Capturing Backstage. Representations of Democracy in Hollywood cinema

By Johanne Pause

1. The politician as actor

At the core of the democratic order is, as once described by Claude Lefort, an empty space. The state belongs to nobody, being a product of constant (re-)negotiation, meaning that the place in which the body of the monarch once represented the unity of political system and people,[1]will forever remain vacant. This empty space at the core of democratic power is, says Lefort, the root of a fundamental problem of representation:

"The locus of power is an empty place, it cannot be occupied – it is such that no individual and no group can be consubstantial with it – and it cannot be represented. Only the mechanisms of the exercise of power are visible, or only the men, the mere mortals, who hold political authority."[2]

For all this, however, political representation is nonetheless exercised. The body of the monarch is, as explicated by German political scientist Philip Manow, supplanted in democracy by more complex forms and arenas of representation, which include, for example, ritualised occurrences inside the architectural space of parliament, which, by virtue of its very seating order alone, ay be read as a form of political representation[3] In both its French and American variant – a semicircle facing a rostrum – and the English form, which resembles a stadium with tiered stands and blocks of benches facing each other, this architectural representation is predicated upon the basic idea underlying the theatre: political action takes the form of performances by politicians who take the rostrum to speak and – right in keeping with Thomas Hobbes[4]– consequently mutate into actors, into interpreters of the opinions they expound. The other politicians, for their part, thus automatically become an audience to this temporarily limited performance, to which they may, or may not, respond with applause. In doing so, they themselves turn into a representation of the non-present people. This performance is therefore attended by three relevant parties, each of which has to be set in relation to the others if representation is to take place: people, deputies, and those speaking, i.e. performing.

As such, democracy's model of representation seems to be theatrical in nature, and hence defined not only in corporeal but also in temporal terms. For this reason alone, it is not surprise to hear that the cinema, as

a medium which makes visible the movement of bodies, has, since its very inception, been interested in questions of political representation. For some film theorists, the medium derives its political potential chiefly from the fact that it subverts established aesthetic modes of representation;[5]for advocates of the social problem film, by contrast, the power of filmic representation lies in its ability to build empathy with those who do not form part of the political order of visibility.[6]In the essay that follows, a different type of argumentation is to be expounded, albeit not one that contradicts but complements these approaches, and one that focuses less on the political than on the analytical possibilities of film. When stories narrated in features films concern the institutionalised sphere of democratic politics, the focus is, after all, not on political representation alone but, in all instances, on how this actually comes about: what makes politicians interesting is the fact that they have a history, together with the circumstance that it is only as a result of these histories that they have become – either better or worse – representatives of the populace; the fact that they act differently towards their fellow party members and staff than they do during their performances; and that they can be the victims of blackmail or conspiracy, which make them act in a different way to that which the populace expects. As will be shown in the following chapters, Hollywood movies whose subject is the day-to-day world of politics are thus often characterised by a strangely dual character: on the one hand, they replicate the mythical original narrative of democracy as theatre,[7]according to which representation is brought about as a result of a spontaneous gathering of persons around an individual who, at that moment of time, is a particularly representative person. This primal scene can be repeated over and over again and, most notably, can – especially at moments in which the political order is hit by crisis – help to restore this order. On the other hand, however, the films articulate a deep distrust of the performative nature of the political per se, which they seek to deconstruct by confronting it with events on the backstage of politics.

This essay seeks to explore the manifold transformations that this mythical 'primal scene' has undergone in the history of American cinema, taking as its examples selected pictures that can be seen as particularly influential with regard to the filmic representation of the political sphere. The diachronic comparison employed follows a particular scene type or 'frame':[8]The focus is on works in which a speech by a fictional politician features especially prominently. The significance of each such performance can be appreciated only in the sense that it be viewed as a frontstage form of behaviour that is at odds with events on the backstage. To illustrate this, the essay traces the historical shift in such relationships that has occurred, principally on account of the emergence of audio-visual media onto the political stage and the way in which these media impinge on the democratic procedures and their representation. While it

is the case that, in many classic Hollywood films, political backstage is surveyed by the respective picture in investigative fashion with a view to assessing the honesty of the politicians, more recent films have, instead, turned the spotlight onto the political consequences of such investigative methods themselves. In depicting political representatives and the political stages on which they perform, they thus at the same time themselves develop an awareness of the power and impact wielded by filmic media, an influence that is able to manufacture, multiply, or disrupt the different types of political stages.

