *The Manchurian Candidate*'s low-rent antecedent, did just that in 1954.<sup>15</sup> But the aim of *The Manchurian Candidate* is not to build a plausible scenario but to build a plausible world in which some version of that scenario is inevitable. The fatefulness of American society in the wake of *The Manchurian Candidate* stems not from its particular politics but from the matrix of analogical thinking that undergirds its vision of culture.

Consider the coincidences between JFK, Oswald, and Raymond Shaw. Like Shaw, JFK was a war hero (Oswald was nothing of the kind); like Shaw, Oswald had an absent father and "mommy issues" (Kennedy had neither). Like Shaw, Oswald used a rifle; like JFK, Shaw was a popular writer. Like Shaw, JFK came from a powerful political family; like Shaw, Oswald spent

time in a communist country. Now, in contrast, consider the differences: neither JFK nor Oswald served in Korea; neither of them was particularly exercised by Sino-US relations; neither of them was deeply implicated in the heritage of McCarthyism. When we are spooked by *The Manchurian Candidate*, we are spooked by the parallels, and we ignore the film's differences from reality. This induced habit of thought—and not the parallels or differences themselves—is the film's real achievement.

The press conference where Senator Iselin bruits the number of communists in the Defense Department epitomizes this effect. However cluttered the frame, we are given uncluttered access to the scene's audio: no one can hear anyone else but we can hear everyone. It is a Kennedy-era cleanliness. The famous shot of Angela Lansbury watching Iselin on television while he denounces the Secretary of Defense live, just over her shoulder, echoes Garry Winogrand's shot of Kennedy at the 1960 convention. But where Kennedy is turned away and his television presence turned to us, Iselin is usually facing right while his image looks left; and where Kennedy himself is much larger than his televisual avatar, Iselin's TV head is the bigger one (although not as large as Lansbury's). To pull it off, Frankenheimer had to leave the set and revert to his earlier role as television director. Later, of course, he could cut together the film, but in the moment,

I was in the television truck directing the live television cameras, so that what you see on the monitor I was actually doing at the time the film camera was filming the scene. In other words I was cutting the cameras in the television truck. So that it was absolutely totally live action. ... This was all take one, incidentally, we never went back and tried to do this again, we couldn't have. (DVD)

The image itself is filled with apparatus, the kind of casual device-bearing that Hollywood does so well. That repletion thickens the reality of the moment despite the ludicrous exchanges between Iselin and the secretary. At the same time, while cinema may still be the medium that tells the truth of television, the technical requirements of that cinema nearly convert it into New-Frontier-television.

The press conference is only one of *The Manchurian Candidate*'s trademark surplussive images. The first occurs in the film's second shot. The opening shot has brought a deuce-and-a-half carrying Sgt. Raymond Shaw and Frank Sinatra's Captain Marco to the front door of Gertrude's, a bar and whorehouse. This second shot leads Shaw down a dark corridor until he reaches a gridded Japanese screen. Raymond slides the doors open, and a world comes into view. More than a dozen people are in the smoky room, lounging, dancing, playing cards, styling hair, and hanging photos on the wall. A guardian lion bears the handwritten title "SARGE." The simplest description of the contents of the room would fill remainder of this essay. Consider the quick ironies—Shaw next to a photo of General MacArthur;



Figure 8.2 *The Manchurian Candidate*.

a prostitute reading *Movie Life*—which are there only to make the image manageable for us.<sup>16</sup> Such ironies are the places within the scene where we can apply our own interpretive capacities, where we can feel like we are working against the totality before us.

That totality is the realization through production design (and cinematography) of novelist Richard Condon's paratactic haze. It comes to the fore when we are looking at Gertrude's, Marco's book-strewn apartment, or the mad Lincolniana of the Iselin house.<sup>17</sup> At the press conference, the surplus lies in the combination of apparatuses and images, but by the time we reach the climactic convention, we are nearly to the point where images alone will suffice, and the apparatus will collapse into the rifle, scope, and sniper's nest/projection booth. Here, the headlong rush obviates the need for any reflection. Raymond tells Marco, "You couldn't have stopped them; the Army couldn't have stopped them," and he is correct. But the speediness of the climax makes the subsequent, final sequence of reading necessary: "You should read some of the citations some time. Just read them."

