# FRAMES OF PRESIDENTIAL AND CANDIDATE POLITICS IN AMERICAN FILMS OF THE 1990S

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## Abstract

The 1990s saw a surprisingly large number of American film treatments of national politics in general and the presidency in particular. It is instructive to compare the way politics is constructed in such films with the legacy of such film representations since the 1930s. This legacy has been influenced by short-term trends, but two powerful motifs have been the Cold War, and the belief in democratic reform and renewal. The nineties saw greater cynicism about politics in America, and filmmakers have done more to accentuate than to redress this trend. In particular films such as *Bob Roberts*, *Wag the Dog* and *Bulworth* suggest the power of a military industrial complex beyond the reach of efforts at political reform. Mainstream film contrasts a politics of self-interest and incumbency against one of conviction and service, but also finds it difficult to provide realistic scenarios of renewal. This trend is related to American cultural fragmentation and the erosion of myths associated with what Lind calls "Euro-America."

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## Introduction

Hollywood, dedicated in broad terms to what Richard Maltby has called "harmless entertainment," has been wary for a number of reasons of directly representing the political process (Maltby 1983). In terms of party and ideology filmmakers have feared alienating any section of the potential audience, while into the 1960s the Production Code meant that certain kinds of political cinema were either outlawed or subject to particular restrictions. Representations of politics as a collective activity or struggle are also usually incompatible both with the formulas of popular American film and the persistently individualistic nature of the national political culture. In addition, political films have rarely been top box-office attractions, particularly with the key teenage audience. The exceptions to this anti-political character of Hollywood have been representations of political campaigns, and of the Presidency and Congress. The 1990s saw a surprisingly large number of "presidential" films, for instance, (1993), *Nixon* (1995) and *Wag the Dog* (1997) as well as films dramatising campaigns for national office. In this article I discuss these films in the context of current debates about the preponderant culture of cynicism and populism attached to end of century American politics. Landmark political films of the period since the 1930s serve as comparative points of reference.

## Populism and the Culture of Cynicism

The pride in politics that Almond and Verba revealed in their surveys of public opinion, first published in the early sixties has long faded (Almond and Verba 1963, 440; Abramowitz 1980, 177). Public trust in government has declined since the sixties, with only a partial break in the trend in the early eighties (Nye 1997, 1). The early nineties instead saw earnest discussions of the pervasiveness of cynicism, and of the reasons why Americans, in Dionne's words "hated" politics (Dionne 1991). Public cynicism about politics obviously has grown: Goldfarb, for example, sees traditional irony and criticism being replaced by "a mocking cynicism that does little to address contemporary problems" and which extends from American politics to journalism and social science. He sees Tom Wolfe's novel, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, with its "exaggerated stereotypes," as indicative of a new condition in which this cynicism replaces "positive democratic and cultural ideals" (Goldfarb 1991, 28). Hart has emphasised on the way in which presidents and politicians in general are increasingly seen intimately and personally, rather than in terms of their public roles. This appeal is both part of their electoral strategy at a time of ideological consensus, and also reflects the desire of voters — expressed through their demand for the tabloids — to know the private as well as the public story of politicians and celebrities of all types (Hart 1999, 30). Such a "cynical" frame — as Hart calls it — not only pervades contemporary American political culture but has also come to serve as a frame to look back on politics of earlier periods. Revisionist accounts of the Kennedy presidency have picked over stories of personal relationships that were unreported at the time, while Oliver Stone's screen biography of Richard Nixon investigates the man in terms of the crucial intertwining of his personal and public life. At academic level psychohistory, from being something of a rarity, has become a standard frame for discussions of political power. The protracted melodrama of Bill Clinton, Monica Lewinsky and Kenneth Starr captured the world's headlines and prompted a congressional and constitutional challenge to

the President, further confusing the distinction between the personal and the political. As Hart argues, Americans have been led into a relationship of emotional intimacy with their leaders, yet this intimacy has substituted for rather than deepened understanding of the way public office, and the public realm generally, has operated. (Hart 1999, 26)