2. The emergence of front-stage

The term 'backstage' derives from the sociology of Erving Goffman, who analysed social life as a sequence of more or less closely defined situations that each contain a series of rules and roles. In such situations, actions occur that are directed at the audience, and others that take place 'backstage' and serve as a rehearsal for, or discourse on, the actual performance. The theatre metaphor used by Goffman suggests an image of front- and backstage, a familiar example given by Goffman being the service staff of a hotel or restaurant, who behave very differently out on the frontstage of the guest area than when in the backstage kitchen.[9]As a medium capable of investigating and documenting reality[10], the Hollywood feature film is not content with presenting to its audience wait staff, singers, sportspersons, detectives, politicians, queens, or superheroes in their social function alone. Rather, it shows how concrete individuals don and discard these roles, how they doubt their ability to perform them, or which type of clandestine agendas they pursue while rehearsing them. This is precisely what happens in the most successful genre of recent decades, the superhero movie, which gives centre stage – both visually and in terms of storyline – to the mask as a metaphor for the social role: Spiderman as a figure is interesting on account of the fact that he is at once both an object of public admiration and an unnoticed, shy and retiring adolescent schoolboy – who, due to particular circumstances, has developed a spectacular front-of-stage behaviour.

Media theorist Joshua Meyrowitz transferred the notions of front- and backstage to the political sphere, a world which – most especially in the media society – can be described as the complex interplay of different stages.[11]In the cinema, too, questions of representation take on a quite particular relevance when films show moments of disruption to political order,[12]which are frequently triggered by precisely the media-induced emergence of new stages. In classic Hollywood motion pictures in particular, such crises generally conclude with a renegotiation of legitimate modes of representation. The yardstick used to measure the legitimacy of forms of political representation is the question as to whether these are capable, at the structural level, of referencing the

ideological core of the respective political system. Paula Diehl speaks in this connection of the 'primary reference' of representation: in democracy, this is no longer, as was the case in the Middle Ages, divine authority but the sovereign people, which is why the attending audience is meant to see itself reflected in the respective representative as the real political subject.[13]A now iconic scene from the 1935 Paramount comedy directed by Leo McCarey, *Ruggles of Red Gap*, is a picture-perfect illustration of this mechanism of democratic representation. The movie features Charles Laughton in the role of an English butler who is forfeited to a nouveau riche American millionaire by his former aristocratic master following a game of poker. After arriving in the New World, the 'servant' is consistently treated by the millionaire as his equal, which would initially appear to be at odds with Ruggles' own work ethos. Only after a debate in the local saloon does it become apparent that Ruggles has actually been deeply impressed by the American philosophy of egalitarianism. None of those present is in a position to give a summary of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address; Ruggles, however, is able to recite the key passages flawlessly by heart. The others, all Americans by birth, listen with great admiration to the erstwhile butler, who has at this moment become their natural representative.

"Of the People, By the People, For the People": The words of the Gettysburg Address encapsulate the 'primary reference' of the US democratic system.[14]In an involuntary act of theatricality, the people attending are divided into one person speaking on behalf of all and an audience listening to that self-same person. Democracy is thus conceived of as political theatre, in which the audience spontaneously comes to an awareness of itself through beholding its representatives.[15]In the process, the representative is recruited from a group of represented persons already presumed to exist. This group is dimly aware that Lincoln's words concern them, yet it does not visibly and assertively form itself into this group until the act of representation has occurred.

Yet Ruggles merely cites what Lincoln, the absent 'dead father' of the nation, has already laid down as the fundamental principle of society. As such, representation thus proves to be the performative actualisation of an order that, latently, has already long been binding. The spontaneous political act creating an embodiment of the body politic requires a spokesperson who, for a brief moment, assumes the role of the dead father, thus filling the empty space at the centre of democratic order. No political power extending above and beyond this can, however, be derived therefrom: Ruggles shall not go on to be appointed to any political office; the scene does*not*lift him out of the crowd in any sustained manner but, rather, thematises his own recognition that he has become an *equally entitled* part of the American people. The representative is a reflection of

the body politic, and this function can, as the film seeks to demonstrate, be assumed by absolutely anyone who is a member of this body politic – even, in fact, by somebody whose behaviour unmistakably reveals him to be an English butler and, as if that alone were not enough, one who is actually played by a British actor.[16]

3. The emergence of backstage

The example reveals that it was, at the very latest, in the 1930s – the period that raised the curtain on the major era and world-wide influence of classic Hollywood cinema – that the US feature film first began to develop a particular interest in the democratic order, its origins, and its representatives.[17]Yet the main focus of this interest is not on the actual forms of representation themselves but the mechanisms and processes by which representation is engendered, which are matters generally discussed on the backstage of power – a backstage which, in *Ruggles*, does not yet exist, political representation here being depicted in its *pre*–institutionalised stage. Quite on the contrary, in fact, Ruggles not discarding his butler's mask until he gives expression to his true convictions. American democracy, in its *primal scene*, is thus mask-free, functioning at the precise moment when audience and events on stage find themselves in a perfectly self-mirroring relationship.

Yet the people – another fact made clear by the scene from *Ruggles*– tends to forget. "You see, you see," will be the words spoken in movie theatres four years later by another fictional representative of the USA in a further scene that has gone on to achieve iconic status,

"Boys forget what their country means by just reading *The Land of the Free*in history books. … Liberty's too precious a thing to be buried in books. … Men should hold it up in front of them every single day of their lives and say: 'I'm free to think and to speak. My ancestors couldn't. I can. And my children will.'"