Each aspect of the president's "cinematization" depended on a particular phase of the production process. The Direct Cinema documentaries turned the flow of events into narratives of design largely through ironic editing. The assassination films and their fellow culturally spooked movies centered on highly designed spaces—*Dr. Strangelove's* War Room, *The Manchurian Candidate's* Iselin home—that seemed to call out for nation-shaking events. The work of production designers Ken Adam and Richard Sylbert in particular supported paranoid readings that encouraged viewers to look through the events of the films to the web of spaces and material objects



that supported such happenings. And while each mode grappled with its complement, only *PT 109* boiled the two together, relying on the absolute coincidence of president and hero to release its Kennedy from its Oswald.

*PT 109* put the president on screen in protohero mode. Produced “under the personal supervision” of Jack Warner, it was the mogul’s entry into the epic battle with Darryl Zanuck’s *The Longest Day*. Warner had made movies on behalf of the government during the war, of course, and had come under HUAC fire for *Mission to Moscow* in particular.<sup>18</sup> But *PT 109* was a cinematic puff piece, and its main aim was to display, for long stretches, young Kennedy’s competence and gallows humor.

Seen one way, *PT 109* seems to be little more than a mediocre film built to political order, where clichéd moments alternate with oddly winning characterizations. But that widely held opinion fails to capture the film’s abiding oddness. Critics have called Robertson’s Kennedy “smug,” and that is one way to put it, but what this Kennedy does is *know*. And when he doesn’t know, he offers an absolutely unself-conscious account of his lack of knowledge (knowing what he doesn’t know). As the men squabble with each other on the deck of the wrecked boat, Kennedy sits silently thinking. He plans to swim. His second is dubious, “You’re not thinking of swimming over there, are you?” And Kennedy is both commanding and contingent: “I’m open to suggestions, Lenny. You got any better ones?” Lenny does not.

In *The Manchurian Candidate*, James Gregory played an ersatz McCarthy attempting to capitalize on his stepson’s fake heroics. Gregory returns to play JFK’s substitute father again in *PT 109*. The commander in charge of operations of the flotilla, Gregory’s Ritchie comes on as the classic WWI retread—a man so tough the Navy couldn’t get rid of him between wars. Kennedy matches his bluster with guilelessness. Generically, Ritchie’s gruff exterior and attention to protocol would mask dissimulated concern for the men under his command, but there is no sign of hidden fellow-feeling. “How did you feel about the inspection?” Kennedy asks. “How’m I supposed to feel?” “The men worked hard to get the boat in shape. I thought a word of encouragement might be in order.” “I don’t hand out pats on the back for a job I expect a man to do.” When the flotilla later decamps to a new island, closer to the action, Ritchie is nearly left behind—passed over, as he was in the last war, which he rode out in Bayonne, New Jersey. His captain explains that Ritchie doesn’t attempt to understand his men (something we knew); Ritchie counters that he can’t understand what they are up against because he has never been in action. This revelation changes our understanding of Kennedy’s interactions with him. Instead of strategically (and smugly) disarming his commander, it turns out that Kennedy has been modeling proper command behavior for him.

As the *109* ships out, Ritchie comes aboard. When the boat is attacked by a lone Zero, he asks to man the 20 mm; naturally he brings down the enemy plane. The substitute father has become a substitute seaman. He is congratulated by Kirksey, the gunner he replaced, and this gives him the chance to

be cool and sincere: “Beginner’s luck,” he remarks, “but thanks, son, thanks very much.” Kennedy overhears and has one of his many private moments. What is he thinking? Most obviously, that Ritchie has learned to show gratitude. But just below that, we might think Kennedy is realizing that the commander is, indeed, a beginner and that his earlier actions were all bluff. Yet in *PT 109*, Kennedy learns nothing because he already knows everything. He can command, he can plot things out, and he can witness. Ritchie’s cool admission of “beginner’s luck” adds nothing to Kennedy’s understanding. Instead, Kennedy is witnessing Ritchie realizing what sorts of restraint are necessary for command. When Ritchie replays the scene below decks—“You must have had a lot of gunnery during the first war, right sir?” “Ah, we can, uh, just let it go at that”—he laughs to himself because he now knows what other men have meant when they gave him such evasive answers. Ritchie has learned his lesson, the one he could only learn in a crisis, and that lesson makes him a better commander.

Ritchie learns his lesson by stepping in for Kirksey. And when we next see Kirksey, he has the jitters. He asks a friend to “take care of my things” when he’s dead. His friend in turn asks Kennedy to intervene. The lieutenant and the seaman have a truly bizarre conversation. “What can a man do but pray?” Kirksey asks over coffee. Kennedy utterly refuses to give him false solace. “You can do your job, like all of us,” isn’t much of a response to existential dread, but the soundtrack swells and Kennedy leaves the galley as though the problem were solved. Kennedy here takes up Ritchie’s position that he expects every man to do his job, but he does so by admitting that every man has been afraid, that you would have to be a fool not to be. It sounds like empathy.