The end of century period in America has also witnessed a deepening of the populist nature of the commercial as well as the political culture. American political rhetoric has frequently borrowed from the ideas and motifs of populism — both as a particular tradition based on agrarian protest and the more amorphous cluster of ideas centred around the opposition between elites and "the people" (Kazin 1998, 269-90; Shafer 1989, 593). There is a relationship between the low esteem for representative political institutions, particularly Congress and parties, and support for movements or leaders that claim to reflect popular concerns more directly. In this paper I will use Margaret Canovan's formulation that populism is concerned with leaders or groups who voice grievances or opinions systematically ignored by governments, and that it is a politics often associated with notions of direct or plebiscitary democracy. To Canovan the falling short of representative democracy in popular eyes, and the attraction of a redemptive politics offering fresh starts or a "clean slate," leads to populist challenges to the existing order (Canovan 1999, 2-16).

The questions asked in this article thus pertain to the articulations of cynicism and populism with the representation of politics and the presidency in the Hollywood films of the nineties. Before exploring these articulations we need to be aware of some of the problematic issues concerning interpretation and representation. Pioneering students of the underlying social significance of recurring motifs in film, in particular Siegfried Kracauer, made claims that images and myths recurring in successful films could be read as indicating underlying trends in the political culture. (Kracauer 1947) Film, however, can also be a means of individual expression, even though authorship in the film medium is problematic and generally collective. Complicating the matter further is the fact that political meanings in films are assessed also in relation to how what appears on the screen is interpreted by elites and spectators. This paper explores notions of populism as a theme in American film, and discusses the way the film narratives resolve or deal with the challenge to political establishments. Frank Capra's films of the thirties and forties used the demonology of populist rhetoric — the distrust of business, finance, intellectuals and party bosses — while powerfully affirming American political ideals espoused by heroic men of the people. How do the large number of films of the 1990s concerned with national politics deal with questions of public cynicism, and what answers or solutions, if any, are provided or endorsed? If film drama counter-poses a notion of "the people" to regular elite politics, how are both sides of this equation defined and represented? Is film reflecting or reinforcing dissatisfaction with Presidential and Congressional politics and a sense that redemption is beyond the efforts of populist revivalism?

This paper will explore the films by analysing the narrative logic of their depiction, their imagining, of politics, while also considering the political interests, intentions and standing of the film-makers. What themes characterise American politics as a subgenre of American film during the decade, and how do these generic features relate to the ideological and cultural politics of the time? Hollywood has often been characterised as unrepresentative both by left wing accounts, and more recently by a view from the right that associates it with the nostrums and concerns of a liberal elite. Does

film treatment of the public realm contribute to a plurality of public debate, or by contrast press that debate into rather specific moulds, reinforcing a specific diagnosis? In order to give a necessary sense of the various traditions of representing the political in American film I start by discussing how the president and the presidency have appeared in American films from the thirties onwards. As we will see, notions of populism set in motion by the work of Frank Capra in particular, and visions of conspiracies and a power elite constitute constant factors in this legacy.

## American Politics and Film: The Legacy

Frank Capra's work is the obvious starting point: his films can be related to notions of populism, the symbolic power of American political myths, and the Popular Front periods of the later 1930s and 1940s. The Popular Front culture of the late thirties and World War Two was characterised by a common ground between liberal and left-wing critics of both fascism and the various ills of the American political and economic system, and by a shared identification with "the people" as a progressive force. (Quart 1977, 6; Neve 1992, 28-55) Capra often used liberal or left wing writers in this period and this general alliance of populist and left perspectives survived the end of the war but declined quickly, given the rise of more conservative agendas related to the Cold War. A key motif in Capra's work is the innocent abroad, the untutored individual from a small town who is plunged into a specialised world of power. In *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1940), Jefferson Smith (James Stewart), armed with simple beliefs, is educated, along with the audience, into the ways of the world, and it is only after moments of despair at the gap between ideals and practice — the "lip service" paid to American ideals — that he is inspired to fight for the transfer of his private vision to the public realm. The film, however, is not merely about the rejuvenation of American democracy by an outsider, for the newcomer also learns something of the inevitable compromises and deals of politics; the potential of populist politics for intolerance, in other words, is tempered by the practice of institutional politics. Crucial to the renewal of Smith's faith, apart from the encouragement and love of a good woman, are the expressive symbols of American democracy. The Capital Dome is referred to as representing a number of American democratic ideals, and Smith also communes with and at the Lincoln Memorial while he prepares himself to take the fight to the Senate floor. Not only is there the conceit that the individual, armed with a correct understanding of the ideals of the system, can make a difference, but Capra's left wing scriptwriter Sidney Buchman provided the protagonist with a sense of the political processes that can produce his victory. Buchman also provides a speech in which Smith's hero, Senator Paine defends his position to the younger man by presenting his years of political compromise in a positive light. Only later, after the war, did Capra resort to heavenly interventions in order to bolster his notion of individual social worth.