In Frank Capra's paradigmatic, and hence frequently analysed, classic *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), the eponymous Boy Rangers leader Jefferson Smith, who utters these words, is appointed senator of a provincial US state. In Washington, he is initially ridiculed for his bumpkin-like naïveté when, in a shaky voice, he reads out details of a plan to set up a national boys' camp. Quite by chance, this is to be established in the very same location in which big-time capitalist Taylor is to build an uneconomic dam – a corrupt project which, however, has long had majority support in the Senate. The camp thus becomes a hopeless venture, yet Smith is not one to give up easily: "Lost causes are the only ones worth fighting for," is one of the best-known quotes from the film, voicing words that in an age of Brexit were recently put on the lips of

Winston Churchill – in the key scene of *Darkest Hour*(2017, Joe Wright), which reprises the democratic ur-myth articulated in*Mr. Smith* and *Ruggles*, yet is unable to reproduce the egalitarian impulse of its role models.

To box through his 'lost cause,' Smith resorts to the most radical tool in the armoury of US democracy, the so-called filibuster – an unbroken speech that may not be interrupted. This performance ultimately enables Smith to force the film's adversary, Senator Paine, to publicly admit to the crooked wheeling and dealing by reminding him of Smith's late father, an old friend of Paine and an upstanding politician. Once again, therefore, democracy is founded anew in the name of an absent father. The motif of the man of the people who, in exemplarily mimetic fashion[18], formulates the interests of a people conceived of as unified by having to wage a battle against a bureaucratised, corrupt power elite in the process, has led to the film having occasionally been accused of populism.[19]Notwithstanding this, Capra displays a high degree of sensitivity towards questions of political representation in democracy. The virtually exact replica of the Senate chamber, for example, acts as an ideal showcase for the three bodies politic: the people itself, which takes its place on the public benches above, the representation of the unity of the people through the semicircle of the Senate, and the temporary individual representative, who, as the person speaking, addresses the senators.

Adding a further dimension and place of action to the film's choice of settings is the 'backstage' of power, in, say, the shape of the backroom in which business leaders and politicians think up 'post-factual' reasons to justify the construction project. For Capra, the sincerity of a politician is arguably measured in terms of the degree to which front- and backstage behaviour are in alignment: Naïve Smith, for example, is to be found at moments of crisis in front of the Lincoln Memorial, where he professes his belief in American democracy and reels off more or less the same patriotic speeches as when front of stage in the Senate chamber.

As Robin Celikates and Simon Rothöhler have shown in a precise analysis of the film, he stands for an ideal form of representation, one in which staging and stratagem correspond to one another in the same way as people and representative.[20]Smith is basically a Ruggles but unfortunate in the sense that he has been cast in an institutionalised stage-play in which he constantly has to mediate between front- and backstage while at the same time seeking to comprehend that his friends and enemies behave differently depending on which of the two chambers they find themselves in.

The key filibuster scene reveals that the ideal model of a direct connection between people and representation may, in the realm of institutionalised politics, be hard to establish yet is nonetheless still

possible to establish – and is one that in fact *has* to be established. It is by virtue of the fact that the film not only upholds the general possibility of this performative re-authentication of politics but does so in objection mode, resisting the false consensus, that Richard Rushton confers on this motion picture a time-transcending political value and significance.[21]As Smith continues to talk at them for hours on end, the other senators soon turn their backs, demonstratively reading the newspaper in order to discourage him. When he begins to read out the Constitution of the United States, indignant grumbling is to be heard – indicating that the 'primary reference' is thus no longer sufficient when the institution of politics is dominated by the dictates of realpolitik-inspired power stratagems. Only by an act of complete physical exhaustion, speaking until he faints, which serves as proof of the authentic unity between the man and the politician Smith, is he ultimately able to persuade those present to desist from engaging in backstage skulduggery. In Capra's movie, in other words, the constitutive non-identity between the institutionalised and ideal level of politics has to be surmounted by means of a kind of de-sublimation of representative power in order to reunite the people and its spokesperson. Yet this reunifying process once again remains temporary: the 'Taylor machine,' inside which a fateful politico-industrial power complex is exposed, has been defeated only for this moment, not on a wider, more general scale.[22]This fleetingness of 'true' democracy is, however, not a shortcoming but what constitutes its actual mythical core. In *Mr. Smith*, democracy, and hence also democratic representation, is not to be had in any other form than that currently realised, than that now being lived and defended. And this, for its part, needs to be protected from the overwhelming force of backstage, which constantly threatens to functionalise and exploit democracy to its own ends.

4. The illegitimate side-stage

The profound belief in the primary reference of democracy, which is the defining feature of the two 1930s motion pictures cited here as exemplars, has, since the 1960s at the very latest, been shaken to the core. Set in the same reconstructed Senate building as that featuring in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* is, for example, Otto Preminger's film-of-the-book *Advise and Consent* (1962), a story of the appointment by the Senate of a Secretary of State proposed by a terminally ill president. A controversial figure, the candidate has as many enemies among the Senate members as he has friends, with opposition to him crossing party lines. Right at the beginning of the film, a lady visitor to the Senate remarks to the women accompanying her that it is not evident from the seating order which senators are conservative, liberal, or 'left' – the Senate thus, here too, representing the unity of the people, not the

plurality of the parties.