Yet Kirksey is right. And as it happens—and what throws the movie completely off-kilter if it hasn’t been knocked that way already—*Kennedy never said he wasn’t*. It is the clean cut in brutal action. What Kennedy offered were what we might call “coping strategies”—reminders about “the odds” and their “jobs.” But his odd beatific stare and hyperreal sang-froid were nothing Kirksey could possibly measure up to. Just as Kennedy could tell that Ritchie had no combat experience, he knows that Kirksey is doomed. He’s read the script.

Even stranger than Kirksey’s accurate superstition or Kennedy’s tacit belief that the torpedoman is right is the film’s lack of concern with the whole thing. Kirksey thinks he’s “gonna get mailed home,” and he disappears when the boat is rammed. The searchers call his name, but no one ever states outright that Kirksey is dead. No one notes that he was correct about his fate or comments that irony has struck or even allows the perhaps-there-are-unseen-forces look to pass across his face. Kennedy’s reticence plays as cool, the film’s as spookiness. Ritchie takes Kirksey’s place at the gun and in the crew cabin; Kirksey pays the price.<sup>19</sup>

I emphasize these splits in character and narration because by the summer of 1963, the twin timelines of foresight and rapid fidelity have reached a

place of standstill. The same sort of repletion that undergirded *The Manchurian Candidate* now seems to be at work within the presidency's own media strategy. The world is decorated with possibility. Forces emanate from and collect around the White House, balancing each other and opening up the bubble in which fact and fiction will operate. The summer is split between *Crisis* and *Seven Days in May*, and each of them in turn is split internally. *Crisis* carries forward the Direct Cinema approach to political action, relying on the sort of predictable event that would allow for the display of the Kennedy style. Yet the event is only apparently predictable and only seems so because the film refuses to acknowledge anything beyond its narrowly defined story. The clean-cut now becomes the guiding principle of the project as a whole. Such delimitation made it possible for Kennedy to agree to participate in the film. In contrast, *Seven Days* takes up the scenario-building of *The Manchurian Candidate*, but now its scenario comes with the administration's prior consent. To bring the necessary plausibility to its alternate reality, the film had to become something close to a documentary. The production would stage a riot just outside the White House fence, and in order to secure permission, Kennedy agreed to head to Hyannis Port for the weekend.<sup>20</sup> Presidential absence made *Seven Days*' contingent, presidential narrative plausible just as narrative determination made presidential presence possible in *Crisis*.

*Crisis* shot in June and aired in October. It has nothing to say about the white riot during the integration of Ole Miss, even though that disaster was the implicit backdrop for the Kennedys' concern with the stage-managed conflict in Alabama. Nor does the film mention the assassination of Medgar Evers the day after Kennedy's climactic speech on behalf of his civil rights bill. Under its self-imposed constraints, *Crisis* implies that the Kennedys have learned from their mistakes, and shows Governor George Wallace determined not to have his resistance to the federal government spark a violent scene. The only real question seemed to be whether someone was going to have to remove Wallace bodily from the schoolhouse door, and how the image politics would play out. Drew had asked the Kennedys for permission to film earlier crises, but the administration put him off, either because international events require stricter control over political messaging or because the narrative was too dangerously open for their comfort. With the integration of Alabama, they relented.<sup>21</sup>

Leacock was in Alabama to cover Wallace's actions. He shot Wallace at breakfast in a sequence that would be intercut with Attorney General Robert Kennedy's family meal. In a tour of the governor's mansion, Wallace casts himself as the inheritor of lost causism ("I'd rather live a short life of standing for principle than a long life of compromise. Of course, that may not mean much to you folks"), but more than that, he is cast as the Boorstinian answer to the Kennedy's media manipulation. Pointing at portraits of past governors, Wallace says, "I think it does us good to reflect and draw on the courage of people who do fight, and stand for what they

believe in.” For him, images are not marketing tools but enduring sources of (perpetually eroding) value.<sup>22</sup>

The parallel breakfasts look ahead to the film’s famous telephone conversation in which Robert Kennedy will talk with Nicholas Katzenbach, and the filmmakers will have both sides of the conversation. Even more important, Kerry Kennedy, previously seen at the opening breakfast, will interrupt the call to talk to “Uncle Nick.”<sup>23</sup> The Assistant Attorney General shifts swiftly and without remainder from discussing strategy to chatting with the young girl. The camera work is particularly sharp. At the very moment that Katzenbach is cheerily explaining how hot it is, Leacock has panned to General Abrams, absentmindedly picking his sticky shirt out of his armpit.