The relationship of Capra's work to ideological debates of the Depression era is by no means straightforward, however. *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* caused outrage when previewed for a congressional audience (Wolfe 1990, 306). The defuseness of Capra's message in ideological terms is indicated in more recent times, as in Ronald Reagan's campaign reference to Gary Cooper's key speech from *Mr Deeds Goes to Town* (1936) — about rich people stopping once in a while to help others climb to the top of the hill. Reagan similarly presented *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) as an anodyne and iconic tribute to the American small town at the expense of darker readings which emerge more

obviously from the text. The power of American ideals and symbols, such as the Capital Dome and the Lincoln memorial, is not restricted to Capra's work. John Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939) also displays a populist subtext, showing the young president as receiving authority, in the form of law books, directly from a pioneer family. In *Crossfire* (1947), a post-war film noir dealing with an anti-Semitic murder, the unravelling of the crime and the uncovering of the perpetrator as a domestic fascist — in terms of the film's discourse — is accompanied by the visual key of the gradual lightening of the view from the detective's Washington DC window to reveal the luminous form of the Capital building.

The Cold War era, as well as elevating the Presidency in symbolic importance, also made it more difficult for politicians or filmmakers to criticise the political system in terms of its ideals. Representations of politics became rare in the fifties, although an early example of this shift in the political frame came with *All the King's Men*, adapted and directed by left-wing writer and director Robert Rossen in 1949. This film, based on Robert Penn Warren's novel, which was itself loosely based on the career of the Louisiana Governor Huey P. Long, is a study of a populist politician who becomes a demagogue. The film is revealing on the seductiveness of power — to aides and campaigners — and has sympathy for the protagonist's initial political project of responding democratically to the concerns of the people. Yet the politician's eventual corruption raises the spectre of a populist democracy that political scientists of the 1950s were often to see as threatening totalitarianism. In the 1950s dominant interpretations of McCarthyism as a mass, populist phenomenon destructive of democratic ideals and principles acted to strengthen notions of the importance of elites to democratic practice (Rogin 1967).

A film that now seems to have been ahead of its time is *A Face in the Crowd* (1957), directed by Elia Kazan from Budd Schulberg's script. For the first time attention is drawn to the increasing interconnectedness between merchandising and the selling of political candidates. "Man of the people" Lonesome Rhodes (Andy Griffiths) becomes a "star" on radio and television, and his overtly sexual, emotional appeal is in demand from commerce and from candidates wishing to use it to carry a right wing message. (The film also includes the conceit, borrowed from the Army-McCarthy hearings, that television could also act to expose a tyrant — a perspective missing in 1990s representations.) Rather like the much inferior *Wag the Dog* later, the drift of the film concerns is the power of politicians to use the new media to set the agenda.

The sense of change associated with the Kennedy administration attracted media of all kinds to a renewed concern with politics and the presidency, and in the early sixties a series of film dramas were set in the institutional world of Washington high politics. Agendas blocked in the 1950s — about McCarthyism and the bomb — were released by the widespread sense that things were changing, while the films had the effect of providing an illusion of access to the personal lives of politicians at a time when journalists wrote uncritically about Camelot and largely ignored the personal misdemeanours of politicians. The communist threat is a staple plot element, but so also is the military as a threat to democracy. In *Seven Days in May* (1964) there is a threat of a military coup, while in *Dr Strangelove* (1963) the American president remains a model of rationality in a MAD world. Presidents are depicted respectfully by Frederic March and Henry Fonda in *The Best Man* (1964) and *Fail-Safe* (1964) in films that can be seen as making veiled reference to the importance of a candidate's personal life to his public performance.

