

A Different Way of Looking at United States Presidential Elections. A New Analysis of Political Science

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Summary: Introduction. 2. A Different Point of View. 3. State of Union. 4. The Last Hurrah. 5. The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance. 6. The Best Man. 7. Conclusion.

Abstract: Every time the presidential election process begins, a question keeps troubling both scholars and citizens. «Does the best man go to the White House?». This essay obviously does not pretend to answer. It wants instead to offer a different point of analysis in order to fuel the debate. It's not simple for an European citizen understand what is really happening. The way the American elections are conducted and presented has nothing to do with the European democratic involvement and television landscape. So, to try to understand what happens overseas this essay looks up to the movies that focus on the electoral competition. In fact, movies are more than a simple reflection of the citizens' opinion. They also take part in the its formation and, so, they show those images which they have partly created themselves.

Keywords: political advertaising, American democracy, presidential elections, electoral movies, political parties, political representation, politic science.

1. Introduction

The long race for the White House has began. In less than six months, Americans will head to the polls to vote for the nation's 46th President.

The Election day will occur on the Tuesday right after the first Monday in November¹.

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¹ This does not necessarily mean the "first Tuesday" in a month because the first day of a month can be a Tuesday. The earliest possible date is November 2, and the latest possible date is November 8, as it will be for just this time. Although the first quadrennial presidential election was held in 1788, a uniform date for choosing presidential elections was instituted by the Congress only in 1845. Previous to that, federal law gave each state some flexibility in the holding of their elections. In the middle of nineteenth century the United States was largely an agrarian society. People could take care of political questions only after the harvest would have been completed. An election date in November was seen as convenient before the start of the rainy winter season. We have to remember that in those years unsurfaced roads were still the rule more than the exception and most of the people needed a full day to travel by horse-drawn vehicles to the county seat to vote. So, the

In that day, Americans will take a crucial decision that will shape their lives for at least the next four years, if not more. But the event seems so important that the whole world is watching what is going on there.

Now more than ever, the United States presidential election has received a lot of attention in the media. For months the result of primaries has been holding political observers with bated breath. Virtually every day news broadcasts have talked about both dangers and opportunities involved in all the candidates. To be honest, one more than others².

It's not simple for an European citizen understand what is really happening. The way the american elections are conducted and presented has nothing to do with the European television landscape. Primaries and caucuses, delegates and conventions, a long series of exotic names that seems to confound European voters as much as it fascinates and involves the American ones. The incredible amount of money spent in advertising, the incessant television coverage, everything contributes to widen the gap that exists, or should exist, between the two political sensitivities.

While Europeans are tempted to treat this show superficially, with amusement and even disregard, on the other side of the ocean "the best democracy money can buy" has just been put on the market³. And Americans really seem to appreciate this particular kind of teleshopping.

Now, in the United States, the Presidential race risks of being seen as the top-rated show of the year. And nothing else.

The success of the political debates, in particular of the republican ones, which have set rating records, are indicative of their entertainment value. Several million citizens and voters follows the democratic process as a TV show.

It's very difficult to believe that they're all really interested in changing their country. If so, the Presidential election wouldn't be typified by the low turn-out that has characterised the last sixty years⁴. It's easier to say that the tale of the political contest has turned so attractive to become irresistible.

religious respect for the Sunday and the prosaic consideration that Wednesday was the market day in a lot of towns set Tuesday the only available day. The second Tuesday of the month was probably preferred to avoid the overlap with All Saints Day. (SCHLESINGER, Arthur M. Jr.(ed.) *History of Presidential Elections 1789-1968*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1971).

² Every month, the Economist Intelligence Unit publishes a report where lists the top ten events that could destabilize the global economy. From March, Donald Trump winning the US presidency has been considered one of the top 10 risks facing the world. He is rated as riskier than Britain leaving the European Union or an armed clash in the South China Sea. Obviously, nobody expects Donald Trump to defeat Hillary Clinton or Bernie Sanders, but the notice has spread around the world.

³ *The Best Democracy Money Can Buy: An Investigative Reporter Exposes the Truth about Globalization, Corporate Cons, and High Finance Fraudsters* is a 2002 book by investigative journalist Greg Palast. It's a collection of investigative articles that tries to explain how money from private corporations controls and influences elections and governmental policies in America.

⁴ According to a 2002 report by International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, The United States is ranked 120th out of 169 countries for average voter turnout in the last sixty years (In R. LÓPEZ PINTOR, M. GRATSCHER, *Voter Turnout Since 1945: A Global Report*. Stockholm: International IDEA), and, since then, things seem to be only getting worse. «Can we be satisfied with a "democracy" when more than 60% of people don't vote and some 80% of young people and low-income Americans don't either? Can we be content when poll after poll shows that most Americans can't even name the political parties that control the US Senate and House – or who their member of Congress is?» A week later the midterm

It's not just about the inevitable comparison to a compelling long-distance running event, full of risks or traps. Neither to an intriguing sitcom, full of awkward-type situations and strange guest. A part of this success is due to the wish of people to be fully involved in a great story that is about to unfold.

In this time, in which politic seems so far removed from the citizens' daily lives, most people turn to television storytelling to be involved, to regain the democratic leading role that they seem to have lost. Probably, the fact the audience is so much bigger than the turn-out says a lot about the reasons of that loss.

So, to try to understand what happens overseas without sinking in Tv's quicksands, but without giving up on the taste of the show, we have decided to look up to Hollywood. Of course, not to the celebrity endorsements that time after time keep raining down on the candidates. But to the movies that focus on the electoral competition.