In the next day’s *New York Times*, Jack Gould weighed in against the decision to turn “the private deliberations of the executive branch of government” into “a melodramatic peep show, with homespun family touches.”<sup>24</sup> These were typical complaints about Direct Cinema. The results were nothing but “play-acting” and a “preoccupation with strategy” that “pushed all the deeper issues to the background.” Drew, he felt, had little knowledge of “the human reaction to the presence of cameras.” Compounding the problem, for Gould, was the delay between the events and the broadcast. The actual crisis was “stronger news last June than last night.” What Gould does not notice, though, is that the delay made *Crisis* an ideal object for further critical attention. Pushing the “deeper issues” into the background made the tensions of the new image culture central, not extraneous; *Crisis* made media criticism necessary. After the documentary aired, Gould switched the channel to WNDT’s half-hour panel discussion of it, “Crisis: Presidency by Television.” However unfortunate it might have been to see government “surrender to the ceaseless and often thoughtless demands of the entertainment world,” another television show was always there to analyze the consequences.

The coup at the heart of *Seven Days in May* looked like one way the Kennedy administration might end; it embodied another. On the one hand, the administration certainly considered the book’s scenario plausible—something that was easy enough to do when the chief plotter of the film’s coup d’état, James Mattoon Scott, was a combination of Generals Curtis LeMay and Douglas MacArthur, with a dash of Edwin Walker. Kennedy had liked the novel, even ribbing Fletcher Knebel about it when the coauthor came to the White House in his role as a reporter for *Look* in early 1963.<sup>25</sup> The production was underway by that summer. Like *The Manchurian Candidate*, *Seven Days in May* was directed by John Frankenheimer. As the start of photography neared, Press Secretary Pierre Salinger conveyed the administration’s blessing. Fredric March, who was to star as the beset peacenik president, had been a featured speaker at the president’s dinner with Nobel laureates in the previous year.<sup>26</sup> Frankenheimer and production designer Cary Odell toured the White House residence in order to take pictures of the interior, and the president offered to clear out

of Washington so the production could stage its opening riot out front.<sup>27</sup> That weekend (July 27–29), Kennedy and his family went to Hyannis Port (there are, naturally, home movies).<sup>28</sup> Back in the District, extras were outfitted with pickets—pro-disarmament and pro-Scott—and instructed to have at it.

The parallels were impressive. In the film, a peacenik president has gone soft on communism; labor and management are at odds; the economy is slowing down as it shifts away from its Cold War footing; and the restive general public is giving the president miserable approval ratings—29 percent in the latest Gallup poll. An impending military alert will provide the opportunity for the president's overthrow. He will be saved by a lone soldier (Kirk Douglas) and a stirring speech. And while Kennedy's approval was still above 60, that summer was similarly stressful for the factual president.<sup>29</sup> Railway workers were threatening a general strike over feather-bedding rules; the civil rights marches were growing in intensity and his own legislation would be almost impossible to navigate out of committee; even his proposed tax cut—designed to boost the economy and improve his chances at reelection—was stalled.<sup>30</sup> Looming over it all were negotiations with the USSR on the Limited Test Ban Treaty, part of the package of deescalation measures that had emerged from the Cuban Missile Crisis. The evening before he went on his movie-induced vacation, Kennedy delivered a nationwide address on the LTBT, cementing his similarity to the fictional President Lyman.

The production was able to capitalize on the president's manipulability within a semifictional context of his own desire. Lyman's absence from Washington provides the opportunity to stage a coup; Kennedy's absence provides the opportunity to stage a staged coup. The semi-Direct Cinema canons of Frankenheimer's realism appealed to the administration; the results were real enough. More important than the film's sync or lack of sync between fiction and fact is its capacity to understand the parallax of their imbrication.<sup>31</sup> Frankenheimer was determined to give the film the feel of the near-future, a world remade by the effortless reflexivity of Kennedy modernism. (Based on its internal calendar, it is set in 1975.) They used rear-projection to create something that looked like a digital video library; they were the first crew to shoot in the new Dulles International Airport; and they relied almost exclusively on European cars to achieve a certain dislocation through design. At the same time, Frankenheimer repeatedly relied on the same sort of hybrid television/film setup as in *The Manchurian Candidate's* press conference to convey the immediacy of events. And again, it required that he be offset, in the truck, managing the live television feed in order to create the filmic record. Just as Kennedy's absence made the fictional coup possible, Frankenheimer's absence was essential to the realism of its depiction.