A more pessimistic view of politics is evident in a series of films in the mid- and late seventies, a period coloured by the defeat in Vietnam and by the resignation of President Nixon following Watergate. Films such as *The Parallax View* (1974), *All the President's Men* (1976) (with its use of "noir" conventions to depict Washington), *Twilight's Last Gleaming* (1977) and *The China Syndrome* (1979) all pick up and help construct a notion of conspiracy in American politics. *The China Syndrome* was released two weeks before the accident at the nuclear plant at Three Mile Island, and may have helped shift the entrenched media frame on the nuclear industry. Referring to the much-debated turning point in media coverage of the Vietnam War, Todd Gitlin has seen Three Mile Island as the "tet of the nuclear power industry"(Gitlin 1980, 288).

The populism of Frank Capra's films affirmed American ideals as much as it criticised the reality, although the subsequent construction of Capra as a sentimental icon, a celebrator of everything American, always distorted the darker elements, especially in his later films (Phelps 1979, 389). The McCarthy era, together with the fading of the Depression agenda, discouraged politics as an explicit theme in cinema, displacing discussion of the public realm into science fiction and Western genres. The Kennedy period stimulated a number of realist dramas of the play of public and private interests in Washington, set against the backdrop of the Cold War. *The Candidate* (1972) picked up themes from *A Face in the Crowd* (1957), warning of the dangers of the new primary process, and the greater importance of the media and advertising in political image-making. The era of Watergate and defeat in Vietnam encouraged darker notions of conspiracy in American politics, while in the Reagan years Hollywood provided both military heroes and a cautious trend towards feminism and multiculturalism.

Generally the film industry reacts to real events, and ideological fashion, with a lagged effect. Capra's passionate feeling about America seemed incompatible with the new political configurations of the Cold War era. Later, in the Kennedy era, Washington became a glamorous location for political drama and *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962) and *Dr Strangelove* provided more subversive perspectives on the crazy logic of the Cold War. Jimmy Carter's redemptive politics of 1976 proved to be a false trail, while Ronald Reagan constructed a hegemonic notion of national revival that intimidated both the media and Hollywood. Yet even the Reagan era ended with Iran Contra, although many Americans still prefer to "print the legend" of the President who identified with a supposed "golden age" in politics and Hollywood. In the early nineties the recession prompted middle class discontent — reflected in *Falling Down* (1992) — while Bill Clinton's election both raised liberal hopes and strengthened notions of liberal conspiracy for conservatives. Film representations of politics were responsive to short term trends, but the Cold War responsibilities of politicians, and the possibilities of democratic redemption, were constant motifs.

## Politics and Film in the 1990s

There are a number of ways of examining the way politics is treated as a theme in American film in the 1990s.[1] One obvious point is the way in which a number of writers and directors have experience themselves, if not as candidates, then as speechwriters, advisers and activists. Oliver Stone (*JFK*, *Nixon*), Tim Robbins (*Bob Roberts*) and Warren Beatty (*Bulworth*) have records of political affiliations and single issue involvements, while Gary Ross, writer of *Dave* (1993) and writer-director of

*Pleasantville* (1998), is a sometime Democratic speechwriter for both Dukakis and Clinton. Robert De Niro, co-star of *Wag the Dog* (1997), involved himself personally in a lobbying effort on Capital Hill before the impeachment vote against Bill Clinton. Michael Moore, best known for his left populist television shows and for *Roger and Me* (1989), his documentary study of the consequences of General Motor's lay-off in Flint Michigan, also directed the feature film *Canadian Bacon* (1995).[2] Finally, a number of those involved in the film production of Joe Klein's best selling book *Primary Colours*, including director Mike Nichols, were well documented "Friends of Bill." Many of these filmmakers, whatever their partisan attachments, are perhaps quite likely to share some of the cynicism about the possibility of significant change that is apparent in the media and among the public at large. It seems also to be the fact that these figures tend to be on the liberal or Democratic side of the cultural and political wars of recent years, something that critics on the conservative or Republican side, from Michael Medved to Richard Grenier, might see as significant. (Medved 1992; Grenier 1991).