The movie charts the efforts of the leading senators – one of them, once again, played by Charles Laughton – to come up with reasons for and against the appointment of the candidate, with the majority of the action shown occurring backstage. This is a no-holds-barred struggle, yet the fact that the speeches delivered front of stage are of a fundamentally tactical nature, i.e. are not a direct reflection of the respective speaker's principal tenets and character, is at all times apparent. In Preminger's film, there is thus an awareness of the incongruence between the pragmatic and representational level of politics, between front- and backstage as the premise of institutionalised democracy. At the same time, however, there is a red line of legality that may not be crossed. It is marked out by a young liberal Senate member who seeks to gain support for the new Secretary of State – for whom the film evokes strong sympathies – by blackmailing another senator. To this end, he makes use of photos serving as evidence of the married colleague's homosexual transgressions – and it is for this reason that the film has become especially well-known for its treatment of the issue of homosexuality.[23]Driven to desperation, the blackmailed senator ultimately takes his own life; whereupon the other senators summon up – in a direct reversal of the filibuster scene in Capra's picture – all legal means available in the Senate's rulebook to prevent the conspirator from being able to speak again.

The scene shows how, at the moment of crisis, opposition between the different party groups represented in the Senate is suspended: with a view to defending the underlying mechanisms, the primary reference of democracy, it proves necessary – in sharp contrast to the situation in Capra's film – to abandon attempts to achieve a political goal. It is precisely through the suppression of an authentic speech by bureaucratic procedures controlled from backstage that democracy is salvaged. And Preminger also shows how communication in the Senate chamber itself constantly keeps fragmenting into front- and backstage: these are not linked to any one concrete location but are determined by the behaviour of the participating persons, who are forever switching between public speeches and covert agreements with party cohorts. Unlike in the case of Capra's film, the backstage in Preminger thus becomes a key political showcase, one in which democratic order has to be not only jeopardised but also defended.

More problematic, however, is another type of stage, which in Preminger's film is created chiefly by the mass media, which threaten to disclose details of the covertly homosexual senator's past. Right in keeping with Meyrowitz' theories, the appearance on the scene of the

mass media clouds the distinction between front- and backstage. Meyrowitz illustrates this by taking the television interview situation as example: in this new type of event occurring on the media stage, a president is neither any longer able to simply deliver a speech, although he is now speaking to the whole nation, nor can he behave as if engaging in private conversation, although the very nature of an interview – which television, in its own preferred take on the format, likes to conduct in the interviewee's private study – is designed to suggest precisely that. "In this sense, we have not only a different situation, but also a different President, and – in the long run – a different presidency."[24]When the membrane between back- and frontstage becomes permeable, says Meyrowitz, so-called side-stages are created. What were once backstage elements, such as the private apartment, take on public significance by, for example, appearing in a televised election commercial. The blackmailing act in *Advise and Consent* serves to open up such a side-stage, one which, however, here exposes the violation of democratic principles. If democracy is to function, it must at all times be certain where the border between front- and backstage is drawn, for only on this basis can the performative order of representation, upon which democracy is founded, be upheld.

Mr. Smith Goes to Washington had already displayed a certain degree of media scepticism, albeit with the mass media here figuring less as actors in their own right than as instruments in Taylor's hands. And in *Advise and Consent*, too, the media tend to be more reactive in nature, although politics is now being threatened by publication of the truth – and no longer, as was the case with Capra, by the publication of astutely formulated untruths. This difference is by no means trivial: a member of the Senate must be given the possibility to represent the people also, and most especially, in instances in which – due, say, to a divergent sexuality – he is *not*identical in the manner which still applied in the case of *Mr. Smith*. His private life, to the extent that this is of no relevance to his role as representative, must not be allowed to become a political tool by being diverted through the side-stage. In this process, the rules of backstage are articulated not as legally binding but as nonetheless mandatory: they are the rules of the game rather than laws, and the general acceptance of the red line between permitted and disallowed means is not determined by the purpose. The exclusion of the blackmailing senator from the circle of august politicians, an act that here proves necessary in order to salvage democracy, ultimately leads to the president's candidate not attaining office: unlike in Capra's film, the principle of democracy has to be realised by allowing a hopeless venture to actually fail. Here, therefore, the myth of the founding scene of democratic society implies entirely different types of sacrifice than was the case in Capra's film. It is not until the death of their fellow colleague that the individuals are fused together to form a collective, the price of which, once again, is the

abandonment of the good cause.