2. A different point of view

Maurice Duverger, one of the foremost experts in political science, said «Electoral mechanisms are strange devices – simultaneously cameras and projectors. They register images which they have partly created themselves»⁵. In his words, it's possible to see an original and potentially fruitful field of research that seems to be capable of explaining that strange event showed by presidential election and, at the same time, that promises to be as interesting as the television broadcasting. Maybe, a type of research that would pretend to be scientific, without forgetting the rules of show business.

«Moreover, an election is more than a simple interpretation of the citizens' opinions. It also takes part in their formation. The model does not exist independently of the portrait, or rather, of the total of the processes that go into the development of the portrait. The technique used for the portrait affects the physiognomy of the model; it helps to shape the model to same extent»⁶

After all, Duverger has studied the evolution of political systems, showing a preference for empirical methods of investigation rather than philosophical reasoning. And, if we want to study the political awareness that remains in the American citizen after the end of the flood of television pictures, it seems to be difficult to imagine a better way of gaining knowledge by means of “direct observation” of several electoral movies.

election of 2014, Senator Bernie Sanders, currently a candidate for the Democratic nominee, complained writing in The Guardian (B. SANDERS, *US voter turnout is an international embarrassment. Here's how to fix it*, 10 november 2014).

⁵ M. DUVERGER, *Which is the Best Electoral System?*, in A. Lijphart, B. Grofman, *Choosing an electoral system. Issue and Alternatives*, New York: Praeger Publishers, 1984, p. 34.

⁶ *Ibidem*

The question of the status of the film as a source for the political analysis, however, cannot be answered in this short essay⁷. But, if it's possible to say that an election takes part in public opinion's formation, then the same thing can be said for Hollywood movies. In fact, movies, as well as the electoral mechanisms - or also the same parties⁸ - show those images which they have partly created themselves⁹.

In this context, instead, it is important to emphasize that the movie releases happen only sporadically and often conjuncturally. This particularity seems to be well suited to cut off the flow of words and images that everyday seem to flood the citizens' houses.

In this sense, movies' incidental nature offers firstly a more accurate and less emotional description of the democratic awareness of American citizens; secondly, it creates a pause for reflection necessary to encourage a further deepening of political issues and to help in increasing the level of political knowledge and democratic attitude¹⁰.

⁷ «Scholars of film and politics often spend a substantial amount of time justifying the cultural and academic value of examining films. [...] Although it may seem obvious to some as to why film plays an important role in our political culture, the small number of academic books written on the subject (relative to other topics in film or in politics) suggests that this topic remains underappreciated [...] But not everyone is convinced of the relevance of studying film. Outside the field of film studies, movies are often seen as simply entertainment. Sobchack [*Beyond Visual Aids: American Films As American Culture*, 1980] suggests that most scholars in the humanities and social sciences do not give film much serious consideration and are skeptical of its value in understanding the history, culture, or the ideology of the United States. [...] This view has been changing over the past few decades, and more and more scholars are looking to film to understand changes in our society». (K. FERNANDEZ, *Film and American Political Culture*, in *American Political Culture: An Encyclopedia*, (eds.) T. G. Jelen, M. J. Rozell, M. Shally-Jensen, Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2015, pp. 445). Among the most recent studies on the theme, we have to remember P.L. GIANOS, *Politics and Politicians in American Film*, Westport: Praeger, 1998; I. SCOTT, *American politics in Hollywood Film* Edimburgh: University Press, 2000; T. CHRISTENSEN, P.J. HAAS, *Projecting Politics: Political Messages in American Films*, 2005; M. SACHLEBEN, K.M. YENERALL, *Seeing the Bigger Picture: Understanding Politics through Film and Television*, New York: Peter Lang, 2005; D. FRANKLIN, *Political Culture of Film in the United States*, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006; M. COYNE, *Hollywood Goes to Washington: American Politics on Screen*, London: Reaktion, 2008; R. HERRERA, *Political Matinee: Hollywood's Take on American Politics*, San Diego: Cognella Press, 2011.

⁸ «At any given moment, a country's opinion expresses itself through a party system born earlier, which necessarily distorts it. It is true that this gap between opinions and parties may be filled by campaign propaganda; but, more precisely, the campaign tends to bring the voters' opinions in line with the party programs instead of allowing their free expression» (M. DUVERGER, *Which is the Best Electoral System?*, cit., p. 35).

⁹ In order to investigate the relationship between watching movies and increasing political knowledge, Liesbet van Zoonen has recently demonstrated how political movies are usually used by the people to make sense of politics (understood as parties, governments, candidates and leaders). In particular, political movies «enable people to think about the dilemmas of politics that politicians face (reflection), criticize or praise politicians for their morals and stories for their ideology (judgement), and express their hopes and ideals (fantasy). In addition, some stories give their viewers the feeling that they have acquired new knowledge about specific elements of politics, which provides them with means to describe what they see as politics (description). Although large numbers of the analysed comments did not address politics at all, there were enough that did to warrant the conclusion that popular films and series about politics can function as a resource to present one's ideas in a public setting. This outcome is particularly relevant when considering the almost total absence of research about audience reactions to such films and series, and about people's articulations of popular culture and politics in general. The results of this analysis demonstrate that people 'do' politics in relation to films and series, and construct in their reactions a particular and public version of their political selves». (L. VAN ZOONEN, *Audience Reactions to Hollywood Politics*, *Media, Culture & Society*, 2007, Vol. 29(4): p. 544. Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/249723175_Audience_Reactions_to_Hollywood_Politics [accessed May 2, 2016]). In order to understand how «film can have a significant, perhaps even large, impact on specific issue preferences, or even on a person's entire political orientation» see also: J. SADOW, *An Experiment on Cinema's Effect on Political Attitudes*, Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southern Political Science Association, Inter-Continental Hotel, New Orleans, LA, Jan 08, 2004, available from http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p67879_index.html [accessed May 2, 2016].