For the representation of politics in these films, however, a distinction between mainstream or "studio" films and films that are defined — in terms of their more specialised audience and more limited finance — as independent productions, may be more important than the political leanings of directors and writers. Independent films are arguable less distinctive aesthetically than once was the case, and it is not easy to classify large budget productions made with considerable personal input by "auteurist" directors (such as Oliver Stone and Warren Beatty) or low budget productions (such as *Wag the Dog*) which owe much to mainstream conventions.

Baring this rough distinction in mind this survey begins with a number of personal 1990s film projects that suggest the superstructural nature of candidate and presidential politics, and the importance of economic and military forces as structural constraints on political power. In the fifties the "power elite" notion of American politics was marginal to social science and journalistic discourse, but by the nineties more radical perspectives on political and media power were arguably more widely disseminated. In particular Noam Chomsky's analysis (often with Edward Herman) of the "propaganda model" of corporate and media power was fairly widely discussed on campuses, with Chomsky having something of the status of a "dissident" intellectual through television appearances and the film *Manufacturing Consent* (1992). In *JFK* (Oliver Stone, 1991) a counter-hegemonic view of the Kennedy assassination was presented which paradoxically burnished the Kennedy legend just as further revelations of the late President's extra marital affairs were contributing to less favourable public and scholarly reassessments of his public record. *JFK* suggests an assassination plot hatched by elements from the security services that are aggrieved at what they saw as Kennedy's lack of commitment to the American interest in Vietnam. Several years later Stone returned both to the presidency and to notions of a military industrial complex in his unexpectedly sympathetic study of Richard Nixon (*Nixon*, 1995). Here again the president is detached from any aura of presidential power and seen as an outsider within the wider national Security State. The film flashes back to episodes in Nixon's intertwined public and private lives to produce a degree of understanding for the fallen, despairing figure — the struggling salesman of Arthur Miller's drama, to use another of the film's conceits — at the time of Watergate. Both films arguably suggest a failure of representative politics, but *Nixon*, which had nothing like the suc-

cess of *JFK*, is arguably the film that expresses a non-heroic notion of the loneliness of the office. Stone's analysis suggests that people identified Kennedy with their hopes and aspirations while seeing themselves in Nixon, the most unglamorous and "uncool" of political leaders. In a more populist age people are arguably more realistic about the aura once attached by cold war and other dramaturgies to both the common man and the uncommon leader.

An updated notion of the military industrial complex is also implicit in *Bob Roberts* (Tim Robbins, 1992), which depicts a right wing Senate campaign that expropriates the post-sixties counter-culture associated with liberal and left politics. The filmmakers are less concerned with presenting the political context in which such an unlikely alliance could emerge, or with psychological realism, than with a particular thesis of political power. Roberts himself may be linked in films about politics to the Andy Griffiths character in *A Face in the Crowd* and with the use made of the singer Willie Nelson to sell political myths in *Wag the Dog*. What can loosely be called country music — or that element of it that straddles left and right cultural politics — is seen as having a continued populist resonance with American political culture. The use made of Woody Guthrie's anthem in *Bob Roberts* highlights what is presented as the enlistment of a left wing populist discourse in support of a right wing project welded to the interests of corporate and military elites. This theme recalls the fifties debate about the continuities or lack of them between McCarthyism and the radical and rural (and turn of the century) origins of populist politics. Again the individual is seen as the front man, but the film is itself perhaps cynical rather than liberating in terms of the lack of any sense of media or public challenge to the Roberts campaign, outside of the incumbent Senator played by Gore Vidal. The film itself takes the form of a public service "documentary," although one that is more fascinated with than critical of its subject. One either accepts or rejects the film's thesis, but it is an emotional "sell," not unlike that of the system that the film is criticising. Rather like elements of radical media analysis, the film's thesis is inadequately supported by evidence of a plausible process of politics.