The film concludes with a surprising twist. Shortly before voting is over, a public announcement reveals that the ailing president has passed away. The vice president, now automatically elevated to supreme office, does not himself vote for his predecessor's candidate, reserving himself the right to name a candidate of his own. This situation, which causes the standoff between the politicians to escalate to a degree that threatens the very agonistic arena of democracy itself,[25]proves to be linked to a concrete historical situation which, by making just a minor change to the power constellation, can bring about direct and radical change. In democracy, as so clearly demonstrated by Preminger's film, political representation is not the endless repetiton of the dead father's will, it is subject to a process of constant change. The inconsequential nature of the conflict, however, does not in any way serve to underscore its futility, the founding act of representational democracy being re-enacted in every political dispute. In Preminger's movie, this is no longer about the good cause prevailing but about defending, or re-founding, the conditions under which political order can be upheld.

5. The front-stage of television

The threat to democracy posed by political manoeuvring and deception, most especially, however, by new media – which already featured in Preminger's film, yet without being at the centre of the storyline – advances to become an ever-greater certainty in 1960s cinema. Considered to be a blueprint for the American political thriller is the second film in the so-called paranoia trilogy by John Frankenheimer, *Seven Days in May*(1964).[26]At the height of the cold war, the US president is here pursuing the objective of signing a disarmament treaty with the USSR, against which charismatic General Scott stages a conspiracy in order to himself seize power, causing the cold war to escalate. Of key importance for the staging of the putsch is special unit ECOMCON (Emergency Communicators Control), whose job is to gain control over the country's entire mass media. This is in fact a reference to a real media emergency system intended to relegate television – at the time a still fairly new medium – to the role of a political frontstage. As early as in 1951, the so-called CONELRAD system was installed in the USA as an emergency program and, in 1963, was replaced by the Emergency Broadcast System (EBS). This system enabled the major national television networks ABC, CBS and NBC to be corralled into a single broadcasting entity under the control of the White House.

Frankenheimer thus fictionalises a media technology that had already been legally implemented in the year in which the film was made, presenting this as the possible result of a right-wing conspiracy. The

inner-diegetic president is thus still able to claim that, as in 1970, the year in which the film is set, he has never heard of the existence of any such emergency broadcaster. At the structural level, emergency medium television is seen by Frankenheimer as unmistakably privileging fascism, its asymmetrical sender-receiver constellation creating a hierarchical order in which political discourse is overlaid by the speaker's imaginary power to beguile. Whenever Scott is shown in a low-angle shot, he is being cheered by the masses, for which television itself provides the visual commands by giving prominence to precisely those cheering masses.

The mythical founding act of democracy, the spontaneous constitution of people and transient representative in a theatrical situation, is thus recast as a situation characterised by media alienation: banished to the screen, the *primal scene* of democracy degenerates into a manipulative instruction on how to act, issued at the behest of an authoritarian state power. Even the upstanding president himself, speaking at a major press conference towards the end of the picture, is forced to defend the many voices of democracy using the same means as those employed by the dissident general. He assumes the mantle of a charismatic leader who, while appearing to be a "decent, resolutely honest man,"[27]speaks words that are nonetheless carried out into the world by that very same medium which came close to appointing a fascist to high office. Even the journalists, seen jotting down the president's political homily like good little schoolboys, thus become compliant media propagating the message disseminated by the symbolic father who, at least temporarily, has once again regained his place at the seat of power.

As such, the film articulates the problem politics now faces on account of the mere existence of the new mass media. The latter develop, due to their power to act as a stage, an ability to structure public opinion which in itself already appears to constitute a threat to democracy. As if custom-made for the purpose of visual representation, television subverts, on account of its own internal logic alone, the forms of negotiation inherent in democratic politics. The room in which the film's final press conference takes place is an exact replica of the layout of the State Department Building in which John F. Kennedy gave his press briefings. It is characterised by an order based on the principle of separation in which events are monitored and directed from control rooms, thus acting as a perfect showcase designed to highlight the dual structure of front- and backstage. The question posed by Frankenheimer, in thus thematising the medialisation of stages, is that as to which form of political order is harnessing to its own ends the dangerous imaginary potential of image-based media. The verbal duel between the fascist general and the president, from which the film's plot takes its cue, thus also becomes a

duel between differently structured backstages. On the one hand is Scott's hi-tech command headquarters, in which both the outside world and other spaces within the political sphere are available solely in the form of medial representation – through the conduit of closed circuit TV, say, or cinematographic installations.

The danger emanating from the new media technology is thus equated with the threat posed by a political conspiracy. On the other hand, the representatives of the old order continue to favour face-to-face conversations and paper-based communication, dispensing their appearances in the public mass media in sparse, highly circumspect fashion. Their backstage areas are the offices and meeting rooms already familiar to us from the movies of Capra and Preminger, and which here themselves now become representations of democratic exchange.

Democratic order thus needs to remain autonomous vis-à-vis the new media; yet the latter, for its part, has to allow itself to be instrumentalised by the legitimate political order. More generally, however, the spatial separation of speaker and audience, as brought about by television, and the new type of technical 'submedial'[28]backstage created by the medium, make the mechanism of representation take on a seemingly dangerous character: Its dynamic has now been irreversibly linked to forces which, freed from the presence of parliament, are no longer subject to any clear controls. The backstage of the television presidency turns into a secretive object of suspicion, one which, from this point on, also proves to be increasingly appealing to the film industry.