¹⁰ The vastity of arguments and the small space available in this paper necessitate an arbitrary selection of thematically relevant movies about various aspects of the electoral competition. Having to adopt a selection criterion, it has been decided

3. State of Union

Based on Russel Crouse and Howard Lindsay's play of the same name, *State of the Union* is probably the first electoral movie ever produced in Hollywood. Directed by Frank Capra in 1946, its vision provides much food for thought and should be considered as an initial contribution to the issues addressed in the present article.

It is apparently a simple tale. Republican newspaper magnate Kay Thorndyke (Angela Lansbury) intends to make her lover, aircraft tycoon Grant Matthews (Spencer Tracy), the new President. Thorndyke plans to use her newspaper chain's influence to deadlock the 1948 Republican National Convention. In her intention, Matthews represents the ideal *dark horse* candidate, the right man for winning the Republican Party's presidential nomination over a host of better-known candidates¹¹. In fact, she well knows that the *GOP's* best chance is to put up a candidate who's never been identified with the politics. Nothing new under the sun¹².

From the beginning the clash, between the idealism and the honesty of the business community and the cynicism and the ambitions of professional politicians, appears to be the movie's main theme. The entrepreneur Grant Matthews shows a growing disdain for Republican strategist Jim Conover (Adolphe Menjou)

«You politicians, instead of trying to pull the country together, are helping to pull it apart just to get votes. To labor you promise higher wages and lower prices. To business, higher prices and lower wages. To the rich you say, "Let's cut taxes.", to the poor, "Soak the Rich"».

While Matthews on the big screen gives a voice to citizens' negative opinion about professional politicians, Conover, instead, summarizes effectively his own point of view on the parties' role in a democratic society. «Is there any real difference between the Democratic Party and the Republican Party» asks naively Kay, Matthews' wife. «That's a hell of a question for a Presidential candidate to ask! All the difference in the world. They're in and we're out!».

to focus the attention on movies made between the end of World War Two and the start of the Watergate Scandal. Just about 25 years in which Hollywood begins to relate the doubts of the American citizens about the fact that "*The Best Man*" could truly get to the White House.

¹¹ Politically, a *dark horse* is a little-known person that rises to prominence especially in an electoral competition. In the political history of United States a lot of relatively unknown politician has played this role. The latest example has probably been Jimmy Carter, elected as the thirty-ninth president in 1976. In fact, in the beginning of that same year, Carter was relatively unknown outside his home state of Georgia.

¹² From *Ecclesiastes* 1:9.

As the same title seems to suggest¹³, the movie represents a serious complaint against the state of the American politic and, more generally, against the democratic representation and the parties' roles as legislators and guarantors.

But the film tells us something more: it emphasizes the difference between those that took politics as a mission for the good of their community and those that took it simply as a job.

Their ambition for power divides them irreversibly. For the former, the political adventure becomes a cathartic event that may be concluded with the withdrawal of candidacy and the acknowledgement of their sins, while for the latter the experience is destined to be lost, being stuck in the cyclical repetition of their own moral confusion.

But the movie seems also to stage the withdrawal of society's positive energies from the political commitment, viewed as guilty of perverting not only the common people and the industrials whom aspire to the candidacy, but also the intellectuals that try to denounce the situation. Grant Matthews' withdrawal is Frank Capra's, too. It's an invitation to the intellectuals to step aside, for their art risks to be defiled by the vile ambition of power. After Capra's *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* and *Meet John Doe*, this seems to be the sign of surrender¹⁴.

This movie deserves better, however, «because its treatment of politics was so much more sophisticated than that in earlier political films. Capra's portrait of interest group politics and his hint at the future importance of television put the film ahead of its time, but he had also moved away from his earlier faith in the common man and his depictions of good-hearted citizens triumphing over corrupt politicians. Here he presented a political world ruled by a power elite represented by the publisher, the party boss, and a gaggle of character actors who spoke for various vested interests. In the 1930s, Mr Smith had stood, fought, and won; in the late 1940s, Grant Matthews saves his integrity by walking

¹³ The *State of the Union Message* is a communication from the President of the United States to Congress and the nation in which the chief executive reports on conditions in the United States and, sometimes, around the world, recommends a legislative program for the coming session of Congress, and frequently presents his vision for the present and future. President George Washington delivered personally the first regular annual message before a joint session of Congress, in New York, on January 8, 1790. But already in 1801, President Thomas Jefferson changed the procedure followed by his predecessors. Infact, his private secretary delivered copies of the message to both houses of Congress, to be read by clerks in the House and Senate. Jefferson's change was intended to simplify a ceremony that he believed to be an aristocratic imitation of the British monarch's *Speech from the Throne*, and thus unsuitable to a republic. Jefferson's precedent was followed until April 8, 1913, when President Woodrow Wilson appeared before Congress to deliver personally a special message on tariff and bank reform. President Wilson is also widely credited with expanding the scope of the annual message, transforming it from a report on the activities of the executive departments into a blueprint for the President's legislative program for the coming congressional session and year. (M. KOLAKOWSKI, T.H. NEALE, *The President's State of the Union Message: Frequently Asked Questions*, March 7, 2006, Congressional Research Service Report for Congress. Available from <http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/resources/pdf/stateoftheunion.pdf>, [accessed May 2, 2016])

¹⁴ «?Unlike any of Capra's other films, *State of the Union* seems anxious to retreat into its sub plot, one of romantic misalliance, " William S. Pechter wrote in 1962. "And all the hoopla of its finale, as frenetic and noisy as anything Capra has put on the screen, cannot disguise the fact that the hero resigns from politics... In one sense, this is Capra at his most realistic, but also at his least engaged. For the artist, withdrawal from the world – the world as he perceives it – is never achieved without some radical diminution of his art"» (J. MCBRIDE, *Frank Capra The catastrophe of Success*, New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1992, p. 535).

away. The people support him, but they are not strong enough to defeat the organizational elite. This cynical view of politics was all the more powerful coming from Frank Capra»¹⁵.