Further contemplation of the American polity from a liberal stance comes in *Bulworth* (1998), Warren Beatty's fable of a veteran politician's despair and subsequent rejuvenation as a man of the people. As often with populist discourse the notion of "the people" can have national, nativist and class connotations depending on the ideological perspective adopted. Sixty year old Democratic Senator Bulworth is seen as cynical of the rhetoric of the electoral process, reflecting Warren Beatty's own stance on the lack of real political choice in the years since George McGovern and Robert Kennedy.[3] Out of this despair the fictional Senator decides to speak the brutal truth instead of the usual platitudes, bluntly telling African Americans, for example, that they have no choice but to vote for the Democrats. There are echoes of Capra's *Meet John Doe* (1941) as the Senator decides to end a life made futile by the hypocrisy of the modern electoral process. Liberated from the conventional wisdom of "getting elected" Bulworth speaks his mind, and is reborn as a man reflecting the concerns and feelings of the urban black underclass and its intellectuals. His faith renewed, Bulworth the holy fool wants to live again, and his campaign revives, only for him to be assassinated — in accordance with the film's overall assumption that radical change is impossible — by threatened "special interests" from the insurance industry. Whether the film is liberating or merely reinforces a cynicism about the possibilities of real

political change is open to debate. Jesse Jackson felt that the film was counter-productive in its suggestion that politics was pointless in such a corrupt system, and disliked the suggestion that "the only authentic black reaction is rage, obscenity and sex" (quoted in Wills 1998, 24-5).

Finally, reference can me made briefly to two films *Wag the Dog* (Barry Levinson, 1997) and Michael Moore's *Canadian Bacon* (1995), that are both associated with notions of the effect of the end of the Cold War on American politics. *Wag the Dog* is a further example of thesis filmmaking in which the characters are given little sense of depth or autonomy. Furthermore the narrative provides no sense of challenge by media or public to the campaigns concocted by the White House-Hollywood gurus. In order to ensure that the President's dalliance with a "firefly girl" does not wreck their master's election prospects the presidential spin-doctors take on the task of setting the agenda for seventeen days by staging an imaginary foreign war. The film suggests a hypodermic effect as much as a hegemonic struggle, with the manipulation being shown as total and untraceable. Women immediately break down in tears after hearing the president's war speech, while student basketball players react in knee jerk fashion to news of the mythical hostage. There is much borrowing from real cases (including the hostages crisis of 1980), and to some the satire seemed to be given resonance by the events that followed its release, notably the American cruise missile attacks in the Sudan and Afghanistan in August 1998 and the bombing of Iraq in December of the same year. Both took place against the backdrop of the congressional moves towards impeaching the President. We see the agenda being manipulated without the President — who we glimpse only once from behind — being aware. This critique of television influenced, cartoon like satire — near to the mocking cynicism that Hart discusses, and a long way from the wit, irony and contemporary "shock effect" of *Dr Strangelove* — applies even more so to *Canadian Bacon*, a crude satire of a President who attempts to distract attention from his domestic weaknesses by waging war on Canada.

In terms of the more mainstream productions of the 1990s several of them play with the motif of the outsider, the man of the people, renewing American ideals and metaphorically bringing Washington practice in line with the classical form symbolised by the Capital Dome. Coming nearest to the old Capra's formula comes *Dave* (1993), in which the caring manager of a neighbourhood employment agency is brought in to impersonate the real President. There are elements of a Ross Perot like stress on business economics, but, reflecting perhaps the temporary recession of 1992, the film celebrates the benefits of introducing the spirit of community minded concern into a Washington politics defined in terms of career, budget cutting, and the long-term self-interest of state and bureaucracy. In other films dealing with political office the rejuvenation from outside comes, if from anywhere, from a woman. In *The American President* the chief executive (Michael Douglas) is seen from the beginning as untainted by the temptations and corruptions of high office, but he is only successful when he fights for an agenda that is at least in part designed to secure his romantic union with his girlfriend, an environmental lobbyist. "Becoming himself," in terms of a loosely defined Democratic agenda, the president wins both his girl and, with minimal rhetorical opposition from his Republican opponent, the country. As elsewhere (e.g. in *Dirty Tricks*, 1992) the male politician's partner is seen as acting in such a way that, although sometimes dangerous to his electoral calculations, keeps him honest and

closer to the film's ideal notion of politics as personal conviction and service to the people.