6. Proliferation of backstages

In the wake of the assassination of Kennedy and the Watergate affair, the 1970s witness the emergence of so-called paranoia cinema,[29]which considers the hostile takeover of US politics to already be a *fait accompli*. Political representation is now portrayed as a mere façade, which, enacted by unknown forces pursuing opaque objectives, serves to conceal a huge conspiracy that is ultimately directed against both the people and the state. What is described as a "crack between the front- and backstage of politics that has become systemic" by Celikates and Rothöhler – themselves here employing Goffman's terms – has now become evident, as most clearly exposed in Alan J. Pakula's film *The Parallax View* (1974),[30]in which reporter Joe Frady attempts to shed light on the murder of a senator. While conducting his investigations, Frady hits upon the machinations of an anonymous firm by the name of 'Parallax Corporation,' which has been carrying out a series of political assassinations on behalf of unknown political actors. The hitmen it employs are loners who, in the course of so-called psychological tests and assassin training programs, are brainwashed and quite literally re-educated to become 'lone killers.'

In the film's final scene, Frady follows one of these suspected assassins into an election arena in which a candidate is rehearsing his campaign appearance that evening. A taped recording of the candidate's speech is playing, which underscores the non-identity of enactment and actual person.[31]And the scene can also be interpreted as the interlinking of different stage logics. While the candidate and his team are rehearsing – a classic backstage activity – Frady and the perpetrator are high above the event hall in the catwalks: this is the place in which the spotlights are hung, and from which the political order of visibility appears to be orchestrated. At this point, the audience, too, imagine themselves to have arrived in the clandestine 'rearmost' backstage of power. In a place from which the events on the actual backstage – where the rehearsal is taking

place – are being controlled and monitored. Yet when a shot suddenly rings out and the candidate in the arena below is killed instantly, it is Frady himself upon whom gazes alight: Right in front of him is a rifle, and a guard identifies him as the man who fired it.[32]

Frady is shot while trying to escape, the commission of enquiry making him out to be a misguided lone gunman. Yet it is precisely his attempt to expose the conspiracy that caused him to be its victim: "In a kind of Hegelian ruse of reason, it is precisely the will to revolt and to destroy the conspiracy which allows this last to write him into their scenario and to destroy him in the process."[33]And this plot twist, too, follows a theatrical logic: what the investigative reporter considered to be the backstage of political representation was actually only a further frontstage put in place especially for him. The true backstage, which now appears to be the all-powerful seat of the conspiracy, remains unattainable for both the film's hero and those watching the movie. Political representation is no longer – as was the case in the era of Ruggles – something spontaneously generated from within the people, but one artificially constructed from this alien, hostile, and abstract place of conspiracy with a view to controlling this very people itself. Representation is thus transformed into its exact opposite: manipulation.

Evidence of a progression occurring in the transition from classic Hollywood to New Hollywood is thus apparent, one that extends from the spontaneously generated authentic bond between representative and the represented through to systemically engineered, sustained alienation. From the very beginning, the films are dominated by a distrust of institutionalised, merely formal modes of representation, which use the aesthetic of representation to manipulate the people rather than extracting therefrom the elements that benefit the latter's actual interests and concerns. By using technical media – in Pakula's film, for example, the notorious cinema machine, in which Frady undergoes a psychological test – to create the imaginations of the collective, they thus thwart its actual establishment. In the real field of institutionalised politics, the assailants' bullets hit in precisely that place in which society might potentially discover its real self. Even more strongly than paranoid constellations, therefore, pictures such as *The Parallax View* address the traumatic character of modern politics, which is now found to be powerless in the face of an incurable alienation of society.[34]

7. Capturing backstage

Fast-forward to present-day Hollywood pictures and one sees signs of a continuation of 1960s cinema on the one hand, yet on the other a more extended, hugely multilayered field of filmic depictions of forms of

political representation. Paranoid narratives, for example, continue to exist and, increasingly in fact, quite independently of political cinema,[35]such storylines having become a more general vehicle of popular culture. Here, as also in most other fictional treatments of the political system, the media continue to operate in the role of epistemic disturbers.Popular series such as *House of Cards*(2013-) cleverly exploit the incongruences between front- and backstage behaviour,[36]now obeying new, multifaceted stratagems which also lend themselves to be affirmatively appropriated by those acting in the political space. Of growing significance is, additionally, Hollywood's interest in forms of particular representation in which the voices of minorities intervene in the institutionalised business of politics. What we find here is a vacillation between representatives who once again mimetically express the interests of those they represent, and modes of 'speaking-on-behalf-of-others,' as in, for example, Sydney Pollack's *The Interpreter* (2005) – the very title of which suggests the impossibility of loss- or friction-free representation – in which a blonde interpreter played by Nicole Kidman can become ambassador to the black population of an African nation.