Last but not least, *State of Union* refers to the status of women in American politics and, more generally, to the question of gender representation. In the movie, in fact, it seems clear that Kay Thorndyke is forced to favor Grant Matthews because she couldn't personally satisfy her own hunger for power, taking part in the electoral competition for the White House. In the '40s the nomination of a woman for president was unimaginable, even more that of an unmarried woman!¹⁶

4. The Last Hurrah

In 1958, little more than a decade after his performance as Grant Matthews, Spencer Tracy comes back to play the part of a political candidate. This time he runs for major of a big city and, to be honest, *The Last Hurrah* is one of the worst movies directed by John Ford. Despite his competent play-acting, infact, the movie recorded a loss of \$1.8 million¹⁷.

The *Last Hurrah* is the film adaptation of the homonymous novel written by Edwin O'Connor. The plot focuses on a mayoral election in an unnamed East Coast city. Veteran Irish Democratic Party politician Frank Skeffington is running for yet another term as Mayor¹⁸.

O'Connor tells the putative demise of the end of an era of American politics characterized by the “big-city bosses” and their so called “political machines”. His novel's purpose is to describe the

¹⁵ T. CHRISTENSEN, P.J. HASS, *Projecting Politics: Political Messages in American Films*, Armonk, N.Y: M.E. Sharpe, 2005, p. 107.

¹⁶ To understand how inconceivable this idea can be, probably more than every social research could demonstrate, suffice it to say that only one movie in all the history of Hollywood shows the election of a woman for President. It happens in *Kisses for My President*, a comedy film directed by Curtis Bernhardt in the 1964. Although the movie has the ambition of showing that a woman President might have greater moral wisdom than the belligerent male establishment, the only noteworthy parts concern her husband's embarrassment of becoming the first male “first lady”. To guarantee the inevitable happy ending in marital relations, the only solution still in the Hollywood of 1964 is to announce the pregnancy of the President. So she can resign the presidency to devote herself full-time to her family and finally reassure all Americans. Since then, no one will dare suggest such an idea. Neither the genre of science fiction, cutting edge by definition, has ever showed a female President. We have to wait until the 2012 for appreciating Stephanie Paul as the President. In *Iron Sky*, a hilarious parody of Sarah Palin has committed to defend the United States from a space nazi's invasion. But it's a Finnish-German-Australian comic science fiction film directed by Timo Vuorensola! Even in today's Hollywood, to break the so-called *glass ceiling* is a difficult task, as those who have seen *The Contender* are well aware. *The Contender* is a political drama film written and directed by Rod Lurie. In that movie «the vice president has died and President Jackson Evans, in a sly performance by Jeff Bridges, decides to secure his place in history by appointing a woman as the new vice president. He chooses Senator Laine Hanson, a perfect contender until it is leaked to the media that in college she participated in group sex. Despite the real-life context of Clinton's extra marital affair, in the film's terms Hanson's gender alone seems to prompt The Contender's guiding question: Can a slut be president?» (T. CHRISTENSEN, P. J. HASS, *Projecting Politics: Political Messages in American Films*, cit., p. 272).

¹⁷ J. CURTIS, *Spencer Tracy: A Biography*, New York: Alfred Knopf, 2011, p. 741-752.

¹⁸ It seems interesting to note that the subject of how cities are governed has not been a very large genre in the movies. Only a few film employs urban politics as a central cinematic theme avoiding the usual pastiche of political stereotypes. Before this Ford's movie, we can remember *All the King's Men* directed by Robert Rossen in 1949 and *A Lion Is in the Streets* by Raoul Walsh in 1953.

impact of New Deal social welfare programmes which broke big-city bosses' monopoly over jobs and services provided by state to urban working-class voters¹⁹

In this sense, the electoral parable told by the movie exemplifies this happening. Frank Skeffington is an old-style political boss, who wants to run his last campaign in accordance with his personal vision of the “grassroots politics” «As sitting mayor he holds court each day with his ward heelers, before, like a *seigneur* in some medieval town, giving audience to a line of supplicants and petitioners outside his home»²⁰

However, times have changed. His city has changed. The new generations' perception of their ethnic ties has weakened, and so has intercommunal solidarity. They feel free from cultural and economical constraints and are less willing to hear old messages or endorse the old agreements on which the grassroots democracy was based.

They look at a future that enters their homes directly through the television. And that future has necessarily the young face of their generation.

Skeffington represent the last of a generation of grassroots politicians overwhelmed by younger candidates and the coming of television to politics. As William A. Henry III explains in his most notable book *In Defense of Elitism* «In the television era, a politician represents you – or is expected to – in the direct sense of sharing your world view and value system and therefore being a dependable alter ego, making decisions the way you would yourself if you had the time and were in power. The fit is never perfect, of course»²¹ but it works very well.