*The American President*, for all its discussion of crime and environmental bills, defines Shepherd (Douglas) predominantly in terms of his personal desires. The Republican challenger is portrayed as a man of straw whose discourse is easily defeated once Shepherd becomes a "conviction politician." The notion of fighting back is in part derived from the supposed lesson of Dukakis's failure to contest Republican attacks on his "liberal bias" in 1988. Politics in the film is secondary to the cinematic conventions of the "comedy of remarriage," and in this sense the film stays close to a media frame — of personal motives for politics — that arguably further encourages media and public cynicism.[4] Approaching the film from a different angle, *The American President* is about identity politics as much as the state of the nation. Perhaps, as Michael Lind suggests, the multicultural trend has reduced the consensus about what the nation means culturally; Sicilian immigrant Frank Capra was in contrast a key contributor to the assumptions that Lind calls "Euro-America." (Lind 1996, 55ff). When political strategist Sydney Allen Wade (Annette Bening) enters the White House for the first time at the beginning of the film she mentions to the gateman that she is savouring the "Capraesque quality" of the moment. Although a strategist and lobbyist she is associated with issues — public schools and the environment — that are arguably insulated from a standard, and cynical, notion of politics. The effect of her arrival is ultimately to force the president to be a braver and more progressive Democrat, leaving behind Clintonesque political caution and calculation.

Eddie Murphy, in his starring role in *The Distinguished Gentleman* (Jonathan Lynn, 1992), arguably provides the most cynical recycling of the old formula, and the film reflects the deeper public cynicism of the Capital Hill end of Pennsylvania Avenue. The Murphy character is attracted to running for Congress precisely because, as a small time con man, Washington offers ideal opportunities for a criminal career to blossom. His belated battle against a corrupt committee chairman resolves nothing and gives no sense that change is on the agenda. (The Jefferson memorial, as in *Dirty Tricks*, is merely a picture opportunity; only in *Bob Roberts*, rather obviously, is attention paid to its symbolism.) Eddie Murphy, as the small time crook cum Congressman, generates sufficient charm to be seen as somehow superior to the self-interested, and white, Washington incumbents. Finally *Primary Colours* (1998), the film of Joe Klein's 1996 book about the Clinton's 1992 campaign, seems to have been overtaken by events, and in particular the prolonged Monica Lewinsky scandal. Here it is the black campaign aide who provides spectators with a moral plumb line, and his joining of the successful President in Washington at the end shifts the film's sympathy compared to the book. Yet given President Clinton's success as an economic manager the film does dramatise the problems of balancing personal weakness and corruption with effectiveness in office and the public good — or relative public good — that this can generate.

## Conclusion

What is interesting about the nineties is the weight of concern about the public realm. Far from weakening notions of a central power elite and strengthening images of democracy the end of the Cold War seems to have produced more pessimistic film representations of the political process. There are still sympathetic views of the Presi-

dency. Some play on some post-Cold War external threat, thus playing on the continued symbolic pull of the office — often shored up by a multicultural discourse. Others encourage a notion of the conviction president (*An American President*) that the rest of American politics (from "divided government" to the strong incumbency of sitting Congressmen) makes unrealistic in practice. In real politics discontent with presidential performance is disguised by partisanship on both sides of the "cultural wars" that still underlie American politics, together with general satisfaction with the state of the economy.

It is difficult for filmmakers to imagine "the people" outside of this liberal-conservative divide, while liberals in particular have constructed a powerful notion of conspiracy beyond the redemptive efforts of any group or leader. Resistance seems futile in *Bob Roberts* and *Wag the Dog*, a military industrial complex defeats democratic politics in *JFK*, while in *Bulworth* the Senator's reincarnation as a man of the underclass is shown to be the stuff of fantasy. The liberal-left certainly dominates this sphere of the Hollywood agenda (although not others), but does so in ways that provide little sense of ways by which that agenda might be furthered. In fact, in standard Hollywood fashion, the films may get made less because of auteurist passion than because the notion of conspiracy seems relatively uncontroversial. The lesson of *Primary Colours* is that we must be thankful for small mercies, while *Pleasantville* projects the contemporary cultural divide back on the safer terrain of the fifties small town.

Political filmmaking in the nineties has dealt with issues of gender and multiculturalism, but it has lacked any convincing imagining of a redemptive politics. Populism, as in *Bob Roberts*, is seen as just a rhetoric, a set of mobilising symbols, while in *Bulworth* Beatty wants both to show both the potential popularity of the Bulworth agenda — a man of conviction vindicated at the polls — as well as the impossibility of this really happening (the assassination). If Americans want to move away from a politics that ties the hands of presidents their screenwriters and directors may have to start imagining how it might actually be done. But perhaps the 1990s will in retrospect be seen as the last decade when national politics was sufficient of an issue to inspire popular cinematic interest. If the presidency gives up trying to shift agendas set by bureaucrats, judges and middle class taxpayers, then the Washington melodrama, as a vehicle for debate about the American public realm, may be in decline.