At the heart of *Seven Days* is a secret military command, ECOMCON, bureaucratese for "Emergency Communications Control." The low-grade

street violence that opens the film is old-fashioned. By hiding the president away from the media while simultaneously seizing control of the major broadcast networks and the crucial long-distance relay station in Utah, General Scott will achieve his bloodless coup. Scott knows the country is run by its media. Frankenheimer and Kennedy know that, too. Scott may be their evil twin, but at every level from plot to production to propaganda, *Seven Days* is a story of media manipulation. The administration's strategy appeared to be working perfectly; then Kennedy was assassinated. The release of *Seven Days* was held up until February 1964.

In that month's issue of *The Realist* (the journal of "freethought, criticism and satire"), editor Paul Krassner explained that he "had originally planned to write a short piece in this issue on 'The Age of Image Projection'" about *Crisis* and the Valachi hearings. *Crisis*, as he puts it, resulted "from a White House decision to permit a serious situation in Alabama to become a self-conscious version of *Candid Camera*" and would have been better if the administration had hired Jack Lemmon to play Governor Wallace. One might think that the assassination would have marked the end of this age of the image, but not for Krassner:

The death of the president does not invalidate the premise; indeed the event itself provided a universal vehicle for image renewal.

*Variety's* obituary inadvertently summed it up: "President Kennedy is a loss to America and the world but, since partisans and individuals alike inevitably see matters in their own reflection, Show Business is especially the loser as a result of the still unbelievable tragedy."

It was the precisely the showbusinessization of politics that enabled an assassin to smite his target.

And it was precisely the showbusinessization of law enforcement that enabled Jack Ruby to kill the suspected assassin.<sup>32</sup>

The analytic overlay that accompanied *Crisis* when it aired on television had nearly become untethered by the time Krassner wrote. Despite Krassner's claim that the assassination had not altered the politics of image projection, something had decisively changed. What had opened up was the necessity for a kind of reconsideration. Had the system changed, even in so little a time as a month? Krassner says no, but he had to say *something*. The producers of *Seven Days*, like the producers of *Dr. Strangelove*, were similarly forced to reconsider. Both movies were delayed until 1964, until a moment when the coincidence of their depictions with the world could be regarded historically. Where *The Manchurian Candidate* and *PT 109* spookily predicted the near future, these films came demanding a reflection on their predictive scenarios. They exist in the future perfect—the coup will have happened; the nuclear war will have been launched—and they solicit reconsideration. This unbridgeably split self-consciousness carried the New Hollywood for another decade.

The Kennedy assassination secured the ideological independence of film and disarticulated the hybrid film-and-television system that preceded it. The consequences for television were just as profound. No account of television and the assassination has been more important than Philip Rosen's "Document and Documentary."<sup>33</sup> Where commentators from Marshall McLuhan to Fredric Jameson located the assassination at the heart of the transition to postmodernism, Rosen concentrated on the particular form television coverage took, in particular the gap between the event and its depiction in the context of the continuous happening of live TV. Where cinema had to come to terms with the events it captured, on the crucial day, television *missed the event*—with no live feed of the assassination—but television goes on. Television's liveness, Rosen says, means that over the course of the broadcast we can watch the television system compensate for the lacuna. What appears to be a crisis of material—no footage of the event—is in actuality a crisis of control—no reassertion of the privilege of certain elites (the anchor) to provide the surplus value necessary for documentary. On one level, the lack of a document makes the process of becoming documentary all the more visible. On another level, though, the coverage of the assassination is a "document in the history of news."<sup>34</sup> I want to concentrate on this interplay between the two.

Recent work on viewer feedback from that weekend by Aniko Bodroghkozy indicates that the audience was less concerned with the gap than Rosen's account would imply. But while the continuous live coverage of the event "was fundamentally new," requiring Americans "to figure out ... what it meant to experience the trauma of the event via this new medium,"<sup>35</sup> the anticipated news format was not. Television news was not then and is not now simply live. It is read and hosted live, but it digests earlier filmed or taped events; Saunders calls this hybrid form "threaded."<sup>36</sup> The problem Rosen pinpoints at NBC, then, is not that they missed the event but that they have no good record to slot into their operational liveness. The network depends, in Rosen's terms, on indexical media like film and photography.