¹⁹ Politically, «using control of government to provide favors in exchange for political support» is what is meant by political machine. Historically, when one person dominated the political machine, he was called a boss. Boss controlled political machines were common in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They represented «the antithesis of ideological politics where voters are motivated by ideas about the proper role of government and public policies. Machine politicians are notorious for refusing to take stands on controversial political issues. They concentrated instead on rewarding their political friends [... using] specific material rewards, such as jobs or contracts. The rewards have to be specific enough that they can be withdrawn if the recipient fails to reciprocate with political support. Public goods, such a new bridge, provide material benefits for voters, but they are not the same as patronage. People cannot be blocked from using a bridge if they fail to provide the promised political support. On the other hand, the jobs to build the bridge can be handed out as patronage. If the workers fail to provide political support, they can be fired» (*Machine Politics and Political Bosses*, in *Encyclopedia of U.S. Campaigns, Elections, and Electoral Behavior*, K. F. Warren, ed., Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2012, p. 385 - 387). In the late 19th century, large cities in the United States were accused of using political machines. The Pendergast machine in Kansas City, The Cox machine in Cincinnati, the Hague machine in Jersey City, Tammany Hall in New York are good examples of centralized political machines. To understand not only the political role but also the cultural and social contest in which a political machines could be born and grow see W. L. RIORDON, ed., *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall: A Series of Very Plain Talks on Very Practical Politics*, Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1993, (originally published in 1905), and, for the characteristics of this article, the 2002 historical film directed by Martin Scorsese, *Gangs of New York*. For a report on the workings of corrupt political machines in several major cities, see L. STEFFENS, *The Shame of the Cities*, New York: Sagamore Press, 1957 (originally in 1904)

²⁰ J.A. CLAPP, *The American City in the Cinema*, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2013, p. 158. A ward heeler is a typical urban political operative who works for a boss in a political ward, the smallest electoral subdivision of a city. His task is to achieve an election result, using corruptions such as graft and patronage, or other illegal acts like tearing down posters of the opposing party or paying constituents for their votes.

²¹ B.M. KELLEY, *Reelpolitik Ideologies in American Political Film*, Lahan: Lexington Books, 2012, p 15.

The movie show the beginning of a new way of conceiving the relationship with the voting public. The politician is forced to get off his high horse and to walk into people's houses. It is no longer enough to provide services. He must inspire a sense of familiarity.

He does not need anymore a gang of ward heelers controlling the territory. No more political machines to be remunerated. From now on, a TV spot is all he need to build a relationship of trust and confidence.

«The opposition candidate Kevin McCluskey (Charles FitzSimons), a vapid tool of rightwing forces, bumbles his way through an embarrassingly gauche television appearance displaying his frozen-faced wife, his small children, and a dog rented for the occasion. The dog spoils the show by barking noisily through the candidate's remarks»²².

This is the paradox that Ford shows us. The superimposition between real life and political image, creating bonds of closeness and empathy. It does not matter how much McCluskey is inadequate for his role as mayor. He is shown for what he is: a family man whose words are questioned even by his dog. Nothing is more realistic, nothing is more familiar. With all due respect to the long experience and even actual skill of Skeffington²³.

Kevin McCluskey's tv spot is also an obvious parody of the notorious televised speech of Richard Nixon that went down in history as the *Checkers Speech*.

It was the year 1952, and Nixon, the then vicepresidential candidate, was accused of receiving illegal funds for almost twenty thousand US dollars. The result was a huge scandal that put the Republicans in considerable embarrassment, as their campaign was based on a profoundly moralizing instance. The Democrats were pressing so that Dwight Eisenhower would annul the ticket for the White House' race. As suggested by the same Eisenhower, Nixon went on television to defend himself against accusations.

In a dramatic television monologue, broadcast on the evening of September 23, he recalled his humble origins, his career based on hard work and sacrifices. Without dwelling at length on the

²² J. MCBRIDE, *Searching for John Ford*, New York, St Martin's Press, 2001, p. 588.

²³ In order to better understand the sense of this passage, the allure of the oxymoron "fake sincerity" inspired by the television appearance, it is useful to read Riesman's studies about the role of the mass media in shaping the individual. «In a study of attitudes toward popular music we find again and again such statements as, "I like Dinah Shore because she's so sincere," or, "that's a very sincere record," or, "You can just feel that he [Frank Sinatra] is sincere." While it is clear that people want to personalize their relationships to their heroes of consumption, and their yearning for sincerity is a grim reminder of how little they can trust themselves or others in daily life, it is less clear just what it is that they find "sincere" in a singer performer ... But the popular emphasis on sincerity means more than this. It means that the source of criteria for judgment has shifted from the content of the performance and its goodness or badness, aesthetically speaking, to the personality of the performer. He is judged for his attitude toward the audience, an attitude which is either sincere or insincere, rather than by relation to his craft, that is, his honesty and skill». So it seems to be easy to substitute the name of artists, singers or actors, with the name of politicians that play in front of a television audience. «Viewing the political scene as a market for comparable emotions, it seems that the appeal of many of our political *candidates* tends to be of this sort. Forced to choose between skill and sincerity, many in the audience prefer the latter. They are tolerant of bumbles and obvious ineptness if the leader tries hard» (D. RIESMAN, *The Lonely Crowd*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press [1950], 1992, p. 194 – 195).

allegations, the aspiring Vicepresident focused the viewers' attention on the difficulties and the sacrifices that he and his family had to endure to be of service for his own nation. And as he spoke, the camera lingered on his faithful dog Checkers, crouched in front of the fireplace

The conclusion of his speech will make the history of political communication: «One other thing I should probably tell you, because if I don't, they will probably be saying this about me, too. We did get something, a gift, after the election. A man down in Texas heard Pat on the radio mention that our two youngsters would like to have a dog, and, believe it or not, the day we left before this campaign trip we got a message from Union Station in Baltimore, saying they had a package for us. We went down to get it. You know what it was? It was a little cocker spaniel dog, in a crate that he had sent all the way from Texas, black and white, spotted, and our little girl Tricia, the six year old, named it Checks. And you know, the kids, like all kids, loved the dog, and I just want to say this, right now, that regardless of what they say about it, we are going to keep it». Everyone was moved, the scandal forgotten and the politician forgiven.