There seems to be a gap between the structural analysis of the more "serious" films — for want of a better term — and the emphasis of mainstream popular culture on personal aspects of the public realm. What seems to have been lost is much sense of individual political agency, and neither film nor other forms of popular culture seem to have the power to provide effective models of political participation and action. William Chaloupka, in his recent study of *Cyncism in America*, cites only one film, and one that is set far from Washington; pointing to the need to rebuild politics from the grass roots up, Chaloupka cites *Fargo* (Joel Coen, 1996) as a film in which "the Coens use cinema to provide a glimpse of the daily life generated in a society that takes its civic communitarianism very seriously" (Chaloupka 1999, 160). The area that is left undiscussed is arguably the institutional politics of making divided or fragmented national politics work. The cultural fragmentation of what Lind has called "Multicultural America" makes it more difficult for politicians and filmmakers alike to construct a simple notion of "the people" (Lind 1996, 97).[5] Popular culture provides little in the way of a realistic agenda for change or reform. The alternative is between

the black observer of the drama of *Primary Colours*, who ultimately backs the system (and goes with his man to Washington), and the black "alternative" journalist in *Bob Roberts*, whose fate reflects a particularly negative view of the possibilities of real pluralism and democracy, and who tells us that "Mr Smith has been bought."

The films of the nineties indicate the spreading of the culture of public cynicism into the arena of popular culture. The blowing up of the White House in *Independence Day* (1996) perhaps stands for a wider fragmentation of traditional notions of respect for its symbolic form and the aura of its key inhabitant. Mainstream film contrasts a politics of self-interest and incumbency against one of conviction and service but finds it difficult to suggest realist narratives of renewal. With the recent exception of *Pleasantville*, with its suggestion of the reactionary roots of iconic notions of the fifties small town, recent films rarely engage with the cultural and ideological "wars" underlying end of century politics. Women and Black Americans are sometimes excused from responsibility for the system, while the environmental agenda, loosely defined, is one of the few policy areas favoured above a politics defined as narrow and self-serving. Capra may be invoked to give a film some provenance, but popular filmmakers struggle to use his motifs realistically in an era of cultural fragmentation and a populist discourse associated as much with the right as the left. Only in their widening of the political discourse to include structural economic and military forces do more critical filmmakers attempt to build a more sustained political critique. Yet such attempts at radical discourse may well be read as encouraging further alienation from the political system, and cynicism about the possibilities for renewal.

## Notes:

1. The films discussed do not represent an exhaustive survey of films released in the 1990s that deal with national politics. The hypocrisy and moral bankruptcy of the president is central to *Absolute Power* (Clint Eastwood, 1996), while in *Clear and Present Danger* (Philip Noyce, 1994) the audience is invited to identify with family man and CIA deputy director Jack Ryan (Harrison Ford) as he uncovers corruption that reaches to the White House. *City Hall* (Harold Becker, 1996) concerns the uncovering of the corruption of a Mayor of New York who has set his sights on national office. Only external threats seem to justify more sympathetic portrayal of Presidents, as in *Air Force One* (1997), *Independence Day* (1996) and *Deep Impact* (1998). (Perhaps the advertising line of the unseen *The Wherewolf of Washington* (1992) is also suggestive: "All politicians suck. This one bites.")

2. A number of political documentaries of the 1990s rival the feature films in terms of their mix of public and private drama. See *The War Room* (directed by D. A. Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus, 1993), and *A Perfect Candidate* (directed by R. J. Cutler and David Van Taylor, 1996).

3. On Warren Beatty's political involvements see Brownstein 1990, 240-49, 316-43.

4. The cinema of remarriage is a motif that recurs in a number of Hollywood romantic comedies; see Cavell 1981, 16-18.

5. The independent writer-director John Sayles depicts corruption in his study of city politics, *City of Hope* (1990), but also provides evidence of positive political practice.

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