Consider the moment in the broadcast when NBC finally is able to show a wire photo of the president's limousine in the motorcade. An unidentified man reaches up from beneath the news desk with the picture, hastily mounted on a ragged piece of cardboard. We see only his hand and arm. For several minutes, he holds the photo in place, and, naturally enough, it wiggles around as the anchors discuss it. The contrast between the jutting hand in this hastily "threaded" moment and the deliberate fussing with Kennedy's cuffs in *Primary* could not be more stark.

Based on such moments, what I want to suggest more forcefully than Rosen is that the absence of an audiovisual index of the assassination is striking because it doubles the uncontrolled absence of the president himself. In years to come, that doubled absence will prompt a compensatory search for material evidence via the obsession with the president's head—skull fragments, brain extrusions, neck wounds—and ballistics—the magical second

or missing third bullets. But in 1963 the doubled absence of president and audiovisual index becomes part of the analytic overlay of the contemporary moment in media analysis. That gap is most striking to Rosen and the network anchors, but it is less so to the audience, as Bodroghkozy shows, because the anchors are available as substitute authority figures. “Over and over again viewers referred to the newsmen as close friends coming together with viewers to share their mutual grief.”<sup>37</sup>

That identification would not suffice for long. Cinema, a paranoid cinema that requires viewing “over and over again,” will peel away from Johnson-era television. But for a while it was possible to imagine that the new world might be one of television-without-cinema. Two weeks after the assassination, director Tony Verna deployed the first videotape instant-replay system for the Army-Navy game.<sup>38</sup> The big, balky machine barely worked. The system relied on the same sort of audio-signaling that made *Primary* possible and that would bedevil assassination studies through the 1970s.<sup>39</sup>

Play-by-play man Lindsay Nelson knew the eruption of this unfamiliar repetition might be confusing, and he did what he could to keep the iterated trauma at bay: “Ladies and gentlemen, Army did not score again!” If the JFK buildup is a matter of procedural documentation and foreshadowing, the liquidating moment—the place where the bubble bursts—is with the documentation of the assassination. But in the aftermath, what one is left with is a heritage of paranoid documentation and coincidence. The desire to enhance the moment, to see what is really happening in frame 313 of the Zapruder film, removes time from the document by focusing on the infinitesimal. Decades of film and television owe their paranoid procedural demand to “enhance” an image to this foundational desire.<sup>40</sup> The other stream of assassination thinking extends the moment of foreshadowing into the future, adding duration to spookiness and yielding a kind of flat-footed belief in built-in coincidence. The grossly inaccurate list of parallels between the assassinations of Kennedy and Lincoln is the most prominent example; the unending series of time-travel JFK narratives is the unraveled knot of causality.<sup>41</sup> The flickering oppositions of New Frontier film and television ended not in a clean cut but in complementary errors: a mounting pile of images stripped of time and omens without end.

## NOTES

1. See J. P. Berry, *John F. Kennedy and the Media: The First Television President* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987), and D. M. Lubin, *Shooting Kennedy: JFK and the Culture of Images* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).
2. See the opening chapters of J. Hoberman, *The Dream Life: Movies, Media, and the Mythology of the Sixties* (New York: The New Press, 2003).
3. T. White, *The Making of the President 1960* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1961); D. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York:



- Vintage, 1992); N. Mailer, "Superman Goes to the Supermarket," in *Presidential Papers* (New York: Panther, 1964).
4. White, op.cit., pp. 288–289; Boorstin, op.cit., p. 43.
  5. In part in Hoberman, op.cit., p. 18; article available at <http://myloc.gov/Exhibitions/hopeforamerica/blurringlines/televisionandpolitics/ExhibitObjects/RevolutionaryImpactOfTelevision.aspx>.
  6. White, op. cit., p. 320.
  7. White, op. cit., p. 24.
  8. White, op. cit., p. 260.
  9. White, op. cit., p. 262.
  10. White, op. cit., p. 262.
  11. Writing about Kennedy's image in *The Making of the President 1964* (New York: Harper, 1965), White demonstrated the staying power of the clean cut: "The bomb issue, some argued, could be put to rest by a television colloquy of Eisenhower and Goldwater, which they hoped would have as clean-cut an effect as Kennedy's address to the Houston ministers in 1960" (346).
  12. N. Minow, "Television and the Public Interest," delivered to the National Association of Broadcasters (May 9, 1961), <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/newtonminow.htm>.
  13. *Primary* was not as widely seen as *Crisis* (1963); it aired only on the four Time-Life-owned and -operated stations in the United States. In New York, it aired on Channel 11 at 7:30 on Friday, July 8. It had a major impact on the documentary profession, where it quickly became legendary. *Primary* won the Robert J. Flaherty award for achievement in documentary in March 1961, and was screened as part of New York's Cinema 16 series. It was also screened theatrically in France. And it convinced Kennedy to allow Drew (and others) unprecedented access to his behind-the-scenes affairs in the White House. In addition, the roster of Drew Associates formed the backbone of the 1960s documentary wave: Ricky Leacock, D.A. Pennebaker, Albert Maysles, and Terrence McCartney-Filgate.
  14. M. Antonioni, "L'Avventura," in Carlo di Carlo and Giorgio Tinazzi, (eds.), Andrew Taylor (tr.), *The Architecture of Vision: Writings and Interviews on Cinema* (New York: Marsilio, 1996). Originally *Humanité Dimanche* (September 25, 1960), 269–273.
  15. *Suddenly* (Lewis Allen, Libra/UA, 1954). The recent Image blu-ray release (2012) features an excellent commentary track by Drew Casper.
  16. She is reading the May 1951 issue, which is historically plausible, but which surely amounts to an inside joke because the cover features Tony Curtis and the film's female star, Janet Leigh. The two officially divorced in 1962, but the marriage had come apart the year before.
  17. A great deal of good criticism of Frankenheimer and *The Manchurian Candidate* includes M. Pomerance and R. Barton Palmer (eds.), *A Little Solitaire* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011); M. Frye Jacobson and G. González, *What Have They Built You To Do? The Manchurian Candidate and Cold War America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); and, most relevant to my discussion here, G. Marcus, *The Manchurian Candidate* (London: BFI, 2002).
  18. "Warner Defends Film against Pro-Communist Charges: 1947," in D Cuthbert (ed. and introd.), *Mission to Moscow* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980), 265–276.

19. Much has been made about Oswald's own moviegoing. John Loken's *Oswald's Trigger Films* (San Ramon, CA: Falcon, 2000), whatever its limits as an account of a psyche or a society, is convincing that the film at the center of Oswald studies should be *We Were Strangers* (John Huston, Columbia, 1949). To the list of overlooked Oswald films, I would certainly add *PT 109*. In Dallas, it screened widely, and was still playing in October at the Texas Theatre—the theater where Oswald would be captured, and the one he was known to frequent. The character splitting I describe between Kennedy and Kirksey seems like exactly the sort of uncanny break that would help undo the complexities of the Kennedy-Oswald mergers in *The Manchurian Candidate*, if Oswald did see the earlier film.
20. Frankenheimer attests to the *quid pro quo* in his DVD commentary. See also L. H. Suid, *Guts and Glory: The Making of the American Military Image in Film, rev. ed.* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2002), 241.
21. Drew's DVD commentary. More detail can be found in P. J. O'Connell, *Robert Drew and the Development of Cinema Verite in America* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992), 168–169.
22. The Kennedy version of this sort of docent tour was Jackie's "Tour of the White House," a television special that aired on CBS and NBC, February 14, 1962, and on ABC four days later. When she got to the Gilbert Stuart portrait of Washington in the East Room, she explained: "The government set a rather interesting precedent when that picture was painted. They commissioned the finest living artist of the day to paint the president, and then they gave it as a gift to the White House. I wish they'd followed that because so many pictures of later presidents are by really inferior artists." She goes on, but what matters about the painting is its production, its quality, and its provenance (Dolly Madison had saved it when the White House burned). At no time does she imagine that the portrait's role is to conjure the moral lessons and great decisions of Washington's life.
23. The film actually shows both sides of an earlier conversation between Bobby at home and Gen. Creighton Abrams in Alabama, but without Kerry's presence, it is unmemorable and has gone unremarked.
24. This and subsequent quotations from Jack Gould, "TV: Too Many Cameras, Documentary on the Segregation Crisis Termed Just a Peep Show," *New York Times* (October 22, 1963), 75.
25. F. Knebel, "Fletcher Knebel Oral History Interview—8/1/1977," pp. 19–20 (25 in the original typescript), <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKOH-FLK-01.aspx>.
26. M. Hunter, "49 Nobel Prize Winners Honored at White House," *New York Times* (April 30, 1962), 1+.
27. In addition to the riot, the production was able to shoot some Direct-Cinema-esque entrances and exits through the White House gates.
28. "Hyannis Port, Squaw Island, July 27–29, 1963," <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKPPP-35.aspx>.
29. Historical poll data for Kenney is available at [http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/CFIDE/roper/presidential/webroot/presidential\\_rating\\_detail.cfm?allRate=True&presidentName=Kennedy](http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/CFIDE/roper/presidential/webroot/presidential_rating_detail.cfm?allRate=True&presidentName=Kennedy).
30. A handy wrap up of the tax cut's progress on its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary comes from Bruce Bartlett, "50 Years After the House Vote for the Kennedy Tax Cut"