At that moment more than ever, the saying (erroneously attributed to President Truman) «if you want a friend in Washington, get a dog» rang true.

The age of *hidden persuasion* through television could begin²⁴.

5. The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance

If one of the fundamental problems of democratic representation is the transparency of the management of power, and therefore the relationship that the community must necessarily establish with the truth, then the film that must be seen is *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962).

It should not be surprising to find a political lesson in a western movie, a genre that is usually associated with fun and entertainment. In fact, the “western epic” is one of the founding myths of America's collective imagination: the long and dangerous journey of the pioneers represents the American version of the archetype of the search for the promised land²⁵.

²⁴ All the risks of a sincere and transparent democratic participation can be understood by reading this comments issued by Adlai Stevenson, noted for his intellectual demeanor and eloquent public speaking. «As Mr. Stevenson's campaign approached its ill-fated conclusion Democratic strategists—now psychologically oriented—were reportedly unhappy because he was not "projecting" himself well and still lacked a really convincing Presidential image. Stevenson himself was heard to mutter that he felt as if he were competing in a beauty contest rather than a solemn debate. He voiced his irritation at the symbol manipulators' approach to political persuasion – at least the Republican variety – by saying “The idea that you can merchandise candidates for high office like breakfast cereal ... is the ultimate indignity to the democratic process”» (V. PACKARDS, *The Hidden Persuaders*, London: Penguin Books, 1991, p. 164). Adlai Stevenson experienced firsthand the difficulties for an intellectual to connect with the voters and lost two presidential races against the more charismatic Dwight Eisenhower.

²⁵ About the special relationship that the American people had with the frontier, Tocqueville noted that «Europe is much occupied with the wilderness of America, but the Americans themselves scarcely think of it. The marvels of inanimate nature find them insensible, and they, so to speak, perceive the admirable forests that surround them only at the moment at which they fall by their strokes. Their eyes are filled with another spectacle. The American people sees itself advancing across the wilderness, draining swamps, straightening rivers, peopling the solitude, and subduing nature. This magnificent

Apparently, John Ford would seem to stage the usual confrontation between farmers and cattle barons, but on the other hand, if you look closely, he draws a magnificent crepuscular fresco about an era of transition. It is the transition from the autocracy of the frontier, the wilderness, to the democracy of urban progress, the civilization. In the movie, the issue could not be addressed in less political terms: from the debate on popular sovereignty to the importance of town meetings, from the role of the free press to the progressive influence of schooling.

«While we must downgrade the importance of elections, we cannot isolate the electoral event from the whole circuit of the opinion-forming process. Electoral power *per se* is the mechanical guarantee of democracy; but the substantive guarantee is given by the condition under which the citizen gets the information and is exposed to the pressure of opinion makers [...] When all is said, we say that elections must be free. This is true, but it is not enough; for opinion too must be, in some basic sense, free. Free elections with unfree opinion express nothing. We say that people must be sovereign. But an empty sovereign who has nothing to say, without opinions of his own, is a mere ratifier, a sovereign of nothing»²⁶

In this specific Ford's film we can find not only the essential value of the electoral moment, but also all the steps that revolve around it, providing the pluralism and the competitiveness that are the basis of a free *democratic awareness*²⁷. These steps must necessarily be dealt with by the members of a community who wants to extend political rights and increase the opportunities for participation and social inclusion.

«Sir Lewis Namier once likened elections to locks in a canal: they allow the rising socio-cultural forces to flow further through the established channels of the system but also make it possible to stem the tide, to keep back the flood. This simile is possibly even more appropriate in describing the typical sequences in processes of democratization and mass mobilization: any rising political movement has to pass through a series of locks on its way inwards towards the core of the political system, upwards towards the central arena of decision-making»²⁸.

image of themselves is not offered only now and then to the imagination of Americans; one can say that it follows each of them in the least of his actions as in his principle ones, and it is always there, dangling before his intellect» (A. DE TOCQUEVILLE, *Democracy in America*, H. C. Mansfield, D. Winthrop (ed.) Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 2000, p. 460). But it's only in the late nineteenth century that the influence of the frontier on the formation of America's spirituality is fully theorized. In 1863 Frederick Jackson Turner, in his work *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, argued that not only the American intellect owed its striking characteristics to the frontier, but also proceeded to characterise the frontier itself in religious terms, defining it as the occasion for a "perennial rebirth". (F. J. TURNER, *The Significance of Frontier in American History*, in *The Frontier in American History*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920). Of course, the reference to the spiritual value of the frontier soon became a recurring theme in the political speech, with Kennedy's speech about the New Frontier being just one example of this.

²⁶ G. SARTORI, *The Theory of Democracy Revisited*, Chatham, (NJ): Chatham House Publ., 1987, vol. 1, p. 87.

²⁷ In this sense it's worth noting the provocative reference to the name of the bandit, Liberty Valance, who personifies the paradigm of how, in the lawlessness of the wilderness, individual freedom lends itself well to declining into anarchy.

²⁸ S. ROKKAN, *Citizens, Elections, Parties: Approaches to the Comparative Study of the processes development*, Colchester: ECPR Press, 2009, (Oslo: Univerisitetsforlaget, 1970) p. 79.

The plot is too long and complex to be told in detail here. The funeral of Tom Doniphon (John Wayne) is an opportunity for Senator Ransom Stoddard (James Stewart) to recount his adventure in the town of Shinbone to the reporters who follow him. Twenty-five years ago, he was an idealistic young lawyer who arrived in the little frontier town in search of fortune. Shinbone was dominated by a lobby of cattle barons who used the brutal cowboy Liberty Valance (Lee Marvin) to make sure no one interfered with their interests. Ransom Stoddard reawakens the civic consciousness of the citizens, opening a school and printing again the newspaper. The clash with Liberty Valance is inevitable, but against all expectations the deadly duel is won by the young inexperienced lawyer. The victory puts Stoddard directly at the top of his political career.