Most obviously in the tradition of the films considered in this essay, all of which feature white males, is arguably George Clooney's *The Ides of March* (2011), which marks a further shift in the filmic discourse of representation.

When the film begins, the audience believes it is listening to an address being made by a politician, yet then realises that this is merely a rehearsal-cum-soundcheck, with the real action taking place on the backstage of institutionalised politics. In the further course of the story, however, this backstage mutates into a dangerous side-stage when it emerges that the idealistic media man Stephen, who is running the election campaign for a progressive candidate, has had an unauthorised clandestine meeting with the opposing candidate's campaign manager. It is, in other words, no longer the politicians themselves who take centre stage here but spin doctors and consultants, and even they cannot afford to make a single misstep without exposing themselves to the risk that this might become public. Yet Stephen blackmails his way back onto the side of the venerated candidate, shifting pressure onto the latter by falsely asserting that he can prove the politician's complicity in the suicide of a female member of the campaign team. Smear tactics and dirty tricks are, it might be inferred, what now dominate the business, causing the real political element to be quite veritably neutralised by institutionalised politics.

It is precisely therein, however, that the difference between Clooney's political thriller and the earlier works lies. Backstage, as that seat of

power from which the political system is established and controlled, has now been usurped by a kind of frontstage totalitarianism. The protected private space or backroom is no longer – as was the case with Preminger – jeopardised by unscrupulous individuals but has been almost completely superseded by a new medial regime of visibility that basically enables every single space to become a stage. Even if the film does not specifically address the issue of the influence now wielded by *social media* in the political arena, the significance of such media in this regard can be clearly sensed. For all this, however, the eroticism of backstage persists, with both reporters and the population at large in *Ides of March* constantly seeking to dredge up backgrounds, scandals, and conspiracies, while politicians learn how to leverage the impact of every possible revelation to their own ends. In order, however, to simultaneously immunise themselves against any form of leaks or disclosures, they develop forms of behaviour designed to make them unassailable. Thus, representation is increasingly replaced by simulation. At the same time, the either authentic or inauthentic, honest or crooked politician gives way to the figure of the media manager who has to eliminate everything that is not performance. Speaking straight to the face of the woman who wants to take her own life since she is pregnant by the candidate for whom she is working, Stephen says that she no longer has any right to exist.

As in the case of Preminger's picture, the secret that must not be allowed to come to light is of a sexual nature and, once again, a victim is needed to salvage democracy, although this time – and in that the film displays, on the one hand, an awareness of current problematics while at the same time perpetuating old misogynistic traditions[37]– the victim is a woman. Yet the situation is here salvaged not by the mythical constitution of the democratic body politic but precisely through the tool of immunising the representative against the inquisition of backstage. In the process, everyone who has anything at all to do with the political sphere is automatically transformed into a frontstage actor, the attention economy of the television medium having incorporated – and hence replaced – the spontaneous mechanism of theatrical representation. Towards the end of the film, in a closing sequence that exactly reprises the opening scene, the former idealist Stephen is now a man bereft of any private life, friends, or convictions, is nothing but a mask, a performance, a front-of-stage. In the television interview that he gives, the subject is only purportedly the background to political events; in actual fact, however, the backstage on which he is standing has long since become the actual, now institutionalised frontstage.

In quite extraordinary manner, the political objectives of the media – as also consistently pursued by Hollywood – to make visible the backstage of

politics, to expose the true game going on behind the scenes, have thus ultimately been turned upon themselves as target. The relationship between back- and frontstage in the media democracy has imploded, now existing in mere performative form only. The traditional hermeneutics of depth and suspicion have run up against their limits and are now – in highly postmodern fashion – being replaced by a game of superficialities. It is for this reason that the charismatic 'old-school' representative played by George Clooney[38]has now been replaced by a savvy media man whose 'flat, inexpressive stare'[39]is very reminiscent of the 'simulacrum-in-chief' George W. Bush.[40]The mask-like face of Ryan Gosling, for its part, stands for a mode of presentist, tautological representation, for a type of façade behind which no further conspiracy or stratagem is concealed. The look on the face of the slick media maven, who appears to be seeking to communicate the complete absence of any secrets or backgrounds, reflects nothing but the dead eye of the camera, thus failing to draw his audience's attention back to the sovereign people, to democracy's primary reference.

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[1]Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies. A Study in Medieval*

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[2]Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, transl. David Macey (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 17.

[3]Philip Manow, *Im Schatten des Königs. Die politische Anatomie demokratischer Repräsentation*(Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2008).

[4]Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan. Or the Matter, Forme, and Power of a Common-Wealth Ecclesiasticall and Civill*(New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), chapter XVI.

[5]E.g., with reference to Jacques Rancière: Martin O'Shaughnessy, *The New Face of Political Cinema. Commitment in French Film since 1995* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 33.

[6]Sarah Kozloff, "Empathy and the Cinema of Engagement. Reevaluating the Politics of Film," *Projections*7, no. 2 (Winter 2013), 1–40.