- (September 24, 1963), <http://economix.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/09/24/50-years-after-the-house-vote-for-the-kennedy-tax-cut/>.
31. I mean that parallax literally. The justly famous opening credit sequence by Saul Bass initially counterposes the Constitution and the counting. After we pull back from the gothic typeset heading “Constitution,” a black-on-gray facsimile handwritten copy will scroll fluidly up the screen. Atop this image, blotchy, inked, and interlinked numbers materialize. They roughly coincide with the appearance of the corresponding article, so we see “2” atop “Article II” and so on—up to “7.” The parallax is wrong, though, so the Arabic numbers move more slowly than the roman enumerated text behind them. Much more could be said about this sequence and the ways it typifies the graphics of Kennedy modernism.
  32. P. Krassner, “Confessions of a Guilty Bystander,” *The Realist* 47 (February 1964), 1, 10, 10.
  33. P. Rosen, “Document and Documentary: On the Persistence of Historical Concepts,” *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 225–263.
  34. Rosen, *op. cit.*, p. 226.
  35. A. Bodroghkozy, “Black Weekend: A Reception History of Network Television News and the Assassination of John F. Kennedy,” *Television & New Media* (2012), 1–19.
  36. D. Saunders, *Direct Cinema: Observational Documentary and the Politics of the Sixties* (London: Wallflower, 2007), 8.
  37. Bodroghkozy, *op. cit.*, p. 8.
  38. C. Hanson, “The Instant Replay: Time and Time Again,” *Spectator* 28:2 (Fall 2008), 51–60; J. Starkey, “Instant Replay Born 40 Years Ago Today,” *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review* (July 12, 2003), TribLive, [http://triblive.com/x/pittsburghtrib/sports/steelers/s\\_168827.html#axzz2ifhofQNh](http://triblive.com/x/pittsburghtrib/sports/steelers/s_168827.html#axzz2ifhofQNh).
  39. The second official investigation by the House Select Committee on Assassinations turned on the discovery of a dictabelt recording from a policeman’s open mic. Although this evidence has been criticized and defended, the crucial initial report was Bolt, Beranek & Newman, “Analysis of Recorded Sounds Relating to the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy,” (Cambridge, January 1979). It can be found at [http://www.history-matters.com/archive/jfk/hasca/reportvols/vol8/html/HSCA\\_Vol8\\_0019a.htm](http://www.history-matters.com/archive/jfk/hasca/reportvols/vol8/html/HSCA_Vol8_0019a.htm).
  40. Of the numerous analyses of the Zapruder film, those that consider most directly its relationship to the course of American cinema include Lubin; J-B. Thoret, *26 Seconds: L’Amérique Éclaboussée, L’assassinat de JFK et le cinéma américain* [26 Seconds: America Splattered, the Assassination of JFK and American Cinema] (Paris: Rouge Profond, 2003); and Ø. Vågnes, *Zaprudered: The Kennedy Assassination in Visual Culture* (Austin: U Texas P, 2011). Beyond these scholarly treatments is Duncan Robson’s supercut, “Let’s Enhance,” which explores the tropes of post-Zapruder image obsession, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vxq9yj2pVWk>.
  41. The list of coincidences began to pile up immediately after the assassination. Vincent Bugliosi traces its first appearance to Lloyd Ostendorf’s letter of November 25, 1963, and prints a characteristically exhaustive list in *Reclaiming History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), 1500–1502. By the 1970s, the list often appeared on a buckslip accompanying a penny with JFK’s profile stamped above the date. For Bugliosi, the list makes it easier to believe in the coincidences

necessary for the lone gunman theory. For Bill O'Reilly and Martin Dugard in *Killing Kennedy* (New York: Henry Holt, 2012), the list is “amazing” and helps explain how their interest in Kennedy followed their book on Lincoln. (Nothing but branding can explain the move from *Killing Kennedy* to *Killing Jesus*.) The Snopes debunking is thorough: <http://www.snopes.com/history/american/lincoln-kennedy.asp>. The most prominent of the time travel tales is S. King, *11/22/63: A Novel* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012). Wikipedia provides a handy roundup of many of the major time-travel narratives, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assassination\\_of\\_John\\_F.\\_Kennedy\\_in\\_popular\\_culture#.22What\\_if.3F.22\\_themes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assassination_of_John_F._Kennedy_in_popular_culture#.22What_if.3F.22_themes).