But the story has a final, unexpected twist. Ransom Stoddard has a crisis of conscience. He does not want to tie his political success to a duel. When he is about to retire from the electoral race, Tom Doniphon reveals that it was he who killed Liberty Valance, from an alley in the dark. A shocking revelation, as for the audience, as for Stoddard: the former must come to terms with the idea that John Wayne can shoot a man in the back, the latter bears the responsibility to put to good use the lie and to become senator and to ensure a future of economic and social development for Shinbone.

After twenty-five years, Senator Stoddard has met the expectations of his fellow citizens, but still seems to feel the weight of that legend. Standing in front of the body of the friend who saved him, he asks the journalists to finally tell the truth, but they reassure him: «this is the west, Sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend»²⁹.

6. The Best Man

²⁹ To ponder about how much politics seems to be a privileged space for lies, it seems to be useful to remember Hannah Arendt's words about truth and politics. With much realism and a little bit of cynicism, she said that «truthfulness has never been counted among the political virtues, and lies have always been regarded as justifiable tools in political dealings» (H. ARENDT, *Lying in Politics: Reflections on the pentagon Papers*, New York Review of Books, 18 November 1971, p. 30). The first English version of her essay *Truth and Politics*, appeared in 1967 in the New Yorker magazine, begins saying: «Lies have always been regarded as necessary and justifiable tools not only of the politician's or the demagogue's but also of the statesman's trade. Why is that so? And what does it mean for the nature and the dignity of the political realm, on one side, and the dignity of truth and truthfulness, on the other?» Questions still in search of an answers. (H. ARENDT, *Truth and Politics*, The New Yorker, 25 February 1967, pp. 49 - 88). Speaking of lies in politics would impose at least a reference to the election conspiracy narrated by *The Manchurian Candidate*, directed in 1964 by John Frankenheimer, and the fascination of the conspiracy theory. But on the subject, Popper's words are sufficient for this essay: «The Conspiracy Theory of Society... [is] a typical result of the secularization of a religious superstition. The belief in the Homeric gods whose conspiracies explain the history of the Trojan War is gone. The gods are abandoned. But their place is filled by powerful men or groups - sinister pressure groups whose wickedness is responsible for all the evils we suffer from - such as the Learned Elders of Zion, or the monopolists, or the capitalists, or the imperialists. Against the conspiracy theory of society I do not, of course, assert that conspiracies never happen. But I assert two things. First, they are not very frequent, and do not change the character of social life. Assuming that conspiracies were to cease, we should still be faced with fundamentally the same problems which have always faced us. Secondly, I assert that conspiracies are very rarely successful. The results achieved differ widely, as a rule, from the results aimed at » (K.R. POPPER, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of scientific Knowledge*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972, pp. 341-342).

At the end of this brief review of electoral movies, a question still hungs in the air: «does the best man go to the White House?».

The question is nothing new and it keeps troubling both scholars and citizens. Already by the end of the nineteenth century, the liberal english thinker James Bryce had devoted an entire chapter of his famous book entitled *The American Commonwealth* to the issue of “Why the Best Men Do Not Go Into Politics”.

The same concern moved Gore Vidal to write his play *The Best Man*, brought to screen by Franklin J. Schaffner in 1964.

At first glance, *The Best Man* seems to tell the same story of Capra’s *State of Union*. In fact, the plot seems to be easily summarized in the ethical choice of the protagonist, the presidential candidate Bill Russell (Henry Fonda). Forced to choose between personal integrity and power gained by evil means, Russell chooses integrity and abandons politic when it clashes with his principles. «Vidal differs from Capra in suggesting that Russell’s choice is not the only moral one, and that, in any case, the electorate might not care either way»³⁰.

The film takes place in a brokered convention, a situation in which no single candidate has secured a majority of overall delegates, and, above all, none of the candidates intend to step back. The choice should not be hard. Russell is a refined intellectual whose only weak point is marital infidelity³¹. He may look a little too thoughtful, but its preparation is indisputable. «His opponent, Joe Cantwell (Cliff Robertson), is a headline-grabbing, hypocritical opportunist with a killer instinct who does not to want to repeat the error of his older brother, Don (Gene Raymond), who had run for president honorably, and lost»³².

To win, both are in need of the support of the old and sick President Art Hockstader (Lee Tracy).

At the beginning of the movie the outgoing president seems to prefer Cantwell, whose decisiveness he respects. Hockstader admires Russell but he doesn’t think that a refined intellectual could really have the ability to lead. It is a clear reference to the criticism that accompanied the Adlai Stevenson nominations³³

³⁰ H. KEYISHIAN, *Screening Politics: The Politician in American Movies, 1931–2001*, Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, p. 28.

³¹ The role of the wife is particularly interesting, as she agrees to reconstruct the family framework just to enjoy the privilege of becoming the next First Lady: “Politics makes strange bedfellows” is her comment, citing William Shakespeare’s comedy *The Tempest*, “Misery acquaints a man with strange bedfellows”. Needless to say, in the end she will change her mind about her husband and, yielding to his promise of fidelity, she will love him once more.

³² H. KEYISHIAN, *Screening Politics*, cit., p. 28.