[7]On the cultural and political significance of the mythic narratives of democracy cf. Richard T. DeGeorge, "Democracy as Social Myth," in *Philosophical Perspectives on Democracy in the 21st Century*, ed. Ann E. Cudd, Sally J. Scholz (Cham, Heidelberg, New York: Springer, 2014), 43–54.

[8]Cf. Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader. Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*(Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1984), 20–22.

[9]Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*(Edinburgh: Edinburgh Social Sciences Research Centre, 1956), 72.

[10]Fabrizio Cilento, *An Investigative Cinema. Politics and Modernization in Italian, French, and American film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

[11]Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place. The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[12]On the possible productivity of disruption within the context of cultural processes cf. Lars Koch, Tobias Nanz, Johannes Pause, "Imagined Scenarios of Disruption. A Concept," in *Disruptions in the Arts*, ed. Lars Koch, Tobias Nanz, Johannes Pause (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2018), 63–81.

[13]Paula Diehl, *Das Symbolische, das Imaginäre und die Demokratie. Eine Theorie politischer Repräsentation* (Baden-Baden: Nomos 2015),

121–131.

[14]Richard T. DeGeorge, "Democracy as Social Myth," 49.

[15]Manow, *Im Schatten des Königs,*70.

[16]It was no accident that Siegfried Kracauer saw the film as satirizing American accesses of quasi-British snobbishness. Siegfried Kracauer, "National Types as Hollywood Presents Them," *The Public Opinion Quarterly*13, no. 1 (Spring 1949), 53–72.

[17]Ernest D. Giglio, *Here's Looking at You. Hollywood, Film & Politics* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 116.

[18]For a fundamental analysis of the concept of mimetic representation cf. Frank Ankersmit, *Political Representation*(Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2002).

[19]Jeffrey Richards, "Frank Capra and the Cinema of Populism," *Film Society Review*7 (February 1972), 39–46.

[20]Robin Celikates/Simon Rothöhler, "Die Körper der Stellvertreter. Politische Repräsentation zwischen Identität, Simulation und Institution: *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, The Parallax View, The West Wing*," in *Inszenierungen der Politik. Der Körper als Medium*, ed. Paula Diehl/Gertrud Koch (München: Wilhelm Fink, 2007), 57–76.

[21]Richard Rushton, *The Politics of Hollywood Cinema. Popular Film and Contemporary Political Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 151. Rushton's argumentation counters the assertion that classic Hollywood cinema is dominated by an 'ideology of consensus.' Cf. Richard Maltby, *Harmless Entertainment. Hollywood and the Ideology of Consensus*(Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1983).

[22]Ian Scott, *American Politics in Hollywood Film.*Second Edition (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 65.

[23]Foster Hirsch, *Otto Preminger. The Man who Would be King* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 361–63.

[24]Meyrowitz,*No Sense of Place*, 43.

[25]Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*(London, New York: Verso, 2000).

[26]David Sterritt, "Murdered Souls, Conspiratorial Cabals:

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[27]It is upon these character traits alone, thus the criticism voiced by Michael Coyne, that, in Frankenheimer's film, the difference between democracy and fascism is founded. Michael Coyne, *Hollywood Goes to Washington. American Politics on Screen*(London: Reaction Books, 2008), 142.

[28]Boris Groys, *Under Suspicion. A Phenomenology of Media* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2012).

[29]Cf. Ray Pratt, *Projecting Paranoia. Conspiratorial Visions in American Film* (Lawrence, Kansas: Univ. Press of Kansas, 2001).

[30]Celikates/Rothöhler, "Die Körper der Stellvertreter," 67.

[31]Celikates/Rothöhler, "Die Körper der Stellvertreter," 68.

[32]Cf. Johannes Pause, "Zeuge einer Verschwörung," in *Filmgenres: Thriller*, ed. Thomas Koebner and Hans-Jürgen Wulff (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2013), 195–198.

[33]Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic. Cinema and Space in the World System* (London: BFI, 1996), 60.

[34]Due to this "suspicion of politics per se," Rushton therefore considers paranoia cinema to no longer be generally political but, at best, parapolitical. Cf.Rushton, *The Politics of Hollywood Cinema*, 216.

[35]According to Henry Taylor, the political thriller is merely a cycle within the meta-genre of the paranoia film. Cf. Henry Talyor, *Conspiracy! Theorie und Geschichte des Paranoiafilms*(Marburg: Schüren, 2017).

[36]Sandrine Sorlin, *Language and Manipulation in House of Cards. A Pragma-Stylistic Perspective* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 6.

[37]Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body. Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992).

[38]Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*(Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1992), 306.

[39]Ron Suskind, *The Price of Loyalty*(New York: Simon and Shuster,

2004), 117.

[40]Cf. Carol V. Hamilton, "Being Nothing. George W. Bush as Presidential Simulacrum," *CTheory*, 13[th]July 2004, http://ctheory.net/ctheory_wp/being-nothing-george-w-bush-as-presidential-simulacrum/#_edn10.

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