³³ «Because of his proclivities and personality, Adlai Stevenson faced the problem of frequently coming across as much more of an academic rather than a man of the people: and he experienced difficulty in providing simple answers to complex problems. Hence Stevenson and his inner circle were described in the press (as well as by Richard Nixon) as “eggheads”, a mild insult that Stevenson embraced in his cheeky response, “Eggheads of the world unite: you have nothing to lose but your yolks!”» (S.J. HAMMOND, R. NORTH ROBERTS, V.A. SULFARO, *Campaigning for President in America, 1788–2016*, Santa Barbara, California: Greenwood, 2016, p. 702).

But the convention is long, negotiations are continuing incessantly, alliances are betrayed and reformed. Among offers and blackmail, flattery and threats, the clash seems endless. Hockstader, which rises to arbitrate the dispute, changes his mind and ends up supporting Russell³⁴, but the party is now hopelessly split.

In the end, Russell is so disgusted that he decides to withdraw his candidacy and to support a third candidate. Cantwell is defeated but the country is likely to be governed by a character of secondary importance. A candidate who has the sole merit of being in the right place at the right time.

«In defeat Cantwell sounds a dire warning about politics and community, challenging Russell: “You don’t understand me; you don’t understand politics: you don’t understand this country. The way it is and the way we are. You’re a fool.” The movie does not reassure us that Cantwell is wrong»³⁵.

The message of the movie could be summarized as follows: that in politics the best man can’t win. If he wins, he’s not the best man. «But the film offers an alternative the best possible man – Art Hockstader, the former president who is capable of Machiavellian duplicity and manipulation, but who lives according to some simple and humane rules: that there are “no ends, only means”; and that “all that matters is how you feel about people and how you treat them”»³⁶.

In the end Russell, after giving his support to the third candidate, peacefully walks away from the convention and, with satisfaction, says to the reporters «And I am happy, of course, the best man won»³⁷.

It is up to the viewer to wonder if the best man is the one who retires from politics or the one that subtracts from politics his own ego, but not his own values and ideas.

Gore Vidal, and also Franklin J. Schaffner, seems so refrain from giving a definitive solution to a question that probably has no answer, and rather suggests the need for a widening of perspective.

³⁴ After yet another confrontation, Hockstader gets rid of Cantwell saying «It’s not your being a bastard I object to; it’s your being a stupid bastard».

³⁵ R.B. BROWNE, M.W. FISHWICK, *The Hero in Transition*, Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1983.

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

³⁷ Curiously, Henry Fonda had already played the character of a politician forced to take a step back from his ambitions. The movie *Advise and Consent*, directed by Otto Preminger in 1962, is worth mentioning because, although not an electoral movie in the strict sense, it’s considered to be one of the best political films of all time by many commentators. Fonda plays the role of Robert Laffingwell, a young professor nominated directly by the US President to the post of Secretary of State. The appointment of Laffingwell, that is as arrogant and presumptuous as he is skilled and trained, could not fail to meet the strong hostility of the Senate, which is responsible for the ratification of the appointment through the constitutional procedure that gives its name to the movie. The clash between the various political personalities is hard and with no holds barred. But the central theme of the movie is explained to us by the same Laffingwell. «This is a Washington, D.C. kind of lie. It’s when the other person knows you’re lying and also knows you know he knows». Facing the awareness of mutual deceit, the anchor of political salvation becomes the construction of a negotiable truth. A fake truth, certainly contingent, a truth which can always be called into question and that is often incomprehensible to ordinary people. But a truth nonetheless capable of transforming a barbaric and unruly dispute into an aristocratic duel between gentlemen, and above all capable of perpetuating the work of the Parliament. Because, after all, every day there are resolutions to be discussed and decisions to take.

After all, judging a person is never an easy task. Indeed, there is a myth according to which Gore Vidal himself, while he was doing the casting for his play, rejected the audition of an actor that wanted to play the role of Russell. Vidal thought that the actor didn't have the *phisque du role* to play the part of an authoritative and respected candidate for president of the United States of America.

That actor was Ronald Reagan³⁸.

7. Conclusion

This brief overview of electoral movies stops on the eve of the Watergate scandal of 1972. This episode was one of the biggest political scandals in American history and had wide, international recognition in all the media. In a society deeply traumatized by the experience of the Vietnam War, Watergate marked a cultural divide in the history of the American people's relations with its political representatives.

American society seemed to feel that a point of no return had been reached, and Hollywood immediately involved one of its most beloved heroes in the realization of an ambiguous and controversial movie, *The Candidate* by Michael Ritchie.

«What do we do now?» is the famous phrase that ends the movie, and the bewildered face of Robert Redford attests all the embarrassment of a society gone astray, unable to find the certainties necessary to begin anew.

Before that, American society had little faith in politics and, particularly, in the professional politician. We have previously seen how Hollywood had already recounted the major diseases afflicting that world, its characters and its unwritten rules. But the fact that only certain specific realities could be affected actually seemed a useful lie to believe in.

Hollywood movies seemed to overthrow the cathartic mechanism of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, showing to the public all the ugly sides of politics, while at the same time reassuring it that, once the curtain was lowered, there was the possibility that in real life would exist antibodies able to contain the spread of the disease.

This time however, the President's involvement had an unbearable symbolic meaning for the American citizen. A meaning fated to radically change his attitude towards politics.

Like Redford, nobody knows how to restore credibility to the democratic representation. And in the early Seventies, it becomes evident to everyone what had already been said a century before Alexis de Tocqueville. «I hold it to be sufficiently demonstrated that universal suffrage is by no means a

³⁸ In hindsight, Gore Vidal has repeatedly regretted his choice. After all, if the director had picked Reagan to star in his comedy, it would have probably revived his acting career and he might never have become president.

guarantee of the wisdom of the popular choice. Whatever its advantages may be, this is not one of them»

In Hollywood, as in every other part of the United States, this seems the only certainty from which to start anew. Once again, into the wilderness.